

# Parenting: Swimming In The River Of Humankind

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Ten years ago, as my young son was grappling with the revelation that his dad struggles with manic depression, things took a surprising twist.

As we were putting the best spin possible on the situation, about adversity making us stronger as a family, more sensitive, closer, more accepting of others.... He quickly worked it all through in his 10 year old's mind and came back with a refreshingly naive take on the matter - "Then families that don't have mental illness aren't as lucky as us!" We assured him it was maybe a little more complicated than that.

Over the years though I'm not sure if he wasn't right. In many ways it's been good for our family that we've had to deal with mental health issues.

I've been lucky. I wasn't ever incapacitated for long. My illness, though it almost ended my life a couple of times has not been as severe as it might have been. I've been able to maintain my modest garden maintenance business and Laurel and I will be celebrating our 30th Anniversary this June. I was lucky to have found such a supportive and accommodating life partner who stuck by me through some hard times.

We're not "The Waltons". We live in Victoria BC Canada, in nice little stucco house, two cars, two jobs, two kids. We're pretty much like any modern family would like to be. We're also like any modern family plagued with too much to keep up with and not enough time. We struggle with all the tedious things that modern families do; frustrations of daily life, and between us - strong wills and egos, generation gaps, miscommunications.

But something special that I appreciate about our family is that we can talk about some of the scary side of living - in an open manner.

In my family of origin, my mother suffered with anxiety and depression but as kids we knew nothing about it. It was consciously stifled, no books, no information, no discussion. When my sister and I ran into



trouble we were ill prepared. We didn't know our family history and like most families hoped it would just go away. My sister took her life when she was 26 after struggling with mood swings and career and relationship difficulties. I plugged along for a good while longer before I hit the wall. Mental illness didn't feel like an asset in our lives then.

There have been times when exhausted and sleepless, tormented by doubts and foreboding, I've thought, "What have I done, perpetuating this agony into another generation." But as it turned out, we've produced two brilliant and decent young men, now 24 and 20. Both are thoroughly engaged in their world and well equipped to deal with any of the old man's "genetic abnormalities". Probably part of their sparkiness is my gift to them.

I've had my scrapes and my family have had their challenges. It's out there where we can work on it. It feels like a better way.

I've not always been there for my family as much as I'd have liked. I'm a little odd, eccentric, a little detached at times. I don't laugh as much as my family do. I'm sometimes not much fun on holidays, and Christmas can be a bust. One time I managed to struggle with depression right through an Hawaiian vacation. It always surprises me how little it seemed to bother their enjoyment of these times, when to me I seemed to be smothering things in my mood. It speaks to the vitality of youth and the filters that depression can put on perception. It wasn't all about me. And again, it speaks to my good wife's ability to cover for me.

Often I've been either scrambling to keep up with schemes or recovering from chasing them. Creativity is something many people with my condition need. We feed off that energy and satisfaction it gives back. But sometimes it has a cost. At least in our family now we can all recognize what the dynamic is. If somewhat chaotic, our household is a very colourful and creative place.

I'm pleased that I can bring friends home who's lives are also affected by mental illness. People who come to Movie Monday and my longtime involvement in our MDA support group have grown this circle and it includes my favourite people. Almost every Monday it's, "Guess who's coming for dinner!" for our speedy pre-show meal.

Both my sons have several friends who have had similar challenges, themselves and their families, and it's been nice to have been able to be supportive and knowledgeable rather than rejecting them because of their problems. They're interesting people.

This parenting role never ends, but keeps evolving. My parents are in their eighties now. These days my dad and I can share books like Kay Redfield Jamison's AN UNQUIET MIND and NIGHT FALLS FAST - UNDERSTANDING SUICIDE and we can talk about those issues at length. It's cathartic for releasing some of the old stuff that never got dealt with all those years ago.

My mum is in long term care now with Alzheimers and a stroke. I'm helping her to take smaller spoonfuls and singing to her some of the familiar songs I'm sure she once sang to me. She's often looking for her parents.