

Lessons I've Learned About Helping Someone With A Mental Disorder

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Courtesy of BuzzFeed

My relationship with my son has not always been easy. Those of you who have read my book know that I was forced to lie about him threatening me in order to get him taken into a hospital rather than put in jail. During a later break, I called the police and my son was shot twice with a Taser. These events can play havoc on father-son relationships.

So what have I learned?

First, mental illnesses are serious business. You can't take an aspirin and wake up in the morning healed. It took more than five years for my son to become stable. Parents and others need to realize that there are no quick fixes. Hang in there and realize there will be many highs and lows on your journey.

Second, accept a new normal. Saying you want your child to go back to the way that he was is counter productive. You need to understand that the person who you love has a mental illness. Most people can and do recover. But the journey that you go through with them to recovery changes both of you. There is no going back to the past.

Third, learn to trust your own judgment. No one knows the person you love better than you and while there are amazing, devoted and really smart mental health professionals, they do not have to live with the person who is sick.

I've had people tell me that I needed to get tough with Kevin when he was psychotic and not lift a finger to help him until he hit rock bottom. I remember wondering: What does that mean exactly? After all, he was arrested and shot with a Taser? Short of allowing him to go homeless — what's left? Suicide?

Other times, I know my anxiety about pushing him too hard has led to me being an enabler. It helps that Patti is Kevin's step-mom. While she certainly loves him, she sometimes can take a step back and see how Kevin and I are engaging in destructive behaviors that are not good for either of us.

I've turned to professionals for help numerous times and fortunately have gotten good advice. But I've also known some therapists who have no business advising anyone. One actually put Kevin in harm's way because of a rushed diagnosis.

A counselor at the Miami Dade County Jail told me that his sister, who had schizophrenia, had seen more than a dozen doctors and literally hundreds of therapists during her thirty-year struggle. Yet, the family was seen as part of the problem, ignored and often treated rudely. “But who was there when all of those others moved on?” he asked me rhetorically. “In the end, all my sister had was me.” You must be resilient. Trust your heart.

Fourth, educate yourself. Think of mental illness as a formable enemy and realize you need to be knowledgeable to prevent it from destroying your loved one’s life. Join a national mental health group, such as the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) or [Mental Health America](#). Learn about Crisis Intervention Team training and if law enforcement in your community has CIT officers who you can call. Become knowledgeable about medications and alternatives. Obtain the tools that you need to help someone you love.

Two sources that have helped me are Dr. [Xavier Amador’s](#) book, *I’m Not Sick, I Don’t Need Help*, and the National Alliance on Mental Illness’s [Family-to-Family](#) course. One advantage of joining a mental health group is that you meet others on the same road. Learn from them.

Fifth, realize that mental illnesses impact your entire family. Siblings often are jealous of all the attention that is being shown someone with a disorder. They accuse their troubled brother or sister of acting out to get attention or of manipulating their parents. Encouraging them to learn about mental illness and including them in helping someone recover can ease those feelings.

Sixth, understand your own limitations. This is perhaps the most difficult lesson to learn. Sometimes, no matter what you do and how hard you try, you will not be successful. If your child had cancer and you couldn’t save them, would you blame yourself? A parent can’t always fix things. This doesn’t mean that you give up, although some do and for good reason.

I remember talking to [Bebe Moore Campbell](#), the late novelist who specialized in writing about mental illnesses, and listening to her explain how she never was critical of anyone who walked away from a family member — including parents. Sometimes, she told me, it was the only way for that person to save themselves. “I’ve seen how these illnesses can destroy relationships,” she said. “No one can judge anyone else until they walk in their shoes.”

Seven, understand that while you love a person who is ill and because of that you hurt, that person is the one with the mental illness and what he/she is going through can be more horrific than what most of us will ever imagine. Learn to listen, treat them with respect, try to build trust and when possible, become a partner — make sure they are part of the solution and not seen as a problem that needs to be fixed.

So what’s the answer? There is no singular one. Every person is unique, every family is different, every mental break brings with it challenges. What I have learned is that for me, ultimately, I must have hope. I must believe that recovery is possible. I must believe because without hope, I know recovery will never happen.

You have to believe that a better day is coming tomorrow.