

# Family to Family



Telling It Like It Is . . . .

## Our Stories

Stories and Wisdom from Families when  
a Parent has a Mental Illness

One of a series of five booklets

This booklet is part of a series of 5 booklets called, “Telling It Like It Is”. Booklets in the series include:

- 📖 Our Stories
- 📖 Working Things Out as a Family
- 📖 Families and Recovery
- 📖 Children and Parenting
- 📖 Going to Hospital

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## **Who is in your family?**

In these booklets family refers to those people who support each other to help children thrive and grow. Children, mums, dads, grandfathers, aunties, grandmothers, step-mums, sisters, step-dads, uncles, brothers, best friends, partners, cousins, neighbours.

## **How to use this booklet**

### ***Families***

This booklet is the result of other families reflecting on the things they would have liked to know about or understand earlier in their journey. There is a lot of information in here and we hope it is arranged so you can choose the parts that interest you most. Some people may read it from cover to cover; others may read little bits from time to time. We hope it will help you talk together as a family about the issues that you are facing and the ways you can support each other. Information is included about when and where to seek help. Not all services providers understand all of the issues you may face so take this booklet along with you to share with them.

### ***Children***

This booklet is not designed for children. It is designed to help parents understand what might be happening for children and has ideas about ways to support them. Teenagers might like to read these booklets by themselves or with another family member or friend so you can talk about it together. It could provide an opportunity to have the conversations you have not quite got around to. Remember to ask for help if you need it.

### ***Workers***

When this booklet was first put together it was offered to some workers with a mental health background to read. What they told us was that the booklet helped them to understand the issues families face when a member experienced a mental health concern. They thought it would be useful to take with them to provide information and have discussions with family members to explore how the issues affected them. They also thought it would be helpful for group discussions.

## Introduction

For many, writing your story can be very therapeutic, and I suggest that everyone gives it a try at as a starting point for your journey on your road to recovery in your mental illness. However once written what do you do with it? For some they like someone significant to read it, a spouse or child, a parent or a close friend. If you have been asked to read someone's story please acknowledge this privilege and give feedback to them. The beauty of writing your story is there is no right or wrong; you just tell it like it has been for you. And in putting your thoughts, feelings and actions into words it somehow validates what has really happened in your life. It is no longer abstract, it is in print.

Sometimes if the memories have been particularly painful, having a burning ceremony and burning the story can be a symbolic way of putting the pains of the past to rest and it can be very useful. But it is up to the person who wrote it as to what they want to do with it. Just hanging on to it can be useful too.

Some people like to share their stories in hope they may help others. What you are about to read are beautiful, honest life stories from very brave people who hope that by sharing personal stories of their lives they may help in some way people like yourself that may be reading this booklet or maybe you know someone you could pass it on to that may find it helpful. Mental illness is very isolating and we often feel we are alone; when you read other people's stories we can be comforted to know we are not the only ones going through this. Please enjoy these real stories from real people.

And remember we all have a story worth reading I challenge you to tell your story of how it is for you.

Happy Reading

*Amanda Olsen*

Parent with a mental illness, 2007

## **Family Relationships**

When I was first confronted with the idea that my mental illness affected my children, I wanted to run away from the fact. I knew what it was like having grown up with a mum with mental illness.

Where I am in my journey now, I realise that if I had confronted this reality at the time, and had had the support to work through my feelings and support to manage my role as a parent, I might not have lost the relationship with my children, which I am currently building bridges back to.

*Margaret*

## **Who Is Behind the Mask?**

You move from place to place a life of nameless faces  
you always move on  
not knowing who you used to be  
you look in the mirror in the at face looking back you see  
don't know is this me

Tell me do you remember me  
Do you like you do you have time for me  
Do I have a face you'd like to know  
Well we might just start there  
It's as good as any where  
The ghost is back like a haunted pack the painted smile upon  
your tear soaked face is that you for a little while.

*Margaret*

## **If only I'd Known**

If only I had known the support system outside hospital. Get as much support as you need.

