

An Unheard Life: The Story of My Father

Elizabeth Saenz Ortega

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. In this article, someone dies by suicide. Please read with care and support. If you need to talk to someone, call 988 or visit <https://988lifeline.org/>. Help is available in English or Spanish and for those who are deaf or hard of hearing.
2. Read about alcoholism in the box on the next page. Why is it important to understand that alcoholism is a disease?
3. In English, the prefix *un* means “not, or the opposite of.” An *unheard* life is a life that no one has heard about. Use *un* with other words.

First, He Got More and More Isolated

In 1974, my parents and their eight daughters moved to Ciudad Juarez. My father stopped working because my older sisters asked him to. They wanted him to rest and enjoy being with the family. My sisters took over the household finances.

My parents stayed home while we studied and worked. My father gradually lost his hearing. He refused to use hearing aids, so he had very little interaction with family or friends. He isolated himself in his bedroom, which he no longer shared with my mother. He spent all his time listening to the radio or TV at high volume and drinking alcohol.

He Was Suffering More than We Knew

I’m sorry to say we felt ashamed of him. When he was drunk, we were disgusted by him. We didn’t realize that his isolation and loneliness were causing him to become deeply depressed. Over time, we all went our separate ways. We sold our family home. My mother went to live with one sister, and my father went to live with another sister.



One Sunday, in June 1991, my father committed suicide. He went to my sister’s house. While she was preparing breakfast, my father went out to the yard. Minutes later, my sister went to look for him. She found him hanging from a tree with a noose around his neck.

It was a terrible experience. He had often said that he was suffering, but we didn’t believe him. We thought he was trying to manipulate us. It wasn’t until later that we understood that his alcoholism was a disease. His deafness made him isolated. These two conditions made him severely depressed. They led him to end his life.

We Live with Regret

Now we wish we had shown more love and understanding. Maybe if we understood his illness, we could have done more. Our regrets have kept open the wound caused by his death.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. What happened to Elizabeth's father that contributed to his isolation? Be specific.
2. With this story, the author has changed her father's story to one that is no longer *unheard*. Why do you think she wanted to do this?
3. Write a letter to the author. Respond to some of the details she shares in her story. What would you say to her about her regrets?

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Alcoholism Is a Disease

Alcoholism or Alcohol Use Disorder is an addiction. Addiction is an illness. If your loved one is addicted to alcohol, they need treatment. If they refuse to get treatment, it is not your fault. According to the Cleveland Clinic, these are some signs of alcoholism.



If you or someone you know is looking for help, try reaching out to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The website is: <https://www.samhsa.gov/>. Or call 1-800-662-HELP (4357). Help is available in English or Spanish.