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A Parental Perspective on A Diagnosis of Schizophrenia

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For years, I couldn't speak about my son's illness or share my family's story because we were dealing with too much turmoil of our own. But eventually my son experienced a substantial improvement in his condition and gave me his blessing to publicly talk about our journey. However, as much as I want to provide information that helps others, it's not always easy to do because I occasionally get asked a question that was initially very difficult to answer. How were you affected by your son's diagnosis of schizophrenia? The question strikes a sensitive chord because of what my family experienced, so a recollection can bring about emotions that I typically keep neatly packed away.

Over time my responses evolved because the more I recalled all the details, I realized a very important fact. All diagnoses are not the same. Although the common perception is that they are a definitive line in the sand, there are times when they are more of an inevitable conclusion. For instance, when I was diagnosed as having a heart attack in 2017, it was within a couple of hours of my arrival at the emergency department. Prior to that pivotal moment, I was a healthy and active person who didn't have any pre-existing symptoms, so the diagnosis was unexpected and shocking in many ways.

However, in my son's case, it was much more complicated. His mental health had been declining for nearly two years and the line in the sand moment began with early onset psychosis when he was sixteen years old. It was also complicated and muddy because he had been smoking cannabis regularly, and I attributed some of his strange antics to the fact that he was under the influence of a drug. Only after he shared that he had quit smoking pot because it made him paranoid and uncomfortable did my wife and I suspect something else was going on.

We were hopeful that everything would return to "normal" the longer he abstained, but the psychosis only intensified over time. We did what a lot of people do in the internet age and scanned the web for answers, and it didn't take long to find compelling information that confirmed it could be a serious mental health issue. We never anticipated that it would be such a struggle to get him the medical attention he needed

but quickly realized that if a person (including an adolescent) is against any medical intervention and doesn't participate in the process, it is extremely difficult to get them help.

In our case, my son's mental health declined so badly that I was forced to take drastic action. I went before a Justice of the Peace and "formed" him on two different occasions to obtain the legal right to force him to go to the hospital, with the assistance of and in the custody of the police. This was an extremely stressful process that took hours to complete, and our hopes for medical assistance were frustrated. The psychiatrists discharged my son after speaking with him for about five minutes when they determined he was not a risk to himself or anyone else, although we didn't share that belief.

We would continue along this journey of navigating the medical and mental health system for the next two years. A more accurate choice of words would be wrestling with the medical and mental health system. During this time, my son would be involuntarily hospitalized a total of four different times, and a diagnosis came during his second hospitalization.

By the time that happened, we were more than prepared for it because of everything we had experienced. Instead of it being a definitive emotional reaction like I had with my heart attack, we had hundreds of moments that were filled with tears, anger, bitterness, and sadness. And in my case, I experienced a significant amount of guilt and affiliated feelings that were always negative.

This was mostly a result of the fact that although I knew there was a history of mental illness in my family, I still decided to bring children into the world. My older brother lived for eighteen years with an undiagnosed mental illness and ultimately committed suicide at thirty years of age. I was always reluctant to discuss this information with my kids for a multitude of reasons, mostly revolving around a fear of some kind. In hindsight, I was always left wondering if I had shared that history with my son, would it have influenced some of his decisions during his impressionable teen years?

Finally, I was especially guilty because I unknowingly encouraged him in a direction that I now know was misguided and ill-informed. I grew up in an unstable and violent household that resulted from parental alcoholism, so my worst fear was that a genetic predisposition for alcoholism might also affect my kids once they were old enough to drink. When my teenage son shared with me that he didn't like to drink but had tried cannabis and liked it, I was relieved because everyone I knew who smoked pot was mellow and relaxed.

But what I didn't realize because it wasn't publicized as much at that time is that cannabis use has been linked with schizophrenia for persons with a family predisposition for that illness. If I was aware of that substantial risk, I would have had a

different conversation with my son so that he was aware and may have chosen a different path.

I was fortunate that it didn't take me long to figure out that beating myself up was pointless thanks to heartfelt discussions I had with my supportive wife, doctors, and other medical professionals. They furnished me with advice that wasn't only wise but also strategically productive. Their narrative was that instead of wasting valuable time and energy on presumptive what ifs, I should concentrate my energies on helping my son and family in the best way possible.

In hindsight, there is no other option if you are committed to helping your child overcome a health crisis resulting from a serious mental illness. They will require your strength, leadership, and perseverance because they may be incapable of acting in their own best interests and there may be no other person willing to help them. One of the first casualties of mental illness is that relationships are fractured, and the resulting isolation reduces the likelihood that any medical plan will succeed. But with a loving and supportive environment, at least there is a chance that things may improve.

I'm more than happy to say that this is what happened in my son's case. It goes without saying that his struggles with mental illness and the eventual diagnosis of schizophrenia were not something that any parent would wish for; but we are fortunate because he's realized a long-term stability that has proven life changing for all of us. When we contrast his current health status with what it was like during the most challenging times, the transition is truly remarkable. His mental illness was so debilitating at times that he was unable to do simple things like read, watch tv, or put a complete sentence together. Eventually, after a drastic change in his perspective, he was able to turn his life around to the point that he obtained his high school diploma and driver's licence within months of each other.

These successes brought about huge changes to his self-esteem and quality of life, and they were a direct result of my son realizing two important facts. The first was that his parents were his greatest allies and always had his best intentions as their primary motivation. The second was that he had to accept the fact that he had an illness that required him to follow his doctor's directions and treatment plan, which included medication compliance.

Ironically enough, it was my heart attack that brought about this change. I was always physically active and strong for my son's entire life, to the point where he believed I was invincible. This perception resulted in him being initially rattled by my health crisis, but he soon noticed that we had many things in common now. I had to take daily medication and follow a medical plan prescribed by my doctors, just as he was obligated to. Just like him, I had certain limitations on what I could or could not do in some respects, but I accepted sacrifices without hesitation because I wanted to ensure I was giving myself the best shot at a successful recovery.

During my rehabilitation, I never lost sight of the fact that I was incredibly lucky to have survived a massive heart attack, and I wanted to warn people about the risks of contributing factors such as high cholesterol. When I shared this with my son, I was overjoyed when he gave me permission to tell his story as well so that we can educate others in a manner that might serve as a warning and an inspiration. This brave and selfless gesture on his part propels me in my advocacy work and allows me to contrast his mental health experiences with my brother's, and additionally with my own recovery to show the importance of addressing any health crisis.

Our shared message is actually very simple, but profound. Be your own best friend. If you ingest anything and experience negative side effects, that may be your body telling you to stop. If you experience a mental or physical condition that you suspect may be serious, it is important to see a medical professional without delay and follow sound medical advice to increase your chance of living a healthy and enjoyable life.

And as difficult as it can be at times, you must never give up hope. I know from experience that there are times when life is so overwhelming, it's hard to stay positive. But I've also discovered that things can change for the better quickly and unexpectedly, and that perseverance pays off. I'm hopeful that our story can serve as an example of that.

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