If only I had known how unpleasant hospital can be if the staff have a bad opinion formed from your history.

Maybe go to a hospital that doesn't know you.

If only I'd known my children could be taken off me. Make sure you get independent legal council.

If only I'd known all this ten years ago.

Now things are much better. I have a great relationship with my children and my ex-husband and I communicate well. I also have fantastic support around me, but you need to find it.

*Margo*

## **Making a Plan**

If you are offered counselling about a certain issue that needs exploring, ask what training the counsellor has had in the particular issue and how much they know and understand about the issue you want help with.

If you decide to go ahead with the counsellor, ask to draw up a plan before you start. For example, if the relationship between you and the counsellor is not working for some reason, have a plan in place that you can discuss your concerns. It is no fault of you or the counsellor as you are both human. Draw up a clear exit plan from the counsellor agreed by the both of you if this should happen.

In addition, have a crisis plan in case anything comes up that can destabilise your mental health whilst in counselling. This is taking care of you and keeping yourself safe. The counselling will then be a positive experience for you and your family.

*Margaret*

## Thomas' Story

Many mental health consumers question psychiatric medication and their side effects, and I am no exception. Whatever the case now, forty years ago I expected and had no option but to take the medicine prescribed. Without Largactil I would never have

“I realise now the opportunity I had to reinforce the bond between us but I let it go by default and now I find it very hard to rectify the matter.”

left the hospital and without a depot injection of Modecate and later Depixol every month my wife would never have felt safe from any relapse of my illness. I was not to know that the sleepiness brought on by the Modecate was to be preferred to my inability to

string two words together when answering the phone brought on by the Depixol. This had repercussions I didn't fully appreciate at the time.

It is only fairly recently after milder medication that I seem to have got the skills not to hand every phone call to my wife but 'old habits die hard'. The habit for both of us has largely stuck and it is a matter of regret for me now that when my son rang from overseas I did not have a strategy in place to talk to him. I realise now the opportunity I had to reinforce the bond between us but I let it go by default and now I find it very hard to rectify the matter.

*Thomas*

## Diagnosis

If only I had known how not being diagnosed correctly could take years to fix. So, if unsure of your diagnosis, get more than one opinion.

*Margo*

## My Experience as a Carer /Partner

Being a Carer/ Husband for many years, I have experienced a multitude of emotions.

Firstly I would like to point out that my wife is my wife, and her illness is chronic but also part of her personality. We work as a team with all decisions regarding our children, home, and personal undertakings. My role as “Carer” is to keep her on level terms, to enable her to fulfil her role as mother and wife. As she is an intelligent person it must be extremely aggravating to have outside influences believing she lacks capabilities.

Schizophrenia is a frightening word to the community, and one that we avoid using to friends and others, but means nothing to family, as my wife is a person that they all know and love. This leads me to my main point; this being my role as a carer mostly revolves around protecting my wife and family from the system, bureaucracy and society. It is obviously apparent that there is “something wrong” with my wife, and with our refusal to give the label, leaves others to make their own conclusions. Schools, home help and others claim

“They continued asking questions, so they obviously valued the wisdom of the answer”.

superiority to my wife, which then leads me to intervene to restore the status quo. Although my wife needs more care than would be needed by others, I believe this is also reciprocated, maybe not needed but given.

I prefer the name partner to carer, as I believe it is more appropriate. I would also like to point out that we have a little joke in our house, that we would ask my wife a question, and come back to her in a day for the answer. Our children would ask her a question, and then go off to do something else whilst waiting for the answer, and she would come back to them with the answer. However they continued asking questions, so they obviously valued the wisdom of the answer.

*Andy*

## **Being a parent and living with mental illness**

I was so deluded at one stage that I thought I had not enough food for the children. At breakfast, they had filled their bowls with cornflakes. I grabbed the bowls and tipped most of them back into the packet. I could not understand their protests and got angry. After they had gone to school, I went to Centrelink, got a food voucher (my first and only one), and bought what I thought the children would like, and some treats.

The reaction I got from them was not what I expected. They were ashamed about what I had done and told me to take the food back to the shops that we did not need it and that we did not deserve it.

