

Mental illness: its effect on children

By Sarah Vance

As Mental Health Awareness Week campaigns get underway, I talked with adult children raised by parents who experienced mental illness. The focus of these interviews has been to understand conditions from the eyes of children who grew up in situations where mental health affected the overall experiences within the household.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada has identified that one in five Canadians experience a mental health problem or illness in their lifetime, a number which underscores the impact on children, considering that 39 per cent of adult Canadians are parents.

'My father was a paranoid ambulatory schizophrenic and he was always up to interesting things, noticing symbols where other people wouldn't even look,' said Kristin, whose father committed suicide a few weeks before her tenth birthday.

'I can't even begin to talk about my childhood without sounding like I have a mental illness myself. In ways it was very different and yet it was normal for me at the same time.'

Kristin describes the rush she experienced in the passenger seat of her father's Ford Mustang, as he demonstrated the co-efficient of friction - also known as cornering at extreme speeds. She recollects hunting the night sky for comets with 'tails as long as the eye could see.' She also remembers 'Og', the spirit her father believed lived among her family, in their home.

'These are early memories which I didn't actually know to be symptoms of his mental illness until I shared them with the kids at school,' said Kristin. 'I was dumbfounded, because it had never occurred to me that his, and ostensibly, my own reality was not actually real.'

As she grew older Kristin was able to isolate the fantastical, in ways that supported bonding with her father. 'As a seven year old, my dad would take me out for Cherry Soda and we'd talk about the Feds,' she said. 'He would explain intricate plots and theories to me that were better than any Bond movie. I cherish those memories.'

But there is also a flip-side, an under-belly which can come at a cost to children who have to cope with parents who demonstrate anxiety, paranoia and depression.

Stacy, a 25 year old Fleming College student, recalls moving every two years, as her father up-rooted their family each time he believed the walls in their home were being 'tapped' and 'monitored.'

'I was with my father when he cut the Hydro line on our street, which wiped out the power supply for the entire block,' said Stacy, whose father, like Kirstin's, committed suicide.

Research shows that ninety percent of people who commit suicide have a mental or addictive disorder, with depression being the most common factor; it's present in 60 per cent of suicides.

Impulsive travel, often without supplies or shelter, was also identified by these adults. They described parents who struck out and hitch-hiked on 165 km treks, on foot or bicycle, without even so much as a water bottle.

'I can say first hand that many people around us have a very different relationship with the world,' said Kirstin, who studies biology at Queen's University. 'I am quite comfortable with uncertainty and crisis. For me it has been cellular.'

As research periodically supports theories that genetics could lead to children inheriting qualities shared by mentally ill parents, adult children identify a concern for their own mental health as a moderate worry that comes and goes.

'I took an accounting course once, to be more normal,' said Stacy. 'Which is ironic because my father would skip his one leg while he walked, to trick people into seeing something other than what they were looking for.'

Despite being well adjusted citizens who are experiencing acceptance in their communities, both Stacy and Kirstin identify feeling stigma as a result of their parent's mental health and eventual suicide. 'When I grew up, we didn't really have the language to talk about these things openly,' said Stacy.

Stigma would not be a factor for Canadians if mental health disorders were more readily perceived as health conditions, along the same lines as, for example, diabetes or cancer.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada identifies the experience of stigma as a barrier that can affect nearly every aspect of life. 'It limits opportunities for employment, housing, and education, and can cause the loss of family and friends. It can affect a person's self-image when he or she starts to believe the negative views held by others.'

Stigma can be reduced by national events like Mental Health Awareness Week, and Bell's annual 'Let's Talk' campaign in January, which are making strides to end the silence.

Initiatives of this kind provide strategies for reducing stigmas through education - including making us aware of our own attitudes and behaviour. It all comes down to inclusion - not shutting people out - as well as positive thinking and positive language.