

Invisible Disabilities Live

Thursday, June 18, 2020

Transcription provided by Stacie Valle for Virtual VRI

Wayne Connell: Thanks everyone! Welcome back! Kellie, our regular host, is getting a much needed vacation. Now I want to introduce our guest Sally Spencer-Thomas. She was moved to work in suicide prevention after her younger brother died of suicide. In 2016 she was an invited speaker to the White House and has spoken at Ted Talks. Sally was also a featured speaker at Brain Ideas.org.

Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas: I am so excited to be here.

Wayne Connell: This is a difficult subject but one we need to talk about.

Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas: I was a psychologist way before my brother died. I had my degree and was interested in psychology but was not a counselor. Then my brother died and that was a pivotal moment for me to be shaken to my core. Traumas like this really define your life as before and after it happened. I remember sitting in a support group after this happened and I recall having an aha moment as someone needs to do something about this, and realized that was me. And since then I have been advocating about it and I just keep going. It has been a ride but it is my pathway forward through this grief.

Wayne Connell: Not to open old wounds, but tell us more about your brother. We have a perception of people that take their lives and junkies or other things and that can be a misperception.

Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas: Before this happened it is what many were taught. That this is an end stage of a difficult mental illness

paradigm. But it can really happen to anyone at anytime. My brother was 2.5 years younger than me, born on Christmas eve. I loved him to pieces. He was a fiery soul. Adventurer, athlete, funny and popular. He followed me in high school and college and I loved that and being with him. We had shared languages and jokes. He was my best friend. He was diagnosed bipolar in college but much of it was masked by his personality since day one. He was expelled for a year from college and it rocked all of us. He came back from this and said I'll be fine, just watch me. He got a job as an encyclopedia salesman - this is so dated - and he was great at it. Motivated by sales. He came back from that year with a sales team and had done great and came back to school with a lot of confidence. He landed a job after college that was great but that was when I saw his wheels wobble.

This was before internet and we communicated by recording messages to cassettes and mailing them to each other. I was in graduate school and I would send him messages about things I was learning and he was fighting the depression he was feeling. But it was pretty much in secret. He didn't want people to know he had a mental health condition so he fought bravely in his own way. He did a pretty phenomenal job. It wasn't until the summer of 2004 that he had a full blown episode of mania and it derailed his life. It was shocking to watch it happen. I looked in his eyes and couldn't "find" him. Trying to support him wasn't working. As is common in mania he had the attitude of "I don't need you, you don't understand me."

And here I am 16 years later still on the verge of tears over this. And then later he spoke to his accountant and was told he was broke. And flipped from mania to depression and came home for 2.5 weeks. We rallied around him, but then soon after he took his life.

Wayne Connell: Wow. I have a brother in law that went that direction due to chronic pain. He felt the shame that he didn't want

to share because "oh, you can't perform" and that is why here we are trying to let everyone know that we all are going through similar things here and we can support you. It isn't something to suffer with alone. There are things you can accomplish based on strengths and weaknesses. What is really sad is all the blame people want to place within yourself, or on the person and I think we misunderstand. I am thrilled you have given your life to helping others since you have been there.

Can you talk about COVID-19 and that impact? And how it relates to this.

Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas: My other ended up a leader in the insurance industry and I think the shame is what killed him. I think if he had had just one peer that had been like, "me too" I swear he would still be here. In the aftermath we have woken up and realized that workplace is a big part of the conversation. The only people that can make change in these spaces are the mental health providers. If we don't empower others to lean in and help the environment can't improve.

Wayne Connell: Some people do just need a friend. People don't always need a professional but a friend that has a difficult and if you listen to what they say that can be enough.

Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas: It can be a worklife balance problem that is driving them to despair.

So to touch on COVID, my phone is off the hook. So many workplaces are seeing the essential workers, and parents, and lots of anxiety about the economy going along with mental health issues and places are demanding some help. One place I like to turn to for emotional responses is the long time we had waiting for this to hit. And then

when it did we had a phase of bravery. People were sewing masks and helping out. And now we are in a down phase and people are in a dark phase. It has gone on a long time. And will be here a while longer. We have to look at where we go from here.

We know when we forecast increased rates of suicide we create a self fulfilling prophecy. Increased purchasing of firearms, etc. We also know historically that we often see a dip in suicide. War is a time of decreased suicide. And after 9/11 we saw a decrease. People are pulling together in new ways and pivoting to something more meaningful. Connecting to things that matter. We also see that happening to. Right now we focus on doing the best we can to mitigate the risk factors. What I ask now is to have the workplaces to small action steps they can do to increase a caring culture. It has been a fun project. We are working with professional sports teams, hi tech companies, etc. People are realizing that mental health matters. It has been a silver lining.

Wayne Connell: It is upon us. Businesses change and relationships have come to the forefront. As an organization we are launching in August what we believe to be the worlds largest relationship summit. Love Ideas. With John Grey and many other world renowned people. Kind of like the Brain Idea thing you were involved with. People finding out that families can be together now.

Talk about care givers. What can they do when they see some signs? What resources are available? We have some things posted on Facebook with hotlines but share some - people that are caregivers need to know how to help.

Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas: Caregivers are often left out. At some point someone gets out of a hospital and if the caregiver can't support them we are all in trouble. There are text lines and resource call lines.

And there are so many families in the same place you are. It makes a difference knowing others are in that spot with you. United Survivors is a place where people who have lived experience with suicide can come together in community. People who have survived it, have lost someone to it, have thoughts of it, etc. A community of people leveraging stories and being better at advocating for a narrative of strength and a journey as a family that can come through this and address things head on. It works amazingly well. All of these stories matter. For legislation and policy changes and advocating for resources. It is a way to make meaning of a difficult time.

Wayne Connell: Absolutely. We want that number to be zero. Not like, well, 15 people is OK. No! Zero.

Can you talk a bit about social media? I know some of the big social media companies have a built in social media thing. You will see people write things on there sometimes and you think, what do I do? Can you talk about that?

Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas: Social media can get a bad rap because there are people harassing each other and gratuitous information out there, but there is an amazing opportunity for information too. But also with Facebook there is an opportunity to connect with friends if they post something that makes you nervous. And if they are engaged in suicidal behavior we can send active help. There are also all kinds of communities out there like United Survivors. For suicide loss survivors there is an Alliance of Hope for people that have lost loved ones to suicide. Forums to connect are there. And there is TRAPS which has a powerful online presence. There are lots of these places where community is built and hope is restored.

Wayne Connell: We have an online platform through our Inspire platform. Finding someone that can listen to you and a big part of

things.

Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas: There are also a gazillion apps out there. There are watchdogs out there too to help you find the right one.

Wayne Connell: We have Heidi Hannah and she is an expert on stress and she talks about good resources. In past shows we have someone talking about how humor can help as well. This is the Invisible Encourage show and it is all about Encouragement.

In your darkest day, what is the thing that gets you through the dark time?

Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas: The thing I am taking away and getting through my day today is frontloading my day with self care. Exercise and walking around in nature. First thing is I get up early and walk my dog while watching the moon and then I can tackle what the day brings. Don't put it off. Frontload the day before you get your emails and your to-do lists. Start your day with things that ground you and connect you to bigger pieces of life.

Wayne Connell: It was great to have you on here Sally. Thank you for sharing your personally story. Thank you for being here and we look forward to our next episode.

[End of show]