Of course, when my mind was not affected I could understand that I had had more than enough food in the pantry and fridge. The sad part in all of this, is that even to this day my children have never spoken about it with me or any thing else about their experience over the years about the mental illness like it was for me as a child with my mother where we never got to talk about any thing. It takes many years to fathom out what has been real in your life, and what was your mum's delusion or fear.

*Margaret*

## **Who can you turn to for help? Who can you trust?**

My advice would be not to trust any initial contact completely, but rather monitor the form in which the assistance is offered, and whether or not the service providing the assistance absorbs the nature of assistance you require, or merely has an “off the shelf” assistance plan where one size fits all.....You will find people you can trust, but like any relationship whether personal or professional, it takes time. The trick is to persist in seeking help from all avenues, but be mindful to keep them on their toes until they can prove their worth.”

*Andy*

## **Don't give up. You deserve to live**

Having a baby is supposed to be a happy joyous time in your life. But what happens when it all goes wrong and you and your baby nearly die during birth? After birth you are both really sick physically and mentally. You already have a few young kids at home who need you very much but you can't even look after yourself. You have been through a lot and people say "It could be worse". Who cares if it could be worse?! It's bloody terrible!!

It's that bad you try to kill yourself. No one understands, except maybe the other patients in the psychiatric hospital. Your husband's stressed out trying to work and run the family, your friends (the ones that still talk to you) tell you its ok, you will get over it. Your parents tell you to snap out of it for your kids. The doctor says "Let's try this drug, and that one, and maybe this one". The psychologist says "Tell me about your childhood", and you still feel like crap two years later - chain smoking and twenty kilos heavier.

Well you know how I know? Because I've been there. I've walked the path and this is my story of recovery.

Support groups can help - so you don't feel like you're the only one going through it. Books and the internet have useful

**“Talking to your kids  
about your mental illness  
is always the right thing  
to do no matter what  
their age”.**

information and chat lines for people with mental illness, so you don't have to leave the comfort of your home, which at times I felt was almost too hard to do. Twenty four hour phone crises lines are good

for the dead quiet, middle-of-the-night emergencies when you need to talk but no one is listening. I have even driven myself to emergency at hospital and said "I don't feel safe - help me!" and they usually do. The P.E.T also handles emergencies 24 hours a day.

Non-government agencies were good for help with housework at times and support for my family and me when I needed it. Especially for the kids, with camps, movies and other holiday programs for free as money is always tight and school holidays are always trying.

Talking to your kids about your mental illness is always the right thing to do no matter what their age. You will find them very accepting and you will be relieved you did this. It all helps break down the stigma attached with mental illness. ARAFMI is an organisation that can help you (talk to your children). Having fun and making time for yourself to do the things you like to do is not being selfish. It's looking after yourself so that you can then look after your family better. It's ok to say NO and remember to delegate chores.

And although there is no cure for mental illness (there will always be ups and downs), if you try and help yourself you will be well and truly on the road to recovery like myself.

Good Luck.

*Amanda*

If only I knew  
I would get better  
I could get help  
I was not alone  
I am a good Parent  
My children will not suffer  
My friends will understand  
My partner will still love me  
My family will not judge me  
My God did not desert me  
I am not being punished  
I don't really want to die  
I did nothing wrong  
I did not deserve this  
I am a good person  
I will go up and down  
I will go down and up  
I will be a better person  
Because I will survive  
Mental Illness

*Amanda Olsen*

## **What it's like for me living with family member who has a mental illness?**

Having a member of your family who has a mental illness does not really make you that much different from everyone else because we are all different anyway. It's not about us being different; it's about having more responsibilities. It means experiencing a different way of life. Growing up and going to school I realised after a short time that I was different from the other kids. It was not necessarily in a bad way I just knew things were different even though people told me it was perfectly normal being different. I learned to accept this and decided that was how it was going to be. However the older I got, the more complicated things got, the more responsibility I got. I thought to myself this is not fair! I'm a kid!

