

# Why we must MOURN

By Xavier Amador, PhD

On April 23, 2007, while helping a woman put her groceries on a bus, my brother Henry was hit by a car and died at the scene. That was not what he or I had planned for. Although I am much too close to my loss and mourning to know what good can come from this, I know something will someday.

Standing at the lectern looking out at the people who had come to Henry's funeral, I was struck once again by what a full life he had. His friends filled the church, prompting several of my family members—who had very little contact with Henry after he became ill with schizophrenia 25 years ago—to say things like “I had no idea he had this many friends!” and “I didn't know his life was so full.”

As they met and spoke to more and more of his friends over the course of that day and the next, some in my family expressed deep remorse and sadness that they had missed out on so much of his life. I didn't feel that sadness because I had not missed out. As I wrote about in my first Lessons Learned column for *Schizophrenia Digest* [“It's not about ‘denial,’” Winter 2007], my brother and I were very close and enjoyed each other's company immensely. He was my hero.

The reason I had this relationship with Henry but others in our family did not is not because I am a better person; I am no saint. The reason is that after he first became ill, I was somehow able to mourn who he had been before, while most of my brothers and sisters (there are nine of us) seemed unable to.

At first, I know we all felt it was impossible to accept that he was no longer there in the way he had been and that he would never become the man we all had envisioned he would be. Growing up, we all thought Henry would finish college, perhaps go further, and likely marry and have children. He was smart, handsome, kind, and loving. He had a magical sense of humor. When he became ill with



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schizophrenia, we all longed for the “old Henry” and made little room in our hearts for the “new Henry.”

He had the same problem.

For the first five years of his illness he, like us, was stuck on the plan he had had for the future, and he became depressed that what he had planned for seemed impossible to attain now. Prior to becoming ill, he had always worked and had girlfriends. That seemed over now. Not until he had mourned his old vision for his future did he discover that the old Henry was still there. He realized that new plans needed to be made. This last year he was especially happy. He had many friends, he worked odd jobs with his friend “Pops,” and his girlfriend, Mary, was becoming a big part of his life.

The research is clear on the importance of mourning. By mourning what has been lost, you open your eyes to all that is still here. Moreover, you open your eyes and heart to new possibilities.

When his brother (*below*) developed schizophrenia 25 years ago, Xavier was able to mourn the loss of the "old Henry" and make room in his heart for the "new Henry."



In a review of the research literature on suicide we published last spring in the *Annals of General Psychiatry*, my colleagues and I found that people with schizophrenia who had successfully mourned were less likely to feel suicidal. Studies of family members of people with schizophrenia

have found that those relatives who have mourned the loss of the way things used to be are less likely to be critical of their loved ones, and feel less burdened and stressed.

Some research findings are intuitive; they just make sense. This is one of those instances. I have seen the same transformation my brother and I experienced—the improvement in his hopefulness about his future and in our relationship—repeated time and again in patients and families I have worked with these past 25 years.

It is like any major change in life. When you mourn, you feel sad because you are saying goodbye to what was and what you had hoped would be. But by doing this, you feel at peace and even happy as you say hello to what is and what can be. I have counseled many families and also consumers on the importance of going through this process. Families that successfully mourn are able to let go of their anger

at their ill loved ones. They have learned to separate the illness from the person. Communication gets healthier, and even the course of illness can improve because of the lessened tension between family members. But I never before experienced the stark truth of this wisdom so completely as I did when my brother died. Now that he's gone, I find that I have no regrets. I cherish countless good memories I have of him. I recall our frequent conversations—sometimes he would ramble and it would be hard for me to listen, but he would always end by saying, "You're my baby brother, I love you." I remember our constant laughter together, his helping me build a fireplace, his giving me permission to write about him, the pride he felt in me and I in him, and so much more.

After Henry became ill, many things changed. But not the fact that he was still smart, handsome, kind, and loving. And he could still make

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me laugh in any situation—I am talking about the splitting-your-gut kind of laughter. In fact, because he felt less inhibited, he was far funnier than he was before and he knew it, too.

Many people have written to me to offer their condolences, to share their good memories of Henry, and to wisely say how lucky I was to have him as a brother. They are right. But they left out one vital thing, a lesson I learned anew as I reflect on the seemingly insurmountable task of saying goodbye to him all over again: I was especially fortunate that I was able to mourn after he first became ill—to say goodbye to what I had hoped for—so that these past 25 years, I could laugh with him, make new good memories together, and realize just how lucky I was to be his baby brother. **SZ**

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