Cindy: this interview is about sharing your life challenges and experience personal growth as a result. I would first thank you for accepting our request to interview you. Before we begin, may I confirm with you that you consent to this interview to be audio recorded?

Ronald: yes

Cindy: the audio will be deleted after our presentation and I will inform you once done so.

Now let’s dive into the first qn, could you tell us about an exp in your life that u found to be quite challenging?

Ronald: okay…challenging ah. I think I experience quite a lot of challenges in life, but I’ll just jump right in into the one that impacted my life view because this one is quite personal to me, it is relating to my cousin---my oldest cousin, the one belonging to my mother’s side. He was my role model but unfortunately, just seven years ago he committed suicide, and that’s why I used past tense “was my role model”.

I think that is one exp in my life that I found to be quite challenging because:

Firstly, he is my oldest cousin, and he has been taking care of me since I was young.

Secondly, because of him he was a very good role model and I look up to him and try to be as good as him because he was a Hwachong student and you know he was actually quite scholarly and he had done pretty well in his life, manage to go oversea to study and get his master degree, that’s why I looked up to him. Why it’s challenging? It was because he committed suicide and this happen when I was pretty young when I was 18 to 19, right after poly and right after NS. He was my role model and a navy regular, he signed on, and because of him being my role model, I signed on as well, as a navy regular. I signed on right after NS but also because of him I felt very very distraught, when he was supposed to be my role model, he committed suicide, and that actually throw me off my life path, which I actually signed on because of him, with him being so successful in life, I wanted to be just like him you see. At this point of life, it was quite challenging, I didn’t expect him, a scholar you see, doing so well in life to have commit suicide. It’s not normal, you see someone who is successful, and the next day you receive news that he is gone, just like that. You like up and like ‘huh’, the cousin, you mean the very successful one, the everyday happy go lucky, and everyday always taking care of younger cousins like me to suddenly just go, that’s why you just get throw off the track of life. To me it’s quite challenging, because it is so personal and it happens just so sudden and the worse thing is that he committed suicide one day before my birthday. So, as a normal human being, my reaction was like you just trying to play a trick on me because tomorrow is my birthday, so my parents just told me this news and I looked at them and I’m like y’all playing tricks on me right? My birthday has not come yet leh, my birthday strikes at 12 midnight, not 12 in the afternoon. So he committed suicide in the morning and the final news came to me at 12pm, one day before my birthday. And I told them like “it’s 12noon not 12midnight, don’t play a trick on me, it’s too early to play a trick on me, if you want to play a trick.” That is the funny part, at that point of time, at first I thought it’s a y’know a joke to me. But eventually, it tell upon that oh my oldest cousin, who has been my role model and who inspired me to signed on and to do well in life actually committed suicide because he had a lot of personal problem. What personal problem he had, I think I won’t go into details, but this was quite challenging because at that point of time, he portrayed an image that he has his life carefully planned out, and totally in control, nobody expected that and it totally threw my family off course. Everybody was shocked and surprised. At that point of time, nobody knew what to do. So, when I heard the news, I looked up at my parents, and I wanted some answers, like how am I gonna deal with this, but there wasn’t much answers. So as a young kid, 19 years old, I was made to handle this situation by myself, and to get it through. I find this experience to be quite challenging.

Cindy: alright yeah, it is definitely very shocking and surprising to everyone. Now I would like to ask you, if you think back on that experience, would you have acted the same way or differently. Would you have been calmer, or in less shock or surprise and why?

Ronald: I think in terms of reaction wise; I was 19yrs old, I didn’t know what to do, and I just keep quiet about it. So, I think something that change during this period of time from a bubbly guy, who people would think was extroverted, I suddenly become very introverted. Ya so, that was the biggest change in my life. I just kept quiet, this is my role model, my oldest cousin, my closest cousin, who always take care of me and now I just suddenly lose a support. So, I partly didn’t know what to do, so I just kept quiet and try to let it pass. If you ask me to reflect back and see what would I have do differently. Of course, I would want to do something differently. I think as a young kid I would want to talk about it but since the parents are also in the mourning stage, nobody wants to talked about it, because its so sudden. I think reflecting back, I think even I want to do something about it, most likely I would still keep quiet, I probably would be y’know, be reserved about it and hopefully let it pass during this period. Then now that I’m older, I’m more open, and my family members and relatives are more open to talking about it and making sure such a case doesn’t happen again. However, if you ask if I’m like transported back in time, back to same period of time, I think…. I don’t think there will be a big change in the way we approach and how we handle the situation.

Cindy: alright, it must have been a difficult season in life for your family and your relatives. For the next question, I would like to ask, when you were facing that experience, that season of the lost of your role model, what are some things that you did or say to yourselves to motivate you to not give up or to remain the same as in you can still live on even without your role model?