I may have been a kid, but all kids mature differently, in different stages. Part of growing up in family with more responsibility meant I just had to mature at a more rapid rate so once again I learned to accept. Sometimes I question myself and wonder what it would be like not having a mum without mental illness in the family but then there would not be a family and I probably would not be here so I can't complain too much. This is where I start to think positively because not everything is bad. There are a lot of people and places out there today who help us out. If I was around in the older days, I would not have been so lucky. My family gets a lot of help so it's been pretty good.

Although I'm not complaining there are some things that I did miss out on when I was

younger. My mum was always coming in and out of hospitals and I was being moved around a lot. I didn't mind moving. But going in and out of hospitals was a pain because I don't like them and every time I saw her she seemed fine. Even though she seemed fine I knew she wasn't and it was pretty frustrating.

“I have always thought that just because my mum has a mental illness, it does not mean that I do.”

Also it seemed to affect the way she did things. Like she sleeps a lot! Also one minute she would be happy and in a good mood and the next minute she'd be sad. It was kind of hard to get my head around it. I didn't know what to expect. Every time I had a bad day I would come home and talk to her about it and she thought that I was depressed and had issues just because I had a bad day, which was pretty frustrating as well. But I knew she had my interests at heart. In the end I didn't mind it too much; it just made me a little less family orientated. I relied on my friends a bit more. I have always thought that just because my mum has a mental illness, it does not mean that I do. Sometimes I thought that the people who were helping us thought I had issues but I was fine then and I'm fine now. It can be hard on the kids though, and we still need the support.

“Sometimes I thought that the people who were helping us thought I had issues but I was fine then and I'm fine now. It can be hard on the kids though, and we still need the support.”

So it has been hard but you can't blame it all on a mental illness because there was always a lot more going on in my family with my dad, who never really helped my mum and the fact that there was 7 of us kids running around, which didn't help. I could tell you all the bad things that have occurred because of my mum having a mental illness but the truth is I wouldn't change it. Sure I'm sad about all the things I missed as a kid but it was all an excellent life experience. We all have things we miss out on, but all the bad things make us stronger. Some kids spend all their childhood with perfect parents who give them everything they want and need and life is good. However they are completely clueless of what is out there. They grow up with no sense of hardship or real responsibility. So when these innocent children reach adulthood they have absolutely no sense of reality. In a way I feel sorry for them. Having a mum with a

mental illness has prepared me more for the outside world and made me a stronger person. So I really have no regrets. I still have plenty of time to catch up on the things I missed when I was a kid. I still think however that now I'm reaching adulthood things are going to start to get harder again. There has been a recent struggle that I picked up on. Being a kid in a family where your mum has a mental illness is different then being an adult in the family.

The day to day running of the house is a problem. From my experience with mental illness, having a patient like my mum running the household is a problem. She sleeps a lot and the running of the household is put on hold a lot. It's a disaster and nothing gets done. My mum has no will power to keep things in order and it punishes all of us. It is really hard to live with someone who does not seem to mind living in clutter and chaos. It makes it harder on me when I come home from work to the mess and it not being my fault. It's a constant battle. However I do know that my mum works real hard. With this example I can explain my point, which is that the mistakes and problems a person with a mental illness has will always be forced upon their family members.

In conclusion there are the good things from when I was younger that happened such as getting plenty of help and support. Also getting a better sense of

“As long as you have plenty of help and support it's not so bad and you learn great lessons”

reality and being prepared for the world at an earlier age. These are the good things but there are also those negatives such as like being forced with mum's problems, as I got older and the extra responsibility. However I also said I learned to live with it because everyone is different. As long as you have plenty of help and support it's not so bad and you learn great lessons. So if I get I asked what it's like living with a family member with a mental illness I'd say it's not too bad.

*Elisha (18 years)*

## **I Am a Yes Person - “Thing’s do not change we change”**

People often look at me and say that I am confident, outgoing and a very happy person, that I have never ever had a problem in my life. The truth is that I had an incredibly challenging childhood. I went through many dark nights of pain and fear. Though it’s through the healing of this pain and fear that I have learned how to survive and become the strong, loving woman I am today.

