

THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS OF A PARENT/GRANDPARENT

The 16th April 1999 and 23rd April 2003 were two dates in which events that happened on those days changed my life completely.

It was the 16th April 1999, when a doctor at the Emergency Unit of St Luke Hospital informed me that he has to admit my eldest daughter, aged 21 years old, to a Mental Hospital due to her prevailing mental condition.

I have never felt so much confused in my life and one cannot explain the feelings that my wife and I felt when we entered into a Psychiatric Hospital. I have never ever thought that, one day, I will ever need the services of the “ASYLUM” for the simple reason that I thought that I, my wife and two children will never need such kind of services and/or help.

I was feeling so helpless, apart from knowing absolutely nothing about what was actually happening to my eldest daughter.

I was lucky to find two professional nurses who really empowered us and encouraged us to face the prevailing situation.

It was there that I heard, for the first time, of the Mental Health Association and we were lucky that in that week, they were organizing a course for Relatives of Persons who suffered from problems of mental ill health. I still remember vividly the first session of such a course. There were quite a number of people attending this course and hearing other persons talking about their situation, I thought “ Hello there, you not alone having this kind of situation. It’s REALITY TIME and you have to choose between three options: ADAPT or DESPAIR or JUST WALK AWAY” . I chose the first option.

It was during this course that we started to learn on how to cope with such a situation. Therefore, I embarked on an information gathering exercise, in order to be able to understand what was actually happening to my daughter and how to be useful to the medical team caring for my daughter. Not only that, but I started helping the association in order to fight the stigma surrounding these conditions. I have never stopped learning since then.

It was then, that I started to understand the behaviour of my daughter during the preceding two years, which involved bouts of either complaints and lies, or vice versa, bouts of happiness and excessive spending which led her to have debts with various persons/companies. I had to pay up in order to keep my child out of trouble. I am still asking myself whether I did the right thing or not, in covering my daughter’s debts.

During those two years, I took her to my family doctor several times, a psychologist and also to a neuro-specialist to try and improve her erratic behaviour, which I always attributed to being just adolescent nonsense.

The truth is that I never took her to a psychiatrist since, at that time, since as I indicated earlier, I believed that my family was immune from such type of illnesses and you have

to be a “MIGNUN”(Insane) to go to a psychiatrist who might tell you that your daughter is a “MIGNUNA”(Insane daughter)!?!?!?

Today, when I reflect back on those times, I state that it is a pity that I had no information on these types of conditions through the media or others. I still believe that if such info was available, the stigma surrounding these mental conditions and the apprehension of going to a psychiatrist will not continue to be so hard on those affected family members.

Regarding family members and friends, they were either equally at loss what to say or what to do to help us or vice versa, tried their best to avoid us. Certain individuals had the cheek to tell us not to let our daughter come to their house, unless being attended by either myself or my wife. So much is the fear from these conditions.

The other point which I wish convey this morning, is the need of the professionals in this field to LISTEN to the relatives and TO TAKE NOTE AND UNDERSTAND THEIR CONCERNS. This lack of listening/understanding may have led to my daughter getting pregnant and thus set the scene for my next date.

The next date, i.e, the 23rd April 2003, was another date which also changed my life. On that date, my daughter gave birth to a baby girl out of wedlock. The baby was later transferred from the hospital on to the Ursoline Creche in Sliema.

It was very hard for us. We were then, in a phase in our lives, where we were starting to reap the fruit of our toils after raising and providing for our two daughters. BUT HOW COULD WE LEAVE THIS INNOCENT ANGEL IN SUCH A RESIDENTIAL HOME DEPRIVING HER FROM BEING RAISED IN A FAMILY ENVIRONMENT ? So we decided to foster our grandchild after getting her mother's permission, thus enabling her to be raised properly in a family environment, and also ensuring that the child and her mother will keep as much as possible their natural bond.

Even during this period, I think that the professionals should have better understood the needs of not only the mother of the child, but ALSO of us, the grandparents, who were trying hard to get on with their lives, trying to re-organise our lives without neglecting our other daughter, continue supporting our mentally ill daughter and coping as much as possibly can with a situation which was certainly not of our own making. This was certainly not our plan in life but, being responsible persons we had no other option but to adapt

But I am not here today to criticize the professionals. Far from it. Rest assured that what I have said so far is not because I am BITTER. I do acknowledge that they did and are doing a good job. But , I ask today, is it not absolutely important that PARENTS AND / OR FAMILY MEMBERS are actually listened to and treated as PARTNERS IN THE RECOVERY PROCESS.

There are other thoughts that I wish to state today, namely:

- The NEED to have more Info/Courses/Exposure/Training on these kinds of mental conditions to schoolchildren, parents and national security personnel by Government and the Media. If children , especially, will be made aware of these conditions by experienced persons, from an early stage, it will certainly help in reducing the STIGMA surrounding these conditions.
- The NEED for more understanding of the relatives' needs and concerns by the professional persons in order to be able to pre-empt any avoidable situations.
- The NEED for better organization in the Mental Out-Patients Dept in order to avoid unnecessary waiting, since this is very hard on these persons.
- The NEED to forward help to those persons who suffer from such conditions of mental ill health , especially in the SOCIAL and ECONOMIC areas. It is useless giving a person all the required medical care, if this same person do not have a reasonably good social and economic life coupled with good community care support.

This, I believe, is the way forward on how to treat these persons and to fight the STIGMA surrounding these mental conditions.

I have to conclude by saying that our life started improving when such understanding and co-operation was and still is being extended.

Today, I am not over protecting my daughter, but just guiding and encouraging her to try to lead an independent life and giving her a MISSION in her life. She gave birth to an ANGEL and I hope that this same ANGEL will perhaps some time in future team up with her to form a family unit adequately supported by community care.

I have to do that, because I am sure that I will NOT be around for as long as I have lived so far.

Until then:

- My wife and I will try to keep coping as best as we could; refresh ourselves again in the art of upbringing and caring for a young grandchild and in the process,
- Understanding that my daughter can have setbacks/relapses,
- Understanding that suicide can still be in her book in a moment of weakness/sadness.
- That we have to keep encouraging her to live her life as best as she could and to have HOPE and FAITH for the future and that we are her friends and family and that we will always be there for her in her time of need.

These are the thoughts and feelings of a parent and a grandparent.

Thank You