Ronald: I think you mean being sane in life ah, instead of being insane like him. Just joking. Yes, as we grow older, this is something we must acknowledge, that sometimes stress can really kill people. People have to acknowledge that stress is real and we should not stigmatize it, and make sure that people like you, university students trying to study out there, its definitely stressful, if you ever face an adversity or what, like me or my cousin, do get help early. Of course, what the things I do to motivate myself is number 1 --- I just kept quiet and hope that things will just go away, it’s a matter of fact that sooner or later, things will go away. This is something that I realized 1 yr later, is that you got to have the hope to keep on living and not to repeat the same mistake as what your role model did. Because, they are your role model, if he is your role model, then of course you will learn both the good and the bad things from him. This is something which I have learned, that suicide as a solution is a stupid thing that he did, and a bad thing that I should not learn. And even so, he still fulfills as a role model to me, even though he committed stupid act. I told myself, I would not be a stupid guy just like him, to commit suicide. That partly got me through. Then of course, not to give up on life is definitely because he motivated me to signed on, I told myself that “he is already gone, he is no longer the naval officer that others can looked up to, and since I’m already in the job, maybe I can replace him and be the proud naval officer in the family, in the relative pool. So that people would not be worried about me. This is something that I did also, I told myself that “hey since he’s no longer my role model, or rather, not around to be my role model, I shall live up to be as good as him and make sure I live up to this role model that has motivated me so much. And hopefully, right now in my job as a naval officer, I’m being a role model to others and hopefully, help others lead their lives properly and not make a stupid mistake just like my cousin. So, I think this is something that motivated me, even though it is stupid, it makes me not give up and make me look forward to replacing him as a role model.

Cindy: right… if he’s still around I’m pretty sure he would be happy to know that you still treat him as a role model, even at the stupid thing that he did (ya of course). Next question, is there anybody in your circle who offer you support during those challenging times besides your family members? Can you share more with us about how this group of people has helped you to get through these times.

Ronald: okay. I think at that point of time, it is a little bit complex, because when before the suicide happens, my family and my relatives are not as close as what we are right now. It is because before the suicide happens, everybody is comfortable and everybody is always saying that things like y’know “how’s your job?”, “I’m doing fine, no problem.”, “do you have any stress?”, “no, not really.”, “how’s your promotion?”, “yeah, I’m getting promoted next year.”, these kinds of talks going around. Before the suicide happen, the family dynamic is actually quite I would say separated where y’know my relatives would just ask me, and I would just tell them “ya nothing is going on, nothing special.” And then over the years people normalized it and it becomes very mundane. Asking question becomes a very mundane thing in life and in terms of family gatherings. So that was before the suicide happens. After the suicide happen I would I say that the family ties became much stronger, because we have a case where our relatives, my cousin, actually committed suicide. And this was partly because, in my opinion, he did not feel any love. Although, yes, people are asking questions, but they may not be genuinely concern about your life and how you are doing. That’s why in my opinion, after the suicide happens, the family ties got bonded closer. After the suicide happens, that’s where I feel that my relatives actually do care about me. Of course if you ask me if there is anybody in the circle that particularly helped me, I would say not really. But I think this case, we actually got through together as a family, as cousins, relatives, etc. because after this suicide happens, all of us internally do not want another such things to happen again. That’s when I feel, my aunties and uncles when they ask me questions, “hi ronald, how are you?”, that’s where I felt they really care about me. To reciprocate them, of course I answered them truthfully, but sometimes when I don’t feel good and want some advice, I would be more open to ask advice from my other cousins, as well as my other aunties and uncles. Especially, sometimes at work, you face a problem --- a difficult boss, then I would ask them how they deal with difficult bosses at work. And ya, these are the things that they helped me. I think we got through this challenging times as a family and supporting each other through.

Cindy: it’s very heartwarming to hear that y’all got through it together as a one big family. For the next questions, what is the characteristics or strength that you have which have helped you overcome this difficult season?

Ronald: I am very determined in life, to succeed. This is a very awkward question, but in terms of strength, I won’t say a particular strength or characteristic, but as a person as a whole, it’s that I learn, from this role model, from this case, I learnt to be stronger. I learnt that in life there are more valuable things to value, things such as your family, such as your own personal goals, your own personal life. I think that’s where the strength comes in, because of this suicide lesson, my whole life value change. Before that, I only concentrated on myself, you know right now everybody in University just want to be successful in life, we tend to focus only on our own success, on our own failures. But because of this life lesson, it gave me a broader view of life, that actually life is very fragile, and it make me question whether your own success, is it more important than your family ties. Or sometimes, maybe you know like to have your sense of freedom, but it makes me question whether is my own freedom really more important than family. Because of this case, I actually felt not really. I found my life values is actually my family, one loss is too many you see. Because my cousin died young, and I was young, I did not have the opportunity to treasure him, and tell him how grateful I was to him, so because of this my life value change, and now I am more… I place more value in terms of my family. Things such as my parents, when they need help, I would help them, I try to connect with them. I think this is the strength, it’s not a particular characteristic, I learnt from it and change my life values due to it.

