

Grandmother's shares her experiences of living with mental illnesses

by Joan in Wisconsin

Early in my childhood, I was sexually abused and threatened to stay quiet. I have often wondered if those events had not occurred would I have had a normal life, even though mental illness is prevalent in my maternal gene pool. As my young life progressed, secrets came out and people were hurt.

Coincidentally, shortly after things were exposed, my beloved father died of a totally unexpected heart attack at the age of 53. It was, I believe, at that time that my life began a journey that would year-by-year take me into the darkness of mental illness. When my father died my mom was devastated. As a young child, I had already come to understand that there was something different or deemed bad about my mother, even though I loved her dearly. I heard things, saw things and most of all felt things. Because of my mom's own mental illness it was very hard for her to be nurturing. That came from my father, so when he was gone the gestures of love went with him. Mom tried, it was just hard for her. Hugs felt awkward, kisses were rare, compliments were few and far between. Also, my family unit as I had known it fell apart. I had two brothers, much older, who basically just gradually distanced themselves further and further from our mom. Dad had been their world, too. He had been the glue that had held, what my young mind thought was the perfect family, together. I think my brothers tried, but Mom was exhausting and very needy. She could drain you emotionally. I am sure at that point my brothers were all they could be, but it never was enough. As time went on I found myself experiencing brief moments of psychosis, splits from reality, but I learned survival techniques. I couldn't cope with the tension I felt between my mom and brothers. They were always at odds. I had luckily inherited my Dad's beautiful smile and dimples. Somehow I learned I could use that smile and my nice personality to not only hide my shame and emptiness, but try to be the healer of the family. Big responsibility for small shoulders. I always was hugging and kissing and trying to make things alright between people, especially my family. I was a pro; no one really knew the real me. I didn't know the real me. I was a different person for everyone depending on the situation or their personality. I used this mask my entire life. Still do. In high school I started having bouts of sadness that would linger for days. I didn't know what was happening, because actually my high school years were great. I cried in private a lot. I was said to be sensitive by many. My junior year was the first time I thought about suicide. To this day I don't know what provoked that urge, but it was very strong. My best friend talked me through it. I also got by stealing my mom's medication: valium, lithium, etc. I smoked a little pot privately -- some of my closest friends didn't even know because I felt like I had to uphold a certain image. Smoking helped take away the uneasiness I always woke up with. It really did give you a false sense of courage, as it was said to do in the 70's. The real "me" had been long buried. Pot and drugs created an image, one I could live with. After my first bad marriage, I began therapy. After my second bad marriage, I sought drugs to take away the pain: Tylenol-3, codeine, hydrocodone, morphine (prescribed for my migraines). Anything I could get that was prescribed because then it didn't seem like I was a "user." My insides hurt all the time, my mind was always sad, always wondering what was wrong with me, why couldn't I be happy...what was happy? Unfortunately, a series of traumatic events occurred during my late 30's and early 40's. I was put on antidepressants and anti-anxiety drugs. I had gone back to college in my 30's, but since I was spaced out a lot on prescribed medications, and I was having breaks in my

judgment, my career fizzled slowly. I had to spend too much time hiding away because of my fear of being considered irresponsible. This one particular incident caused me so much shame and embarrassment I ran off and tried to kill myself. I tried my hardest, took just about every pill I could find, but somehow I managed to live. This, of course, put me in my first mental facility...the first of many. I had been hospitalized many times before, but it was always said to be for exhaustion, medical observation, migraines, etc. Life played its games on me and I pretended I was coping, but I wasn't. Now, though, I was in a psychiatric unit. I had to at least face that there was a problem. Its funny how you can know some things are true, but deny it till the end. Eventually, I was put on what I considered my personal wonder drug. I was able to walk through the day, maybe in a fog, but I could function far better than I had been doing on nothing. By this time I had ruined my marriage, my two children were developing issues with me, my career was in the skids. I couldn't hold a job because I was too anxious and panicky. So, of course this new drug began making me sane, or at least it seemed. Yet, I eventually, as I was bound to, ran into problems with this drug and had to go into rehab. Funny thing was a few months later I was admitted into a psych ward and was put right back on them. It was then that I began to learn how to work the system. I've been on them ever since - almost 6 years. I've been in psych wards several times for depression and panic. I get panic attacks that cripple me. I swear I'm going to die, (and often wish I would.) I live constantly with the urge that I'd like to die but I KNOW I won't act on those thoughts. I now have six beautiful grandchildren. I won't continue the legacy of mental illness and the guilt associated with it, not to them. They are the only things I haven't ruined. Currently I am on Social Security disability. I had a severe breakdown in the summer of 2005 and was in the hospital for three months. My diagnosis is dysthymia, generalized anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and episodes of obsessive compulsive disorder. I spend my days praying, reading books trying to find answers, and sleeping away the emptiness. I have damaged many of my primary relationships and have most likely ruined any chances of obtaining a job teaching, something that may be the only thing besides my grandchildren that gives me immense pleasure and self-satisfaction. I substitute teach, which is a perfect job for me. If I am apprehensive, I usually know early in the morning, like by 4 a.m., so I can turn down a job, and just wait for a better day to work. I keep plugging along. I decided to find a meeting place to start a support group. I am exhausted all the time and feel little hope, but I will get better. People have such misconceptions about mental illness. If there was one thing I could do, it would be to make people listen and understand it all. I think that is why so many people struggle so hard with daily depression. They know how the real world looks at us. We struggle. We don't deserve it.