

A woman with long, straight red hair is shown in profile, looking down and to the left. She is wearing a white, long-sleeved top with a lace collar. She is standing in a field of tall, dry grass. The background is a soft, out-of-focus landscape with a warm, golden light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

OUR ADULT CHILD HAS **CLINICAL DEPRESSION**

“It was during this time I became increasingly uneasy in varying degrees concerning the mental health of three of our own children.”

BY JULIE WEEKS

Mental illness has taken a huge toll on our family and shattered relationships into what seems like a thousand shards of brokenness. We have spent inordinate amounts of time gathering up the pieces to create a restored and repaired version of family.

It is almost four years since our world, as parents, was forever changed. I had been working as a School Counsellor for 6 years - a challenging role that required a broad yet informed approach to mental health issues for young people. I had sufficient experience, knowledge and understanding to be able to recognise and refer when students needed help beyond what is appropriate to offer in the school context.

It was during this time I became increasingly uneasy in varying degrees concerning the mental health of three of our own children. They were 18, 20 and 28 and all three were displaying obvious signs of depression and anxiety. This much I did know. What I didn't know was just how deeply mental illness would impact our family.

All of our children were, at the time of their illness, considered adults, so as their parents we were largely excluded, except by their invitation, from any type of intervention or consultation concerning treatment. The difficulties we have faced and pushed through to be included at times of crisis has been at best extremely frustrating, at worst absolutely terrifying, leaving both my husband and I completely and utterly bereft of hope.

There have been times where it seemed the family was considered as almost irrelevant to the recovery of our adult children's mental health rather than a vital part of the recovery team. This is in direct contrast to the best practice guidelines indicated in the document provided by Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council titled 'A national framework for recovery-oriented mental health services: Guide for practitioners and providers' where it states:

- assists families to understand the challenges and opportunities arising from their family member's experiences.
- All Commonwealth and state legislation and standards governing mental health service provision emphasise the importance of working collaboratively with a person and their family irrespective of whether they are receiving treatment voluntarily or involuntarily, or whether that treatment is in a hospital or in the community.

Many times it felt like we were journeying through a thick fog that was cold and difficult to cut through in terms of information and guidance. From my experience calls to Emergency Mental Health when you believe your adult child is at high risk of suicide can at best be difficult, at worst absolutely agonising in terms of seeking assistance and support. There have been several calls where I have been left feeling like I was doing the wrong thing or asking the wrong questions or giving the wrong information – awful feelings on top of already awful feelings. Additionally it would seem that psychiatrists are at odds with psychologists, who are at odds with counsellors, who are at odds with the medical

model. Each looks at the other with suspicion and families are left questioning what to do for their loved one, whilst the professionals politely ignore the possibility of the value of each in a holistic approach. Families don't need this type of challenge on top of what they are already living with on a daily basis.

Each of our adult children has been on a journey to the darkest of places. Each has at some time experienced a degree of mental illness that has, at it's worst, been a threat to life. As parents we have more often than not been left feeling absolutely helpless as we entrusted each one to God's care and supported one or another through numerous traumatic events such as attempted suicide, self-harm, drug abuse, alcohol addiction, severe clinical depression, post-traumatic stress, anxiety disorder, medical intervention, hospitalisation, surgery, rehabilitation, and the long journey to recovery.

This is a story about the survival of our family unit. Each family member has been deeply affected by the illness of the others. Our eldest child has been the furthest removed due to distance and age and this has been to some degree a protective factor for him, however the effects have been no less traumatic, just different. He has been most concerned for us, his parents. He has felt a profound sense of helplessness and frustration as he struggled to understand depression and it's effects. As one horrible thing after another has occurred it seems like life has stood still or passed interminably slowly as we held our breath during yet another crisis month after month, year after year.

As I reflect on the past four years it seems like our family has been in a place of pain for so long that we have almost forgotten how to have fun together and to enjoy each other as a family in ways most parents expect to once children reach adulthood. Or maybe it's that we are too afraid to really embrace times together because we have become so jaded by the trauma and cynical about any perceived improvement due to the length of time we have been doing this journey. Whilst we continue to attempt to have times of celebration (the obligatory Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day, Father's Day and birthdays) at each there is a sense of collective breath holding. How do we do this togetherness time and make it feel like it is about connecting when it has really been more about surviving? Family times are few and fleeting and undertaken with a measure of anxiety that leaves each of us silently exhausted and aware of a profound loss. Whilst we have all worked hard in our own way to rebuild relationships it is a long and difficult journey made the more so due to one son's continued struggles with severe clinical depression and addictions.

