

Friends and Family

I have always found it to be an interesting dynamic with the mentally ill, friends and family. Generally there is a great deal of history, bad behavior and even more serious elements involved that break down the trust lines between all parties.

It has been mentioned before how important it is to always remember you are fighting an illness, not one another. Mental Illness can and is frustrating for all involved. Stigmas are attached, whether we like it or not.

I can only speak from my perspective and from this angle, I am not sure I could maintain without family, friends and a mental health team. Some do, and are successful. I have certainly tried in the past, but I found it impossible to have a consistent checks and balances system on my own.

Often, families are simply at a loss as to what to do. There are programs nationally available to help families come to understand and even learn some great coping skills along the way. The National Alliance on Mental Illness offers a program called [Family to Family](#) that was certainly instrumental in my parents understanding of mental illness and I highly recommend this program.

The fact is that everyone has a choice as to how they approach their loved one and the consumer has a choice to commit to a treatment plan that is transparent and family inclusive. It is important for family and friends to remember that no matter how frustrating the events in a mentally ill person's life are, they are

sick and often times driven by the illness. Consumers must come to the realization that there are ways of softening the symptoms of their illness through medication, therapy and lifestyle. I have found over the course of many years that there is no shortcut, no room for cheating. The bottom line is that like everything, it takes a consistent lifestyle conducive to your illness to release you from dangers of the illness.

So what does it look like when you have family and friends that are genuine in their concerns and hopes for you as a consumer? After 10 years, I am encouraged that I can describe this for you. While I certainly don't have as many friends as I have always had in the past, (Mania attracts a great deal of friends) I have incredible friends and family. It is my goal to always be open with them about my life events and my hopes and dreams. I don't tailor how I am feeling in the fear of a friend turning their back and I share everything that I am working on with family and friends. I have no doubt and it has been said, that some think, "Why does he [Cory] feel the need to share everything in his life." The reason for my sharing is simple – I want everyone on the same page and while my life events are not that important to most, my life events (if too many) can be very dangerous to my health and life. If someone doesn't really have concern for my well being, I at least hope they care enough about my parents to be alerted if things don't sound realistic or maybe grandiose. Mental Illness affects everyone, not just the consumer. With that in mind, I rely on my friends and family to say, "Cory, I see you have several projects going on – are they spaced out? Are you feeling any stress? Are you able to achieve your goals with these?" This is my checks and balance – it forces me to look at my own task list and question, "Is this

doable? Am I setting myself up for a break down?” If everything is doable, I am blessed enough to have people around me that say, “Great! I am happy for you and how can I help?” Of course there are those that simply don’t even address the fact that I am doing anything and they have an important part in the equation as well – because it reminds me and brings me to the reality of my past and why trust is a difficult thing to place in me. I don’t defend that, but I realize it and it helps keep me grounded. If you search hard enough, even the people you feel might be a negative in your life – you can make a positive to work for you rather than against.

I put a great deal of responsibility on both family and the consumer. I do not judge either – however, not working together and disrespecting one another regardless of the past, will only result in damaging behavior in the future - I assure you of this. Regardless of the behavior of a mentally ill person, I can nearly guarantee that there is deep shame, guilt and embarrassment that has settled into the psyche of your loved one. Out of fear, most people present anger. It is my belief that only unconditional love and determination can overcome that anger and only unconditional love and determination can burrow its way to the hurt that the consumer festers in their psyche and heart. When I hear the string of excuses, which many are completely viable, as to why it is impossible to continue supporting a consumer – I only think of the alternative... Suicide, life on the streets, prison, rape – name one, I’ve been there/I have lived it. When I look at those alternatives, I guess the answer is very clear.

If a loved one would have another illness (rather than a mental illness) and behave badly what would the response be? Would it be more compassionate because cancer might take their life soon? I am here to tell you, mental illness can take their life even quicker!

This column goes around and around and is not meant to answer the questions of what to do. Everyone's dynamics are different. What this column is meant to do is provoke thought, outside of the box from which you may be trapped. It is my hope and my prayer that compassion and love and understanding will always overcome whatever obstacles you may face. And when you think that life cannot get worse, sit down with a mother or father that lost their child to suicide – you might get a different perspective.