



## When a Sister Commits Suicide Part 1

Meet Sasha, who grew up in an Iranian and Chilean family. Her youngest sister, Suedi, died by suicide, and her family still doesn't talk much about it. The silence makes it harder for Sasha to open up about her own mental health struggles.

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Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Hi, everybody. This is a two-part episode, because what we're discussing today, suicide, mental health, needs our time and attention. This is part one, where we'll talk to our guest, Sasha. In part two, we'll talk to an expert. Both parts are available right now anywhere you're listening. Suicide, mental health, these are difficult topics, so please use your discretion as you listen and take care of yourself. Stop if you want to, get someone to listen with you, or don't listen at all.

Our guest, Sasha, comes from a family where dad is Iranian, and mom is Chilean. Some years ago, her sister died by suicide. Sasha's family doesn't talk about it openly or privately. This cloak of silence makes it hard for her to talk about her own mental health struggles. Let's get into it.

Sasha: I'm Sasha. I'm from Miami. My mom is from Chile and my dad is from Iran. I called them mommy and daddy when I was a kid and then mom and dad as I got older. Actually, my first words were Baba Joon, which is dear dad in Farsi, and I am the oldest of four girls. There were four of us total. And we were very isolated, because my parents didn't know a lot of people, because they had come here as adults. So, we basically were each other's best friends. We made board games together, we used to put out a sheet and pretend we were figure skating. You know, when we watched the Olympics, we always cheered for the USA, Iran, and Chile. We really had a fun and interesting childhood.

Being the firstborn child meant that I was the cultural translator for my parents and the messenger between my parents and my sisters, who of course are younger than me. For example, on Valentine's Day, when they asked us to all bring in cards for all the students, my parents didn't know what Valentine's Day was, or why that was something they should participate in. But I also had to explain to my parents certain things like field trips, or my sisters and I would like to start shaving our legs.

When I was 24 years old, a few weeks before Christmas, between Thanksgiving and Christmas, my youngest sister, Suedie, who was just 20 years old, died by

suicide, which was a very traumatic event for us to go through as it would be for any family. But I guess for us especially, because of the stigma of mental health, and suicide especially, which is not just in the Catholic religion, or even the Islamic religion, but also in Western culture. We still haven't really come around to removing that stigma. It's made a lot of progress since she died, but when she died we had no language to discuss that.

I don't know if my sister was mentally ill. She had threatened suicide once before when she was about 14, and it was right after I had had a nervous breakdown my sophomore year of college, and I had been placed in a psych ward for a couple of weeks after a suicide attempt. I had been sent home from the college and within a month or two, my sister said that she would try to kill herself too if my parents didn't let her go on a field trip, which I think was sort of a manipulation. I don't know if she was actually depressed. I think it was just more that she saw me going through something that maybe she couldn't put into her own words.

As the eldest daughter, there's an enormous amount of pressure, I think especially from immigrant families or immigrant parents, that the first child has to be the role model for the other sisters, and I had been an overachieving high school student. I'd had multiple AP classes. I was the editor in chief of the college newspaper. I did over 2,000 hours of community service by volunteering at the library, beach cleanups, working with the elderly, and I barely slept I think in high school.

And then I got to college and I went to a college in North Carolina, which I want to leave unnamed, but I was the only person there that I knew that was both Hispanic and Middle Eastern. 9/11 happened and I heard a lot of talk about how it must have been the Iranians. Somebody, when I went to a 9/11 memorial, a girl told me that I wasn't allowed to be there because I wasn't American. I mean, I was. I was born in the United States. I am an American. But I felt so isolated and alone. I'd never been apart from my parents. I'd never been apart from my sisters. College was a brand new environment for me, and I think I felt like I was failing on many levels. I took a lot of the microaggressions personally, as if it was my fault, so I ended up having a nervous breakdown. This feeling that I was failing, I wasn't the smartest person in the room anymore, I wasn't... I was the only brown person in most of the rooms. This feeling of maybe not being American enough and trying to figure out who I was if I wasn't American, because this is all I knew.

I just felt so traumatized I think by 9/11 and people's reaction to it, and the media reaction to it, the rise in hate crimes against Middle Eastern students, which I didn't experience personally beyond microaggressions, but my sisters that were... One of them was in high school and then the one that died, Suedie, was in middle school, and they also got a lot of bullying. You know, in some ways we tried to lean more to our Spanish side. Sometimes as a way of protecting ourselves. But that, with our last name being Moghimi, we weren't exactly easy to hide. You know?

My parents were shocked. They had no idea that I was... I think that because they don't believe in mental illness, they thought it was a cry for attention. My dad said

that depression is just for immature people. My mother said, “Maybe we spoiled you too much.” My college had suggested that before I go back, I should go to a therapist, and I couldn’t drive, so my mom would drive me to the appointments and would say, “Therapy is only for crazy people and you’re not crazy.” Or, “Recuerda, la ropa sucia se lava en casa.” So, you know, like the dirty laundry is washed at home. And I just felt like such judgment from them that eventually I just stopped going to therapy and just transferred schools instead of going back. And my parents just chalked it off to a phase.

We never talked about my time in the psychiatric hospital. We never talked about it with my parents because I think they had chalked it up to a phase and then my sisters didn’t understand what was going on. I think they were concerned. They would ask if I was okay and I would assure them that I was fine, that nothing was wrong, but I did feel that my sisters had felt some sort of I think betrayal because I was the person that was supposed to be the steady one, and then I wasn’t anymore, that they felt that they couldn’t rely on me as much.