My life was fantastic until I hit the age of two years old. Then shit hit the fan for me, especially from my point of view as that is when my life became an up hill battle. I lived in a three generation household in the south of England with my mother, my aunty and my grandparents. My father was nowhere to be seen, there were no older or younger brothers or sisters either, and I was the only child. There was a noticeable lack of love in our household, many power struggles and many mind games. I felt there was nothing I could count on and no one to hold me, love me and make me feel really wanted, I felt in the way.

When I was five years old my grandparents came over to Perth, Western Australia to be closer my grandfather’s immediate family. Not long after my mother and I came over also, with my mother leaving her twin sister back in England. I thought it was going to be an exciting new beginning!

My grandparents still had to live with us in a small three bedroom duplex. My mother had to work fulltime so she was able pay the mortgage and general living expenses. My mother thought that by having my grandparents live with us it would be very helpful to her when it came to looking after me and not leaving me alone at such a young age.

I loved my grandparents immensely, they were wonderful to me. My grandfather was the only male influence in my life when I was young, as I still had no contact with my father. My grandfather was a very strong willed and stubborn man but at the same time was very helpful and compassionate towards me. My grandmother on the other hand wore her heart on her sleeve, she saw the good in everyone; no one could do any wrong according to her. She didn’t

like confrontations or conflicts therefore she tried to avoid them as much as possible. I also saw that she was a rather quiet, emotional woman who lacked so much self esteem. She had to put up with plenty of bullying from my grandfather's immediate family which I found to be very disturbing. Little did I know at the time that she was suffering from a mental illness, which she had from the age of sixteen, caused by her own challenging childhood experiences.

It was now at the age of eight years old when I could soon see again and feel the intensity of the constant battle of power in the household between my mother and my grandparents. My mother came to realise that the three generation household does not work. So within the year my grandparents moved out into their own home. This put plenty of pressure on my mother, as she found it increasingly hard to keep a fulltime job, pay the bills and look after me all by herself. My mother became increasingly stressed making her very depressed, causing her to be verbally, emotionally, mentally and physically abusive towards me. This was a very fearful and painful experience for me, my mother made me feel as though I was responsible for where she was in her life. My self esteem and self worth was down to nil.

There was not much support coming my way at the time. There was a lack of understanding and supporting services from my immediate community and the lack of understanding and support from my immediate family about the situation my mother and I were in made us both feel very vulnerable. I was ridiculed continually by my immediate family (not my grandparents); they enjoyed blaming me for my mother's problems and mental illness. Bullying me, like they did to my grandmother, I repeatedly heard that I should stop whinging, that I was worthless and stupid, somebody's no-good spoilt brat that had to be fed. How could I feel good about myself when I was constantly being bombarded with negative affirmations? Was this a dysfunctional family and community pattern being passed down from one generation to the next?

As I entered my teens, my mother was still suffering from mental illness. I wasn't a rebellious teenager, in fact I lacked so much self esteem due to the constant verbal, emotional and mental abuse that I

kept to myself most of the time and stayed out of trouble. Because my mother went through many bouts of extreme depression going in and out hospital and therapy I found this was a continued circle of horror for me. Therefore I decided to spend most of my time after school and weekends at my grandparent's house, of which I found to be the most secure, positive and supportive environment for me at the time.

When I was coming out of my teens into my twenties I was studying to become a primary school teacher and kept a part-time job to help me financially. Now having to spend most of my time at home with my mother, (as my grandparents had passed away when I was sixteen and eighteen), I was constantly trying to prove my self worth to her and the immediate family of which she had become very close to. I felt as though I was living the life she wanted me to live, not the life I wanted to live.

When I turned twenty one I had the first piece of contact with my father, which was such an uplifting and rewarding experience for me. It was the first time in a long time that I had felt wanted and loved. My mother was actually happy for me, I couldn't believe it, and she actually became rather emotional. My mother never married my father and in those days having a child out of wedlock was not accepted well by society. She had a choice of adopting me out to another family, but chose to keep me. That made me really happy.