Cindy: okay, I think its great that you became a better person through this difficult season. For the next question, is there any piece of advice that has been pass on to you that helped you remained steadfast, to remain calm, hoping that things will go through, will continue on in life.

Ronald: in the face of adversity, in the face on stress of whatsoever, remain an open mindset, I guess. And think it through on yourself, life principle is not to be stupid to commit suicide, from this case. One piece of advice that I would pass on to other people, which I realized through this episode is that don’t be rash with your life because life is precious. I guess everybody hears it very often, that life is precious, but do we really think about our life as precious. This is something I feel is questionable and I think that I want everybody to think about it carefully before jumping down the building or cutting yourselves and trying to end your life because sometimes you dying is very easy, but it may not be s easy for your family members. Afterall, who are the victims of the suicide case, it’s definitely the people around you, your loved ones, parents, siblings and relatives. They are the people who have to painstakingly live their life through possibly with guilt. Because for my cousin case, no one knew he has so much stress being put upon him, in his work as well as at home. And, I think everyone felt a sense of guilt towards my cousin, because if someone detected this stress earlier, maybe we could have prevented him from killing himself. We may have showed him more attention and gave him more advice, rather than having such a tragedy happen. So I think one piece of advice for anyone out there who has any thoughts of suicide, there is always a… there is always people around you, who can and will help you esp if you know you don’t want to turn to your personal family members, you can always go external, find some random counsellor to talk to, and try to pull through this time together. And when you are more settled down, think about it properly through your life, I think when you really sit down and think about it, you would be able to find a way through it. Sometimes you really just need someone to pull you through any difficult times and it can be anybody.

Cindy: right…I definitely agree with you like as the saying goes “you only live once”, and I think life is too precious to give it up like that, it is indeed very easy, but there are still people who care about you. So, what is some wisdom that you have gained from this experience, which would help you in the future to deal with other life challenges?

Ronald: I think wisdom is something that you gain through exp, so if you want to know how to deal with a suicide case, you have to undergo one yourself…just joking. But really for wisdom, it’s something that you have to go through it, and exp It for yourself. However, something that people do not see about wisdom is that you don’t really have to exp it, but you can talk about it. So like right now, I’m telling you about suicide case and how I dealt with it, and hopefully this small piece of wisdom, if you ever encounter a suicide case of your friends or your relatives, you will be able to remember my pieces of advice and think about your life properly before making any stupid decisions in life that will affect your future. In terms of wisdom, definitely it’s experience plus talking about it plus listening and I think when you listen to other people’s story, other people’s biography, how they overcome challenges. These are some very useful avenue that you can understand how people went through and when you get hit, you know how to deal with it.

Cindy: I think sharing life exp is very important, so that we can learn from one another even though we don’t face the same circumstances in our life. For some more lighthearted questions, what are your dreams for the future? Is it successful naval officer or any other dreams for your future?

Ronald: definitely, last time I dreamt to be very successful but I think through these years of life, after living through a suicide case, and having all my life values change. I think my dream is to live a life, live my life properly, make sure that I do not have any regret in life. And I not talking about having any regrets, its when right now I have the opportunity on life to be grateful to people and life around me, I think this is my dream. Whereby, people around me are eventually appreciated, and people around me can feel that I’m grateful for having them around. I think this is a simple dream, to live my life properly, and the people around me getting taken care of and make sure as much as possible I appreciate them and life around me, and also my future life.

Cindy: last question, what do you think would be the obstacles to you achieving this dream? And how would you tackle them, would the wisdom you mention be useful in tackling it?

Ronald: definitely, having this episode happen already 7 to 8 years ago, it definitely changes my life, how I looked and deal with things and stress. Rather than giving a heavy value to stress, nowadays I deal with it very laissez-faire. When there’s stress, I just deal with it, don’t put too much value into stress, as it is always around. So I tell myself that “okay it is very stressful, but I also tell myself no problem, maybe one mth down the road, when things get solve, things get lighter, stress would reduce.” I tell myself that stress would not be always there, its just a temporary thing. Looking into the future, I do live my life now more lightheartedly, so last time if I looked back, I was an angry boy ---angry about this and that, at my parents controlling my life, but now as you get older and looked back, there are lots of things you don’t have to care about, and to be angry about. There’s a saying “when you are angry for one minute, you are wasting your life for one minute.” When you can be happy with that one minute. It’s somethings I try to live my life with is that every minute I try to make full use of it, but things that happen, stressful moments, just close one eye and live through. Ultimately, you will go over, and this is life, where the exp u gain throughout will make you more patient, make you more warmhearted, make you more open and accepting in life, making sure that you don’t always be angry, and waste your life away.

Cindy: totally agree with you, I think stress is parts and parcel of life, you can never get rid of stress, and no matter what we should always hang on and to not give up because the stress would eventually reduce. We have come to end of the interview and thank you for sharing so much on your experience.