

In their memories

Two months into my role as an assistant professor, my colleague died of pancreatic cancer and the two students he had been supervising asked me to be their new adviser. “Why me?” I asked myself. After years training with a prolific scientist and a seasoned mentor, what could they possibly learn from a brand-new professor? Not to mention their areas of research were different from my own. Others also advised against it. “You need to focus on doing your own research and working toward tenure,” said one. “They’re not your problem,” said another. But I didn’t think twice about it. I had once experienced a similar loss, and I knew what I had to do.

Early in my graduate school experience, the chair of the department, Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, gave me a model of mentorship. At first, she was a kind but distant figure—her expertise was not in my planned area of research, and everything was going smoothly for me, so I doubted she even knew I existed.

Then, a few months into my studies, I was walking back to my apartment after a Friday night dinner with friends when I was beaten and knifed by a group of men; police later said it was likely a gang initiation rite. At the hospital, I was told the injuries I sustained would require not one, but two surgeries.

Days after my attack, Susan emailed asking how I was doing. Susan was a legendary scientist; why would she care about a new

graduate student like me? I assumed she was simply doing her due diligence and sent a brief response—“I’m hanging in there”—thinking our exchange would end there.

Yet week after week, the emails kept coming. Her genuine care and concern came through, and I discovered I could be genuine myself in turn. After the attack I had moved in with my parents, who lived a 45-minute drive from campus, and I told her I had been feeling isolated. Susan pushed me to get out and connect with people. When I confessed that I wanted to leave the Ph.D. program, Susan encouraged me to continue doing the work that brought me pleasure, even if it was elsewhere. And when I shared that I was thinking about transferring to another university, Susan helped me realize that I couldn’t let the events of that night define me and my trajectory. I returned to campus to resume my studies, buoyed by Susan’s support.

But days before the semester was due to begin, the members of our department received an email informing us



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that Susan had tragically died of complications from heart surgery. I was crushed and angry and lost. Who could I turn to if not her?

In the weeks and months that followed, I found myself reading her messages over and over again. One is etched in my memory: “Things can be better than they are now. ... You’ll get back there and make even more progress once you get past this obstacle.” I realized that those words would help me get through her loss, and whatever other difficulties life threw my way. And I vowed to follow her example.

So, years later, as I began to work with my new mentees, Shauna Bowes and Tom Costello, I tried to cultivate the same openness with them that Susan had fostered. At

our weekly lab meetings, I invited each to share a memory of their former mentor, Scott Lilienfeld, whom I didn’t get the chance to know. Some weeks we laughed. Others we cried.

They weren’t the only ones who did the sharing; I did, too. Because I was open with them about losing Susan, my insecurities as an assistant professor, and more, they knew they could be open with me, whether it was about their research, their mental health, or anything else they needed to talk about. Our relationship has been incredibly rewarding.

After the support I received from Susan, I’m grateful to have had the opportunity to pay it forward. But it shouldn’t take awful and unimaginable circumstances like getting attacked or losing an adviser to build these kinds of connections with students. It is our duty as faculty to support students in all ways, always. ■

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