

World Fellowship for Schizophrenia and Allied Disorders

I Grew Up Very Fast

Peter's Story: My mother became very ill and started to go out on to the lawn and scream at people. I would come home from school and have to do my best to get her to go back inside. One time she took off all her clothes. The neighbours must have been watching from inside but no one came out to help me to put her coat on and take her back inside. At this time it was not difficult to realize that my Mum was crazy.

Neighbours reported what was happening and the police would come. They would quiet her down or sometimes they would take her to hospital. For the short time she was in the hospital it was quiet at home and we would hope that she would be better when she got back. But when she came home she never wanted to take the medication that would help—she didn't like taking medication all the time—so it wouldn't be long before she was ill again and went back into hospital.

She used to think that people were following or sometimes chasing her and my sister told me that Mum would pull her down the road when they were out shopping. She would hardly be able to keep up while Mum ran away from whatever she imagined was after her.

I would have liked it if there were someone who would talk to me about what mental illness was and why it had happened to our family. The grown-ups would huddle and talk quietly about it but would never tell us what they were saying. Since we were living with Mum all the time I think that was unfair. It was a big secret that wasn't really a secret at all. And it hurt us because sometimes we got the idea that they were talking about us. We got the idea that maybe we were to blame for making Mum crazy. Maybe we were bad kids.

It was very lonely for my sister and I. We began to keep our feelings to ourselves. If we told Mum how we felt we knew there would be confusion about what we meant. If we told Dad—well, we felt he had enough to deal with without us putting an extra burden

on him. He was doing his best. We knew Mum loved us and was doing her best -- and we loved her too -- but there were so many difficult times when all she could do was keep herself together. She just couldn't deal with things that were happening in *our* lives.

Sometimes I would dread going home for fear of what I would find. But often everything would be peaceful and I would breathe a sigh of relief. The trouble was that life was not predictable and that made it very tense at home. We felt so unsure of everything. We could not imagine our future. I don't remember looking forward to very much. My sister could not wait until she could leave home.

At school the children heard about my Mum and it made me so embarrassed at first. Some kids would even chant "Your Mum is crazy!" I think my Dad came to see the teacher one time about that.

In the early days I remember times when she would be really affectionate and other times when she would be cold and distant. Maybe she didn't intend to be cold but that is how she seemed to me at the time. I think she was wrapped up in her own thoughts.

She cooked and cleaned just like other mothers when she was well but when she got sick it was best to look after yourself and not ask her to do anything for you.

The trouble with her illness was that most of the time she just didn't know she was sick. Even when people told her, she did not believe them. She went in and out of hospital so many times before she realized that to stay well she needed to take the medication.

Now she is OK most of the time and I am still there to make sure she is. I hope when I leave home she will be alright. My sister is already married and living away from home.

From what Peter says in his story we know that his Mum was suffering from a mental disorder.

There are several illnesses like the one Peter's mother had in which people are unable to tell the difference between fantasy and reality. Sometimes the fantasy world becomes so real

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that they believe it is the real world and you cannot persuade them that it is not.

One of these illnesses is schizophrenia. Schizophrenia can be treated, but quite often people cannot believe that this is happening to them. Fear and disbelief plus a lack of insight make them pretend that nothing is wrong.

Schizophrenia is a biological disease which affects thinking, feeling and behaviour. People are often overwhelmed when their thinking becomes muddled and their brain won't work like it did before.

People with this illness often "hear people talking to them" and feel that others want to harm them in some way. Peter's Mum may have been answering the voices she was hearing, or believing something quite different was happening when she ran screaming on to the lawn.

When you have an illness like this you suffer from *psychosis*. This means that you are unable to tell the difference between reality and fantasy.

Peter felt embarrassed and possibly ashamed about his Mum's illness. Although her behaviour was embarrassing at times, mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of. People are not ashamed of having diabetes or arthritis so why should they be ashamed of having a mental illness? And—mental illness can happen to anybody. Behaviours associated with mental illness deserve sympathy and not ridicule or neglect.

Mental illnesses are illnesses like any other. We do not know why some people get heart disease or arthritis and the same goes for mental illnesses. Just like heart disease or arthritis, we do not know what causes it or how to cure it, but we do have treatments that help to reduce the symptoms.

Peter and his sister also had other feelings about their mother's behaviour. They were scared, unhappy and even guilty—all natural feelings for anyone caring for or living with someone with a disorder that makes people believe strange and even weird things. What's more, because no one would confide in them, they were never sure what went on when Mum went to hospital and whether they should be pleased or upset about this.

Sometimes family members try to protect children from knowing about the illness. This is not a good idea because the children need to learn and understand why things have changed at home. They also have a need to talk about their experiences to those they trust. Children often feel guilty that in some way they have done something that has made their parent ill. But this is not true. No one is to blame.

Serious illnesses are very hard to talk about for everyone affected by them. People find talking

about mental illness even more difficult. They do not know how to start because they feel uncomfortable. People find mental illness difficult and often do not know how to deal with it.

Not so long ago people used to hide mental illness and never talk about anyone who was experiencing it. Today, it is much better understood but there is still a stigma attached to it which can make people unwilling to speak of it.

So Peter and his sister felt isolated. It is much better to bring thoughts and feelings about mental illness out into the open so that everyone has a fair chance of dealing with it in a healthy way.

Signs of illness are called symptoms. Here's what to expect when someone has schizophrenia, but remember that not everyone with schizophrenia will have all these symptoms.

People may:

- Believe strange things that are not true
- Feel that their friends and family are against them
- Hear strange sounds or voices which seem to come from the outside world, or see, hear or taste things that are not there
- Have muddled or racing thoughts which confuse them
- Be unable to concentrate or make decisions
- Have mixed up emotions
- Feel that someone or something is after them

Imagine how you might feel if this happened to you. Think how you might react to friends and family. So, remember to be helpful and try to be as understanding as possible.

No doubt you will feel nervous or upset or worried by the events that are overtaking your family. If your mother who is ill is rude to you, try not to take the unpleasant comments as a personal attack, since they are the result of illness, not the true opinion of the person saying them.

If you are looking after or live with someone with mental illness, you need to take time to see that your own health is OK. The best thing you can do for yourself is to find things you like to do and do them regularly. Physical activity is good because it releases tension. It is important to keep up with your friends and to take part in activities outside your home. By keeping well yourself you will be better able to handle life at home.

For the person herself, the best thing is to have the continued support of family while continuing on the medication that works.

There are several medications which can be tried to see which one is the best for the person. Most people have to take medication all the time in order to stay well. However, many people on medication begin to lead a more normal life again.