

LIVING WITH GUILT, LIVING WITH LOVE

A father's journey

Robert's 18-year-old daughter Ashley died by suicide in 2016

BY ROBERT RIECK, adapted from the book,
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The what-ifs tear me apart every day

Ashley was eighteen at the time of her death. She was a very smart, beautiful young woman and an overachiever. Ashley graduated from college before receiving her high school diploma. She was accepted into the Registered Nursing program starting in the spring. She always thought of others before herself.

Ashley was the second oldest of five girls ranging in age from ten to twenty.

Two weeks prior, Ashley was in the process of moving out because I did not approve of her dating an older guy who lived an hour from home. Because of that, we had not talked in the weeks prior to her death except for a few texts.

The night before Ashley died, my wife had been texting back and forth with her. Ashley sent a text to my wife early the next morning at about 6:30 a.m., but my wife didn't hear it until about 9 a.m. as we were all sleeping. When my wife finally listened to it, she screamed "I knew it!" and ran out of the house. I didn't know what was going on. Ashley had scheduled the text delivery time.

Ashley explained where her car was and said she couldn't go on anymore. We found her car parked near the lake access close to where we live. She left her phone and notes to all of us on the car dash.



It still wasn't registering to me that this was real; I kept saying that Ashley was around the area or someone had picked her up. We spent an excruciating several hours looking for her body in the lake. All the neighbors were helping and then the sheriff came. My mind said she was still alive.

It was so weird being by the shoreline waiting, watching, and praying she would not be found dead.

Several of us went back to the house to use the bathroom, which took less than ten minutes. That's when they found her body.

Prior to finding Ashley, the sheriff had told me that unless he took his sunglasses off and looked me straight in the eyes, that there was still hope. When I pulled up, he started walking toward me and was taking off his sunglasses. That is when reality set in, and I knew they had found her body.

I just kept screaming "No, no!"

It was the worst day of my life.

I have a lot of guilt because Ashley was mad at me. If I had known the issues she was having the night before, I might have been able to save her.

For several years prior, Ashley had been in counseling for depression and I had tried to help. Ashley never felt accepted by her peers or others around her, even though she was loved by so many who told her often.

I have lived with the guilt every day since her death that I didn't get to tell her how much I loved her, how beautiful and talented and how proud of her I was. I let my anger about her dating an older guy and not following the rules get in the way. The what-ifs tear me apart every day.

With all the accomplishments Ashley made prior to her death, I really thought she had put some of the things from her past behind her. But I was wrong, and it'll haunt me until I die.

Most days I am just numb inside with the guilt from telling her that if she was not going to follow

the rules, she would have to move out. It was meant to encourage her to see that the guy she was dating was using her, and to concentrate on her education and not on a guy who did not have a job. Instead, I made her feel unloved and unwanted by me, her father, and that just eats me up inside.

I love all my daughters so much, and as a father I wanted what was best for them, but sometimes I guess what I feel is best is not what makes them happy. It is hard for a father to let go as they get older, and being a father of five girls maybe made me more protective. Most days I just move forward with a smile, pretending that I have moved on, but inside I'm a mess. Some days I just cry, and most days I find it hard to do things. I have to force myself to do anything.

If it wasn't for my oldest daughter, Alexa, I would not have gone on. She has been my strength when I feel so alone; she keeps me living. I see so much of Ashley in her as well as my other daughters.

I might not know what each day will bring, but what I do know is that I, her sisters, and all her friends are left with this empty feeling inside. Without her here, there is a void, and nothing will ever fill its place.

