

One woman's experience with Family-to-Family

Earlier this year, my niece who lived in our home was diagnosed with schizophrenia. I had spent three years working as a case manager at Fort Logan Mental Health Institute working with chronically mentally ill clients, but I never expected schizophrenia to be a part of my personal life.

My sister's world and my own family's world began spinning completely out of control. I thought that with my knowledge of the system, I would be able to help my sister navigate through the hospitals, social workers, doctors, and outpatient facilities, but I soon found out that I was as powerless as those without knowledge of the system.

In despair, I went online and found a NAMI support group. Ann, the leader, was so kind and listened to us each meeting as we shared our frustrations and tears. Having a place to go where there were others having similar problems helped us get through some of those first dark days. She put us in touch with the Family-to-Family group. This was such a blessing! And the timing could not have been better.

My sister was eager to sign up and begin learning all about mental illness. I, on the other hand, felt that I pretty much knew just about everything I cared to know about all the major mental illnesses. I encouraged her to sign up, and I told her she should get her son to take the class with her. Since he was not real excited about taking the class, I decided to take it with her to provide her with transportation and to be a support to her through the class. Did I get the surprise of my life! I guess when mental illness affects your life, you learn different things than when you are just trying to get through a class so you can graduate.

As I attended each class I found that I no longer was there as a support to my sister. I was there to learn and help myself get through this difficult time in my life. The teaching-support team made each lesson applicable in some way to my situation. My biggest surprise came one night when during a lesson I was able to apply it to my own son. Four years earlier he had been in a car accident and sustained major brain damage. His recovery was remarkable, and he leads a mostly "normal" life. When all this happened, my husband and I attended all the classes, and we read all the books. But nothing talked about the fact that the damage to the brain would give him a mental illness.

We went through years of trying to understand why he was acting the way that he was. Nothing we said got through to him. Our story was so similar to everybody else's in the class, but we had not had support because this was not a "mental illness," it was a brain injury. He was expected to just handle it. After a very traumatic event, he went to see a psychiatrist. Finally he was placed on psychiatric medications. This helped quite a bit, but we were still in the dark as far as behaviors and ways to help him.

Finally after one class, I began to see life through his eyes. His world is not like mine. I cannot expect him to see the world the way I do and expect him to respond to the world as I would. His world is different. My relationship with him has changed. I can't see his whole world, but I get glimpses now and then, and for that I am so thankful. I don't have the son that I raised and all the dreams I had for him, but I have my son. I'm learning who he is, what he wants out of life, and what he sees as his obstacles to success. Thank you for this class and the many volunteers that helped put it together. Gus and Leslie were great leaders!

I also learned many things that helped me deal with problems with my niece that came up throughout the 12 weeks. As I stated before, I pretty much knew many of the facts. But applying the facts to my own situation and being able to help my sister understand the facts as they applied to her daughter was so great. We were in a time of crisis, and NAMI was there with information for us. Thanks.

I take so much away from this class. I see the great need that families have to understand how to best deal with their loved one. I see that there is so much misinformation out there. I see that many families are still ashamed of mental illness and in denial even after learning the facts, and they will need much more time to accept that it is not their fault that someone they love got sick. I have learned that the person with the illness will heal in their time, and I cannot control that. I can only love and support them in their journey. I can be there. I can shine a light. I can listen. I cannot walk in their shoes. I do not know what it is like. I can give them another chance. I can love them. I can take care of myself so that I will be there for them when they are ready to reach out. I can share my experience with other families and be there to listen to them as they pass through their dark time. And so much more.

Thank you again for all your help!

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