

## Family

I had the privilege this past weekend of attending training for the Nationally Recognized Family to Family Program offered by the National Alliance on Mental Illness. It was a unique experience simply because I am a person living with a mental illness but had the opportunity to get educated from a family perspective in order to help others.

It was overwhelming to see the love and support that many like me have. It was also sad to see the pain that our illnesses put all around us through. So this column is for you – all of you that are loving family members simply trying to make sense of it all and do the right thing.

There were many times throughout my most manifested symptoms that I could not understand why my parents would not do more. Now balanced, I look back and think, “Thank God they didn’t!” A family, as much as they want to or find themselves doing – cannot be pulled into the illness. Often, you are the only foundation, the only logical rational thing we have as people with mental illness. That stability in itself is a very powerful tool against the illness and the symptoms.

If you risk your homes, careers and mental and emotional stability – what will we have? You simply cannot do that. My parents could have. Had they gone any further, jumped on planes to find me – taken off work to find me or anything else... 10 years later the stability that I now have, would not exist and we would all be at the mercy of my illness. Never – should you feel guilty for this. With that said, how do you handle it? I am not a professional, but let me give some personal advice.

Always attempt to come from a place of love. Not fear, but love. Remember that anger is not an emotion – it is the result of an emotion, identify the emotion as quickly as possible and react accordingly. Do not be enveloped by the drama of the result of symptomatic behavior. Get out a piece of paper and write down the facts. With that, write down what you CAN do and what you simply CANNOT do. Relieve yourself from guilt for what you cannot do. That guilt will do nothing for you or your loved one.

See your loved one for who they are – not their symptoms. React to them with only that in mind – the son, daughter or sibling that you know, the illness is not their definition – you know who they are. In many cases symptoms manifest based on insecurities. Chances are you know your loved ones insecurities – nurture them. Whether your loved one reveals it or not, they are

most likely being pushed by guilt, regret, a sense of loss, and embarrassment. It is important to let them know that YOU know that this is NOT how you define them. There are going to be plenty of people in their world that will define them by their actions and symptoms – you won't be able to protect them from this hurt but you will be able to balance it by letting them know they are safe and understood within your family.

Love and Hope is a very powerful thing. Most of us have a belief system – be it God, Buddha or Allah, we believe in something beyond ourselves. Know what is within your control and know what is not – once again, pull out a sheet a paper and write these things out – give to a higher power what is his and do what you can with what is yours.

YOU need a support system. Pull close those that love you and those that have compassion for your loved one. They do not need to understand or even approve, but they do need to love. The last thing you need around you is someone who is cynical and degrading to your loved one. Your loved one will live with this illness the rest of his/her life – chances are the family cynic will be a hurtful component to your loved ones life, validating all the insecurities that feed their illness.

Never compare. Every single person, all 6.5 billion on this earth are different. While an illness by definition may be the same; personality, environment and every other component plays a part in your loved ones recovery. We cannot all be Van Gogh, Einstein or Hemmingway nor should we have those expectations placed on us (as the mentally ill). Provide expectations that meet the abilities of your loved one. I believe we should all follow what we are passionate about and what our heart leads us to do, but with a mentally ill person – I think this is even more important. I believe if I would have followed writing as a career rather than entering the corporate world – life might have been a little different. But everything is as it should be. If possible, however – nurture those natural talents in your loved one, you never know they just might be the next Hemmingway ☺

Mental Illness is no one's fault. There is always a fine line between mental illness and behavior. There is no answer key to this. The closer you get to your loved one, the more you know them – the more you will learn what behavior is and what is the illness.

Finally, be kind to one another. Do not create anymore bad memories than possible. We as the mentally ill need you to be mentally healthy and stable. You are our balance our gage. Please get rid of all the negatives. Get rid of guilt, regret, embarrassment and shame. It will provide nothing in your

life. I assure you that your loved one has enough of all of these emotions for your entire family – you don't need to carry them as well, they do NOTHING for ANYONE!

Get involved in the mental health community, the advocacy community and the support community. The more education you have – the more of an arsenal your loved has. I call those around me, my army. My parents, my therapist, my psychiatrist and my case manager and my friends. – they are my army against a very worthy adversary. I never doubt the power of my illness, I never underestimate it. It takes an army!

This column is dedicated to all the family members that I met over the past weekend. It is also dedicated especially to a woman that warmed my heart – a mother in every sense of the word. Doni. Your love for your loved one was not only visible, it was felt – he is in good hands no matter where he is in the world! God Bless!

Cory