

## *Me & My Mum*

### *My Family Experience: Coping with Mental Illness & Receiving Support*

When I was 8 years of age my mother became diagnosed with Manic Depression, also known as Bi polar disorder. I was very young so my understanding of the happenings around me was somewhat limited. Saying this however, there were some things I noticed; my mother had become much slower than usual, in her speech and her actions. She had stopped taking care of us and of herself the way she used to, her energy had evidently decreased. No one really discussed anything of this change with me, no one bothered to explain, possibly because they were also baffled and confused about the change.

Her illness peaked during our move from England to Malta, where my parents hoped for a better life and an improvement in their relationship together. They thought going back to their roots and to my father's home-land would help their situation.

My two younger brothers, myself and our mum were temporarily staying at our uncle's house, since our home was put up for sale. Soon after, my uncle accused her of being lazy and negligent of her children. My uncle was in denial and refused to acknowledge that Mum needed medical assistance. As a result of their frustration and lack of understanding of the change in mum, my auntie physically attacked my mother in front of us children. Her husband, my uncle, also punched the wall and fractured his wrist. I remember my youngest brother, being just about 4 years of age at the time - jumping towards my mum, clasping her feet so that they would stop hurting her. Immediately after this a family decision was made to split us up with different relatives until the time came for us to leave to Malta.

My brothers soon left to Malta along with my father to get a head start in settling in the new country. It was about this time that mum was admitted into a small mental hospital in England, where she did her first set of ECT's. In actual fact, my mum had admitted herself into hospital ... .. she had called from a phone box saying that she is experiencing suicidal thoughts and fears she is going to commit suicide.

Back then, about 20 years ago, her regular GP had never referred her for appropriate care, he could not recognise the signs of her mental illness.

My mum has shared with me the times when she was very close to suicide, and she claims it was the thought of us 3 children that often kept her back from actualizing her thoughts – it stopped her from opening the car door one time, whilst driving on the motorway from Wales. This was one of the occasions I vividly remember which she had confessed to me after the journey.

When we moved to Malta, my mother was finally given an accurate diagnosis of what she had – Bi polar disorder. Knowing what she had, helped her and later on us, to grasp a better understanding of what was happening. My mum found a lot of comfort and support from the professionals in Malta, the psychologists, nurses and psychiatrists whom she still mentions and praises till this very day. I would often attend visits to the psychiatrist with her since the age of 8, they would sometimes allow me to be in the same room and occasionally I would also add points to what mum would have forgotten; Her memory was not very good after she had the ECT's, so I would need to help her explain stories accurately. We've always had a very close bond, she shared her thoughts with me in many things and I always had respect for her. At times I felt like a mother to my own mum. However, she always assumed the role of the mother and would get angry at me when she thought I had gone overboard. Fortunately she always remained responsible for her own medication, so we could at least build on a solid foundation.

When we arrived in Malta, we first lived with my father's parents. However, mum soon needed to be admitted into hospital again and this is when my brothers and I were isolated from society as we knew it, and sent into care, living in a Home run by nuns. My father did not take on the responsibility of caring for us and neither did my grandparents. For me this was a massive change since in this Home I had to start taking care of my own belongings and of my two younger brothers myself. I went from being a mummy's girl, to being a mummy of 2 at the tender age of 8. At the time we were the ages of 8, 6 & 4. We were made to wake up unusually early, around 6am, in preparation for the day ahead. My morning chores were to help dress my brothers, and do their beds too - I had never even done my own bed before so this proved to be quite a task. We had the same breakfast every morning before school which became sickening after a while. After school we would have dinner and do our homework and study for the entire evening, until 8pm when we would have to say the Rosary as a good night prayer before bed. It was a monotonous 2 years of this lifestyle.

Unfortunately, as time went by, my brother, whom had just turned 8, was taken away from us and sent to another Home for older boys. I was worried about him leaving us because I felt his vulnerability and knew that we needed each other more than anything. His absence was greatly felt by my youngest brother and myself especially since we were not given the opportunity to contact each other.

During this time that we were in care, my mum was in and out of hospital. Her marriage was on the rocks. She was advised, for the benefit of her own mental health, to separate from our father, as she could not be stabilized for long giving the sour relationship they had between them. My mother's ultimate goal was to take us out of care and back home with her. My father did not want this, for what true

reason I cannot be sure of till today but after months of my ill mother fighting for us in the courts, she was granted custody and we were freed to go and live with her once again.

For the first few months, the psychiatrists recommended for mum to just take on two children, my youngest brother and myself, and to then bring the third sibling home once we had settled. Theoretically this made sense. However, when my brother found out that we had been sent home, he ran away from care and caught two buses on his own ... to be re-untied with his family. He was only 8 at the time, had no money on him and had never caught a bus on his own before. I feel that this event had traumatised my brother. From a photo that I saw of him when he was in the older boys Home, I saw the fear in his eyes, I know he loathed being there. In my opinion it should never have happened. The boys he was sent with were not of his kind, most were rough and undisciplined, coming from very troubled backgrounds.

When my brother returned home with mum, my grandma from my mum's side came over from England to help us settle and to see how mum would cope. We were given clothes from family and friends and were all excited on re-starting our lives back together again. Mum couldn't have been happier, even though she was still recovering from a depressed phase of her illness, which could be seen in her slowness of actions and speech. She seemed drained of energy most of the time, but somehow we all pulled through together for the following 10 years.

