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# Recovery for Families

*By Susan Inman*

I wince at the phrase 'recovery for families.' It evokes images of the ignorant, incompetent, and dangerous mental health professionals of the past trying to fix the families who, they were sure, had created their ill family member's bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. Families are going to feel a lot better once the history of this dark era has been fully acknowledged and its lessons more fully incorporated into contemporary mental health practice. Given that there seems to be a widening acceptance of the fact that the families of people with psychotic disorders haven't caused these disorders and often provide the necessary conditions for accessing the best treatments to overcome them, the phrase 'recovery of families' deserves fresh consideration.

What do families need to recover from? I've learned a lot about the journeys of families during the 8 years that I've been closely involved in the experiences of my family responding to my younger daughter's schizoaffective disorder. I've also learned about the situations of many other families whom I have come to know well. There are many traumatic experiences that injure families when they have to confront serious mental illnesses. Here are some common ones:

## The Shattered Belief System

Our generation of parents were raised to assume that 'nurture not nature' determined the course of our children's lives. Therefore, all of our dedicated efforts to provide the most loving, supportive, stimulating and growth producing environments possible were clearly going to be important, if not the most important, factors influencing our children's lives. The chaos of mental illnesses, about which most of us have been abysmally ignorant, throws our understanding of the world into upheaval. Our sense that our efforts matter are shattered when we first look into the fractured face of our psychotic child.

## The Visit of the Stranger

Parents suffer when we see our children suffer. In the grips of a psychotic episode, our child is not only suffering, but often exhibits strange behavior completely out of the range of whom we have known them to be. Families grieve the absence of the person they have known and are often wounded by the unknowingly abusive behavior that can accompany the arrival of the new person. The person we love and miss can take a painfully long time to re-emerge.

## The More Insecure Future

Most parents work to help their children construct a life which allows them to confidently cope with the challenges of getting an education, building a career, forging healthy, long-lasting relationships of their own, and creating a life with a reasonably secure future. All of these developmental tasks become extraordinarily difficult when our children first have to battle their own minds that have betrayed them. Our ongoing responsibilities to our children to help them establish manageable lives become much more difficult to fulfill.

## The Daily Losses

Families who are actively involved in caregiving for an ill relative lose many of the rewards their efforts have previously provided. They often incur significant financial losses, the disappearance of free time or vacations, and the loss of extended families and communities of friends who don't understand these illnesses. Families often lose the peaceful and restorative home lives that they'd struggled to create.

When my daughter emerged from the two year psychotic episode that had devastated her life and drained the joy from ours, we all experienced a kind of rebirth. Regardless of the limitations she still had to endure, she was restored to herself and to those of us who love her. No longer was our wound continuing to bleed. Helping her rebuild her life allowed us to rebuild ours. We could once again begin to believe that our efforts matter, that regardless of the greater difficulties we confront, we can find our way into the future. We value our hard won skills in navigating a complex and underfunded mental health system. We've recovered our belief that crises can have successful outcomes and that small steps forward can gradually restore old levels of functioning and develop new skills for living.

I'm coming to terms with the phrase 'recovery for families' especially when I envision it being claimed, explored and explained by families themselves. I know that terrible parenting can do devastating damage to children. I imagine that the people who have abused their children are the parents who quickly drop out of the challenge of responding to the often overwhelming experiences of parenting someone with a catastrophic illness. I know lots of the other kinds of parents and I know them and their constantly changing situations very well. These parents constantly show me the kinds of resourcefulness and resiliency that lead them on in recovering their belief that their actions do, in fact, make a crucial difference. Their recovery involves them accepting the unfairness of life and living through the inevitable grief about the many losses all the members of their family endure. Their recovery leads them to educate themselves about all the complex elements that are needed to provide the best circumstances for their child's recovery, and to assume their rightful place, 'out of the shadows at last,' in transforming the broader community's response to serious mental illnesses.