In the same year I met a lovely man that I fell in love with very quickly, in all probability too quickly, because of my neediness to feel loved and wanted by another human being. At the time he made me feel really special. He had two young girls to his first marriage and I welcomed them into my life with open arms. We eventually got married after living together for two years and had two wonderful sons of our own. After a few years our marriage fell apart, my ex husband deciding to go his separate way. This devastated me and I blamed everyone around me especially my mother. I felt afraid to be a single parent like my mother was and I didn't think I would cope emotionally or financially. I was faced with yet another challenge that I had to overcome if I was to survive.

During this trying time in my life I decided to do some spiritual healing, getting in touch with my inner child was what I needed to do. I found this to be very rewarding as this changed me in many ways. I learnt that the past cannot be changed; the future is shaped by our current ways of thinking. I know now that as an adult I am responsible for everything that happens in my life. That blaming another person or situation is one of the surest ways to stay in a problem. In blaming another we give away our power. It was important for me to understand that my mother was doing the best that she could with the knowledge, understanding and awareness she knew at the time. She felt just the same helplessness as I did as a young child. The only things she could possibly teach me was what she had been taught by her parents. Whenever we blame someone else we are not taking responsibility for ourselves.

Eight years have gone by since I divorced my husband and I can honestly say that I am so proud of myself and who I have become. I have two wonderful sons of whom I am so proud of and love with all my heart, I have a wonderful career and I know that I have a wonderful life ahead of me. I have forgiven my mother for my painful up bringing and my relationship with her has grown stronger. I have a better understanding of her life when she was a child, which contributed to her mental illness. By me forgiving my mother and showing her compassion and understanding, we have set each other free from any hurt, blame and anger towards each other.

My life's experiences have helped me to learn to go beyond other people's fears and limitations. I have chosen to no longer be my mother's fears and limitations, nor am I my father's. I am not even my own fears. I always affirm to myself 'I am worth loving, I do not need to earn love from anyone; I am loveable because I exist'. I have come realise that no matter what challenges lie before you, continually remind yourself that the fantastic, frightening, wonderful, ridiculous, astounding moments that you experience between the day you were born and the day you die are what life is all about.

Sending you divine light, love and harmony  
*Suzanne*

## **Flowers to rocks**

My mother is a rock  
I just want to throw her sometimes  
    She is round  
    She is hard  
    She is rough  
    She is cold  
    She is heavy  
    She is solid  
    She has no feelings  
    She shows no emotion  
    She just lies there  
When I want a mum like a flower  
    I can pick and admire  
        To bring me joy  
        To smell so nice  
        To share its beauty  
        To brighten my life  
    To open up to the daylight  
    To give colour to my day  
    To give pollen to the bees  
        To look nice to all  
    To be a wonderful gift  
        Mental Illness  
        Is like this it  
    Turns flowers to rocks

*Amanda Olsen*

## **It's a Family Affair**

*Our Story* is a bit different as I was 3000km away from my small community where all my support was. I had a very brand new sick baby in the children's hospital and a husband in a locked ward in a mental hospital. Then they told me that my baby may die and my husband was going to have a long-term chronic illness called schizophrenia. I felt so alone. But the pharmacist who came to visit me said there was a support group for families with schizophrenia at the Schizophrenia Fellowship (now called Mental Illness Fellowship WA). I quickly made some very good friends there that will be in my life forever. I also joined and got support from ARAFMI. Also we got doctors who treat my son as their own grandchild.

This illness called schizophrenia is liveable - you can have a family, you can have relationships, you even can be the best parent to your children; but is up to yourself and your family to work together for this to be a reality. We had to move to the city to get medical help, as they couldn't provide the doctors and psych nurses where we lived. But with the teamwork of our health professional and my husband's treating team we got a house in city and a place in a brilliant clinic that gave us the care that was needed.

