

Turning 20 in 2020

How is an almost twenty-year old coping with loss at a time when they should be experiencing and enjoying so many new things?



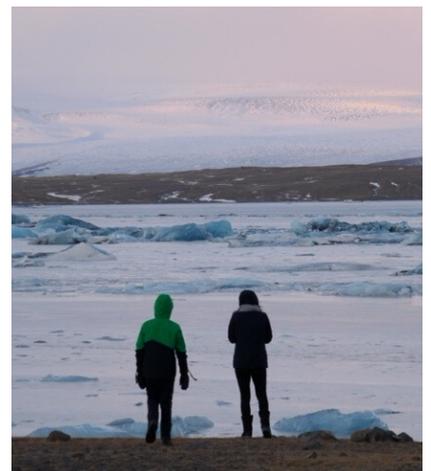
Esmée Cornelissen's week looks like this: on Monday she goes to school where she studies pedagogy. When she comes home in the afternoon, she is extremely tired and has a big headache. "It feels like my brain is pressing against my skull." All the noise in the school has overstimulated her. "I describe my headaches with pain levels to my family. Just after school, my pain level is a 10." If Esmée doesn't do anything for the rest of the week, her pain level can go down to a 7. But most of the time, that's not the case. Every Friday she has an internship at a daycare with lots of noisy children. At the end of that day, the pain is at 10 again. She then needs all weekend to prepare for the following Monday.

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Until 2 years ago, Esmée was a very ordinary student. She played a lot of sports and spent a lot of time with her friends. She was always happy. Then her life turned upside down. Her younger brother Kester, who was just twelve years old, died of cancer, six weeks after her graduation.

It had started three years earlier. "I was the one that discovered a little bump under his armpit." Four months later, Kester was diagnosed with a very rare and aggressive kind of cancer. Chemo- and radiotherapy followed. "I often went with him to the hospital because I wanted to support him." While there were many hopeful moments, in the end, none of the therapies worked. She says that she could not believe it when her parents told her that Kester wouldn't get better. "I was with him when he passed away at home. Even though I knew it was coming, it still happened suddenly. I couldn't breathe and almost passed out when I saw his eyes staring at me."

At first it seemed she was only very sad. A month after the death of her brother, Esmée went out for the first time. "I went with my mom to the mall. I got out of the car and I was already feeling anxious because it was my first time out, but at that moment the sounds of all the cars and the noise of the street came in so loud, and I thought: what is this? I didn't know what was happening to me." She first thought she was only anxious to go on the streets, but what she actually found out that day was that she no longer had a filter for the sounds outside, because of what she'd been through. It turned out she had a post-traumatic stress disorder.



Esmée lacks energy. Once, when she was on the train coming back from school, she was sitting with her classmates. They were all talking about their plans for the afternoon and that they'd maybe all go on to a restaurant. "I then thought: How can they have the energy for that? When I get home, I can only think of laying down."

She also finds that other things in life are more important now. Last year, when she was with a big group of friends she hadn't seen altogether since her brother died, she felt totally out of place. "Everybody was talking about their study, their boyfriends and how hard their life was because they had to do so much. I was thinking: don't whine so much, life can be so much worse." She says her friends were nice to her and she doesn't blame them, but it just didn't feel right to be there. "I left a lot earlier than the rest of the group."



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Esmée gets good grades and has obtained her driving license. "Normal" people would be very happy about that she says, but she actually feels unhappy at such moments. "I can't tell my brother about this. I used to share almost everything with Kester, I find it so difficult that this is no longer possible." Esmee's trauma makes it hard to get her life back on track. "It's not just that you are sad for a while, and you then pick up your life again. It is much more than that. It affects a lot more in life and for the rest of my life."