After these 10 years my mother experienced a relapse in her illness. She needed to be re-admitted into hospital for a 'rest'. I would attribute two factors that brought on this relapse. ONE reason being that family issues were increasing due to teenage-hood creeping in. Need I say, it is not easy bringing up three teenagers,

especially being a single parent, and even more so when you suffer from a mental illness. **SECONDLY**, after years of taking the same medication, the body becomes immune and similar medication needs to be slowly re-introduced.

I was going through the delicate phase of my A-levels at the time when my mother was re-admitted into the psychiatric hospital in Malta. Doctors were going through the trial- and- error stage of the medication. During this time, we were left with the dilemma of what to do without mum at home. How would we cope together?!

Thankfully my grandma from my mum's side came over from England again to help us out. When she left however, we were left to fend for ourselves. I made it clear to my brothers that I have my own life too, and that I am **NOT** a replacement of our mum. We were all to pull our own weight around the house and our priority had to be to stick together. They had agreed to this and we planned how to share the house chores and who's to do what.

A social worker would also visit occasionally to guide us and help keep us move steadily ahead. Along the way, sibling arguments erupted and often our planning arrangements were in vain. I frequently closed my bedroom door, placing my hands over my ears and just try my best to study amidst all the arguing. Objects would get broken in the house, without anyone there to show discipline and set the boundaries. Sometimes the pressure would get too much. I remember being at college one time, sitting on the sofa in the corridor during a free lesson and just crying. The head mistress at the time got to know of my family situation and during prize day she awarded me a prize for **EFFORT AND ACHIEVEMENT**. That will remain with me forever, as have other things along the way. Some teachers actually helped me to remain focused during hard times. I always had an eagerness to improve the situation I was in. I was adamant not to end up working in a factory as were the expectations of some students I knew in my school. As I moved up in education, I realised that the school atmosphere just kept getting better. College

was a breath of fresh air, even from the pressure felt at home; Sports facilities were abundant and I always took part in school plays and singing activities. In fact from the age of 13 onwards I was always involved in some kind of sport. This helped me to remain positive and not to dwell on my problems at home.

You might be asking where my father appears in this experience. Well, he paid occasional visits on the weekends, but offered no support other than the mandatory maintenance up to the age of 18.

At the time when mum was re-admitted into hospital, I was 17 and had met my fiancée who was a God send, especially at that time. We are still together today, 9 years later – and plan to get married in 2011. He has supported me throughout all the hard times at home, helping me to achieve the goals I set out for.

During this stretch of hospitalization, Mum would be sent home some weekends, but she was too ill to do anything, she would lie on the settee all day, unable to discipline us children. In fact, sometimes she preferred to be in hospital rather than at home with so much arguing going on.

When mum was recovering I would notice odd things in her actions, sometimes she would go out and buy unnecessary things for the home, considering we were on a tight budget that was not appropriate at the time. She would very often give-in to my brothers requests of wanting expensive items, such as game stations, bicycles and PC's. One time she spontaneously thought of buying a car and took it for a test-drive. She hadn't driven a car in about 10 years and didn't even have the funds to purchase one. Another instance was when she decided to go to Gozo, a sister island of Malta, for a weekend break. She took my youngest brother with her whom was 12 at the time. He got bored so she allowed him to catch the ferry back on his own

and then two buses home. She turned up a day later dressed in military gear, trousers, a top and hat that she had bought from the market. I will never forget opening the front door to see her dressed like that. She had a marvellous grin on her face and she couldn't understand why I was astonished to see her like that. She explained that she also had an argument with the bus driver on the way home and he quickly shut up when she shouted at him. These are funny memories. However, it was more disturbing when mum would bring a male friend home, a stranger to us. Introducing new men did not happen often however, the few times it did I remember feeling very uncomfortable around them and feeling protective over mum as well. On one occasion when I knew there was a guest over late in the evening, I stayed awake in bed trying to make sure nothing I disliked would happen. I got out of bed 3 times to pass the living room where they were. It soon became apparent to mum that I was doing this deliberately, so after being told off, I went back to bed, cried and tried hard to bury the thought. When speaking to her today, now that she's stable, she regrets bringing estranged guests at our home and wishes she could turn the clock back. I think it is quite haunting knowing that in the past you lost control of your actions, and that your children suffered because of your illness.

I would definitely say that the ultimate factor which gave me the motivation I needed in my life was the great Love and encouragement my mother always had towards me. From the minute my brothers and I were born, she says they were the best moments of her life. I would say that her love has transcended through us, providing us with the ability to continue life in a healthy frame of mind. As her Consultant once described mum to me "her personality shines through her illness". Despite the fact that she sometimes feels guilty that we had to go through bad times, what she fails to see is that she has - through her love - given us the tools we need to sail through life. Currently my brothers are back in England and they have

both decided to further their education. The youngest is currently studying Finance and Economics at the University of Portsmouth, and the other has started studying Law at the University of Coventry. We still support each other till today. My motto at home was 'We are Fa-mi-ly, my mother my two brothers and me', and this I hope will remain with us for the rest of our days.

Today, my mother is doing very well. She has been in a stable relationship with her partner for the past 5 years. It thrills me to know that she is now able to see the beauty in this world, being able to recognise and appreciate scenery and cultures she visits; These are often things we take for granted, but try living for one day in the world of a person who is chronically ill, and you will never see things the same again.