As a parent of an adult child with mental illness you suffer losses that you never realized were at risk. You lose the ability to feel joy. You lose a sense of optimism. You lose hope at times. You lose the desire to connect with others. You realize that you had hopes and dreams for your child that you never knew were there. It's kind of crazy that you have to let go of those things that you never knew you held onto, and the sense of loss and grief is raw and inescapable. Numerous times I have needed to take sick

leave either for myself or to care for one or another adult child. No one wants to be in a place where it hurts. It can feel like you are trapped, with no escape. Knowing the deep emotional pain our adult children have experienced has been heart breaking and gut wrenching to say the least. I have often had a sense of being trapped while we held our breath and waited and prayed for healing of brokenness that couldn't be seen or mended easily and simply.

Journeying with a loved one through severe clinical depression is mind numbing and relentlessly exhausting mentally, physically, emotionally and relationally. It is indescribably painful to witness the downward spiral of your adult child's mental health knowing you are powerless to do anything to change or interrupt that spiral. To know that if this spiral is not arrested that at worst it will lead to catastrophic consequences, both for your adult child and for you, the parent. There is the usual drive to 'fix' it, to provide solutions and answers that, in normal circumstances, would assist in a return to a balanced and normal life for all. But such attempts have been of little assistance to either our adult children or us. We have been fighting a war! One that at times has seemed unwinnable.

Recently I have begun to liken our experience to that of having a child with a terminal illness. You watch them slowly fading with each day yet you fight on and agonize over what you might be missing, in terms of turning things around by finding a solution or a cure. You step onto a roller coaster ride that takes you from hope to hopelessness at speeds that leave you reeling, feeling dizzy and filled with anxiety. It can seem like you are on a hunt for clues that will lead to the key to wellness and restored happiness. If you could just find that key, and yet it remains illusive no matter how much time and energy you expend searching. Most recently we have both come to a place of peace and acceptance of the possibility that our son may not survive this illness. We don't know what will happen, however we do know that we have done all we can and that through it all we have loved him and cared for him well.

Community resources such as specialized services that support parents and families and a determination to research and find what is needed for an informed approach, have helped. My husband and I have been able to return to a reasonable level of functioning, despite the dramas that we continue to face with our son, however I know that my sense of calm and inner peace is tenuous and at best dependent on his level of functionality. I have had to acknowledge that I need to take time out to care for myself. This has been difficult to put into place because I have struggled to really identify when I am not travelling well. At those times my friends and colleagues have been invaluable in helping to identify the need to take time out and to care for myself.

And so... I bought a puppy. I have never owned a puppy of my very own. It seems such a simple thing, and yet this little puppy has helped me to feel joy and happiness on a daily basis, regardless of what else is happening around me. She has been an uncomplicated source of love and provides lots of distraction,

requiring attention and investment of my time and energy. I have also begun to learn a new skill – photography. I am not a natural photographer. Earlier this year I did a beginners course and found it incredibly challenging. It was a distraction. It has given me something to help shift my focus. I recently went on a mission trip with Grade 10 students to Vanuatu. And we have been on holidays and adventures, my husband and I. Not family holidays, but holidays nonetheless.

Imagine working in a profession where all the skills you use with others to assist their recovery seem useless, feeble and ineffectual with your own loved ones! What is it like being a professional counsellor in such circumstances? There have been times – many of them – where I have felt unable to be of any real use in helping others. I have had to fight an inner battle in order to continue practicing. There are times when I have been dragged down into some level of depression myself, especially when I came face to face with the very real prospect of losing one or all three of my children to the ravages of mental illness at its most extreme. I have spent hours, days, even years of my life agonising over what I might be missing, what I could do to make a difference. Many times I have felt grief stricken and unable to face the world. At these times I have learned that I must trust in God, lean on Him and rest in His love.

What has helped me to continue in my profession whilst experiencing all the grief, anxiety and prolonged trauma of mental illness? I believe that my own therapy, supervision and a dogged determination to believe in and claim the peace of God have all played a vital part in being able to continue to work professionally. Reclaiming my own life and choosing to create a life outside of our adult children's illness has been pivotal to me not becoming buried by that grief and pain. I remind myself daily that God is with me and He loves and cares for me, that He will sustain and strengthen me enough for today. I have been learning to live in the moment, to be ok with tears. I have learned that distractions are helpful and healthy, that I can change how I feel by changing my thoughts and what I dwell on. I have learned to be my own therapist whilst retaining a humility that, at times, drives me to seek the assistance of other therapists.

Regardless, it is hard. It is hard to see your child suffer. I believe God has a purpose and a plan but it is hard. He continues to show me many things about myself, my life, my family, my friends and above all Himself as we go through the hard times together.

Because of these events our lives will never ever be the same. We are different people, my husband and I, forever changed. We seize moments in time where we can escape together to places of beauty, spend time with people who help us to laugh and simply live in the moment. We are also different from our friends. Like Job our friends and extended family can only look on and be concerned for us. This we appreciate beyond measure, but there is an understandable line where they cannot cross to experience with us. We walk that part alone but together, with our faith in God's goodness unshakeable.

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