I made friends with other families who had a parent with a mental illness and we would support each other. We started a weekly playgroup so the children could play while we sat and had a cup of tea and worked through issues that came up for the different families, and so the person with illness and the other partner without illness could join together to work through the day to day issues of life. I feel this is so important to get out there and surround yourself with others in same situation as yourself, so that you are not socially isolating yourself and feeling alone like I was 14 years ago.

I think that it is really important for the partner without the illness to make self-care as a priority, because your partner's mental illness doesn't go away just because you get sick. Please

learn to hear your body and take care of you because if you don't, there won't be anyone that can. And you are very important.

My son is a 14 year old young man who is a very adjusted, clever, musically gifted child who is an A grade student, who loves his father as a dad, regardless of the fact he has a mental illness. He talks to others about mental illness so hopefully the stigma can be broken. The misinterpretation of what schizophrenia is., has been the hardest hurdle our family has had to face

We fly home a few times a year to our hometown and community, as I truly believe my son needs to know his culture and where his land is; who his kinship and skin-group are, and also for him to reconnect with his family.

The people in my community are brilliant with my husband; he is not treated any differently to other community members. I feel that over the years we have taken the shame factor out of having a mental illness.

“I think that it is really important for the partner without the illness to make self-care as a priority.”

As an Aboriginal woman, I feel we need to stand up and take charge of our families and show others that we are strong women who can face adversity head on and say there is no shame in talking about your family member having a mental illness or problems with grog or drugs.

*Alli*

## Jamie's Story

My dad has schizophrenia. He is a fun dad but I like him to be able to be a father. I feel that the illness robs him of his mind. This illness is unfair because when my dad is well he can function great and we have fun together. But when he is paranoid and delusional and agitated it is hard work some days. I can't even do my home work because he walks into my room 100 times because the voices are telling him I'm being hurt. We all know this isn't real, only my dad doesn't know this at the time.

When I was about 3, I can remember my mum was very sick and needed an operation. They wouldn't let my dad look after me because he was unwell at the time with his schizophrenia. They took me away from the hospital and told me I had to live with another family while my mum was in hospital. I didn't understand why I couldn't stay at home with my dad as he was acting like my dad always did. I know I felt scared that they wouldn't take me home again to live with my family. But after 2 weeks of staying with the fun family they took me back home again and this made me very happy.

I am now 14 and I play 5 instruments. The guitar is my favourite. I use my music as way of coping with my dad. I also have got lots of tools in my toolbox that different workers in my life have given me to cope with my dad's illness - but sometimes they tell me to use my hammer but really I need a screwdriver because it isn't a nail I need to put in place but a screw! Sometimes others don't seem to see what I'm asking for, and this is as hard as living with my dad's illness.

I get to fly back to my hometown in school holidays to be with my extended family kin. My uncles take me out fishing and spearing crabs and collecting turtle eggs so we have lots of turtles for next 100 years for others to see. I love being on my land and proud to be a Bardi boy. My Uncle John helps me when I feel sad; I know I can ring him and he helps me cope. Also I ring my Aunty Heather and she just listens to me talk about life. I think that is it great to have family you can do this

with. I love staying with them when I go home. I love spending time with my cousins just doing fun boy things and forget about living with a dad with a chronic mental illness. My uncles just take my dad away to do men's things they don't treat him any different to anyone else and I think this is great. I love being on my land as it makes me feel special and lets me be a normal kid. I have a saying

“No victims are allowed in this space” which means it is ok to say life is hard but just because you've got a parent with a mental illness doesn't make you a victim.

Also I ring my Aunty Heather and she just listens to me talk about life. I think that is it great to have family you can do this with.

*Jamie* (14 years old)

## Dan's Story

*I am a dad* that happens to have schizophrenia. I have some insight into the illness but my parenting can be erratic. Parenting keeps me going - to be responsible and caring both to others and myself. While difficult and hard at times to mould a life when my life is erratic, the goal is shared and the difficulty halved. So I feel that while my wife keeps this household going, I still feel valued as part of the parenting partnership.

Looking back it seems that life is short and the day long and the illness is a cycle of cruel waves always changing, but with the assured support and returned love of a child. The journey to a better life is worth the long road of improving little by little every day.