Two months before Suedie died, she was in a car accident. She was riding a bike to work. It was her 20<sup>th</sup> birthday and a woman hit her with her SUV, and the bike went under the car, my sister was on the road, and so the lady didn’t even get out of her car. She just rolled down her window and said, “You all right, honey?” And my sister... So, she just picked up her bike and walked the rest of the way to work rolling her bike along. She had a concussion. The muscles in her shoulder had been torn. There is the possibility that the concussion, mild as it was, led to her suicide, because that’s something that has come up recently or in recent studies, especially with the research with the NFL players, that a mild concussion can cause suicide.

But it’s something I haven’t wanted to discuss with my parents or with my sisters even, because I feel like they would prefer that as the answer, that she had a concussion rather than mental illness. I can say that she had broken up with her boyfriend six months earlier. She had had a fight with her best friend three months after that. And then by the time she got around to the car accident, she was already in a low place, so it’s possible that she became depressed and killed herself because of depression. And it’s also possible that she killed herself because of concussion.

I think that because we had never really been outside of our own network, besides with family and friends, Persian friends that we had made through the community eventually when my parents did meet other Persians, or my tíos on my mother’s side who lived in Miami and we would spend time with them on the weekends and my cousins, or my primos. We had a circle that we knew, and that we trusted, and I think the outside world was not as protective and as sheltering. I think it was hurtful to both of us. You know, me in North Carolina with the microaggressions, and then her with the bullying after 9/11, and then of course the accident, and it... I think it made her, especially as the youngest, we had protected

her sort of even more. She didn't just have my parents' protection, but she had three older sisters. I think when you go out into the world and you realize that the world is not as safe or as protective of you as home is, that it can be very jarring.

The night that my sister died, she and my father had had a fight about a cat that she had brought home from the street, and my dad did not want a cat, and they fought a lot. And I think that part of that was that she was the only daughter still living at home. My parents had just been divorced about a year before and she wanted to grow up and be independent. She was already trying to become more extroverted. She was out going clubbing a lot. She was in art school. She liked going out and sitting and painting at the zoo, or by the beach, and she just wanted to sort of be a grownup. And whenever they got into a fight, they would call me, and I would come over and fix it. We would sit at the dining room table, and we'd have a conversation, and I'd listen to both sides, and then I would make some suggestions, and that night when they got into a fight, my dad called me and said, "You know, we had a fight. You need to come over."

It was a Tuesday night, and it was around 9:00 PM, and he said, "We need to have this discussion. Come over and fix this." And I said, "No. I'm not coming tonight. It's 9:00. I have work tomorrow. I have a cold. I'm not coming." The next morning, he called me, and he was crying, and I was at work, and he said, "You didn't come last night. Let's see if you come now. She's committed suicide." And he hung up. So, when I got there, the police said that they didn't want me to see her. I wasn't allowed in the room. So, I went and sat with my dad, who just kept saying, "My baby is dead," in Farsi. **کودک من مرده است. کودک من مرده است.**

And I didn't know what to say, so I ended up just making tea and serving snacks to the cops, because it was all I could think of to do.

Lantigua-Williams:

Dropping in with some helpful information. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline offers free and confidential support 24/7. If you're in distress or know someone who is, and you're trying to help them, please call 800-273-8255. That's 800-273-8255. You can also reach out to the Crisis Text Line, which offers emotional support by connecting you with a trained listener. Simply text HELLO to 741-741. It's free, confidential, and available 24/7.

Sasha: We didn't really know how to break the news, so everybody that I called, I told them that she died of suicide. But when it came to speaking to the family in Chile and to the family in Iran, we gave those calls to my parents. Both my parents, they both said that she had died in a car accident. They just lied to their families. And I think the lie... In a way, it was easier for them to say to themselves, maybe, because of the stigma, or maybe it was even a way of saving face, because there's a lot of guilt and shame associated with suicide and they couldn't bear the idea that someone would say to them that they had done something wrong.

We never again spoke about how she died. We just closed the book on it. I think part of it, you know, is that we don't want to give grief to each other or remind each other of a bad time. On the anniversary of her death, what we've done is just text each other, "Thinking of you. I love you." We do the same on her birthday in October. We acknowledge it I think just by saying that we love each other and reminding each other that we love each other, but we don't acknowledge it otherwise.

I've been trying to make more inroads into this because I have bipolar disorder and I've been diagnosed with that now, and I've gone... I'm in therapy. I'm on medication. You know, I'm doing the best that I can to protect myself and take care of myself, that I'm trying to have more of a conversation about it, and I'm trying to remove the stigma by talking about my own journey. In the beginning, it was hard for them to hear things, like I was going to a support group, but now they sort of have let it go, and my sisters are now mothers, and they're questioning about how to talk to their children about the aunt that the kids have never met. And one of my sisters says that she doesn't want her son to hear about it from anyone else. She wants to be the one to tell him. And she doesn't want to do it until she's ready and she can think of the way.

Having a mental illness, it's something that I think makes me more thoughtful and more compassionate towards other people, and more empathetic. I think I'm more likely to nurture and take care of people who are sad because I know what it's like to be sad. I think it's something that in some ways, while I don't... I wish I wasn't bipolar, because sometimes it's very hard to manage, I work really hard to be a very high functioning person, and sometimes it can be very exhausting, and I think that if we were more open about mental illness in our society, we could have resources, more resources for people who are mentally ill. And remove some of that shame and that stigma so that people can seek the appropriate help.

Lantigua-Williams:

Thank you for listening and for sharing this episode. In case you didn't catch it the first time, here's the info on where to get help. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline offers free and confidential support 24/7. Just call 800-273-8255. That's 800-273-8255. And the Crisis Text Line connects you directly with a trained listener. Simply text HELLO to 741-741. That's HELLO to 741-741. It's free, confidential, and available 24/7.

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