*My life is full of joy when I sit and watch my child grow.*

I feel that I have missed some of the most important milestones in my son's life due to my long stays in hospital in my son's early years. But as my son grows, I have loved teaching him to become a man. I have watched him grow into a great young man, despite my illness. When he became a teenager, I felt I was to blame for some of the arguments but with support from others, I found this wasn't my illness but just my son being very adolescent and this was very normal part of us both adjusting to teenage hood. I'm a great dad when I'm well, but I do struggle and leave the parenting to my wife when I'm unwell. But this has worked well in the past for my family and my son knows where I am at as a dad.

Parenting keeps me  
going - to be  
responsible and caring  
both to others and  
myself.

*Dan* (a dad with paranoid schizophrenia)

## Need Information and Assistance?

Start with your GP. They can be a great source of information and are able to link in with some specialist counselling and other services through Medicare.

Hospitals, Community Health Centres, Mental Health Clinics, Centrelink and the Education Department all have social workers or psychologists who can provide information and support or advise you about appropriate services.

### *In An Emergency (24 hr)*

Mental Health Emergency Response Line	1300 555 788
Peel/Mandurah	1800 676 822
Country WA (Rural Link)	1800 552 002
Crisis Care	9223 1111
	1800 199 008

### *Need Support?*

Women's Information Service	6217 8230 1800 199 174
ARAFMI Mental Health Carers & Friends Association Incorporated	www.arafmi.asn.au 9427 7100/1800 811 747
Carers WA	1300 227 377 www.carerswa.asn.au www.youngcarers.net.au
Commonwealth Respite and Carelink Centre	1800 052 052
Wanslea Family Services	9245 2441 www.wanslea.asn.au
Women's Health Care House	922 8122 www.whs.org.au
Clan Indigo Project	9498 2829 www.clanwa.com.au
Youth Focus	9361 4222 www.youthfocus.com.au
Yorgum Aboriginal Family Counselling Service	9218 9477 www.yorgum.org.au

### ***Someone To Talk To? (24 hr Help Lines)***

Carer Counselling Line	1800 007 332
Family Help Line	1800 643 000
Kids Help Line	1800 551 800 <a href="http://www.kidshelp.com.au">www.kidshelp.com.au</a>
Mens Line	1300 789 978 <a href="http://www.menslineaus.org.au">www.menslineaus.org.au</a>
Parenting Line	1800 654 432

### ***Want Some More Information?***

Children of Parents with Mental Illness Resource Centre	<a href="http://www.copmi.net.au">www.copmi.net.au</a>
Office of Mental Health	<a href="http://www.mental.health.wa.gov.au">www.mental.health.wa.gov.au</a> 9222 4099
SANE	<a href="http://www.sane.org.au">www.sane.org.au</a> 1800 187 263
Seniors Telephone Information Service	1800 671 233

### ***Not Getting What You Need?***

Health Consumers Council	9221 3422 1800 620 780
Mental Health Law Centre	3928 8266 1800 620 285
Office of Chief Psychiatrist <a href="http://www.chiefpsychiatrist.health.wa.gov.au/publications/index.cfm">www.chiefpsychiatrist.health.wa.gov.au/publications/index.cfm</a>	9222 4462
Council of Official Visitors	9226 3266 1800 999 057

# Family to Family

Raising a family is both a joy and a struggle at the best of times. Having a mental illness in the family adds pressure.

The Family to Family booklets arises from a group of family members reflecting on their journey when a parent experiences a mental illness. They have found that services usually offer support to only a 'part' of the family: Consumers, Carers or Children. A Family To Family Reference Group that included the whole family was created and from that this series of booklets evolved.

The Family to Family Reference Group believes that their families would have managed better, learnt from each other, and found better ways of supporting each other if they had an opportunity to spend time with each other exploring how everyone is affected by the presence of a mental illness.

This series of booklets have been written as a partnership between these families and organisations:



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The information and advice provided is made available in good faith and derived from sources believed to be reliable and accurate at the time of printing