

## Parental disorders

Growing up is difficult enough, but when  
your parents are mentally ill ...

? Some of the people in this article have requested anonymity. Their names  
have been changed to protect their identity ?

*By Jenelle Jensen*

RIKKI CHERNOFF vividly remembers the day it happened. She had a sandwich for dinner with a blueberry pie for dessert. Then, she and her husband spent a quiet evening at home and went to bed.

A few hours later, she got a call from her father.

Her mother, BettyAnn, had jumped off the College Drive Bridge in Saskatoon.

"I was just praying and thinking she swam to the shore," Chernoff says, tightly squeezing her coffee mug. "But my mom didn't know how to swim. It didn't seem real at that point. I remember how it felt to tell someone, 'My mom is dead.'"

She takes a deep breath and wipes away tears, as she reflects on the happy moments she spent with her mother, a teacher, who spent her summers with Chernoff and her younger sister.

Chernoff talks about how she planned fun adventures for the girls; like road trips, and intricate scavenger hunts full of rhymes and riddles.

"She always had a lot of energy and kept up with us. She was a lot of fun."

Though Chernoff says she tries to remember the positive moments, her predominant memories are of her mother's struggle with alcohol and bipolar disorder.

"The alcoholism has been a part of her entire life. Even before I was born. The two were always there, but it was just a matter of understanding what the second piece was – which was bipolar."

*'It was late afternoon, early evening, and my mom  
had so much to drink that day she was passed out'*

As a child, Chernoff says, it was hard for her to comprehend the severity of her mother's suffering, but there were times where it became a normal way of life.

"I was in elementary school at the time, and one of my friends was over for Canada Day," she says. "And we were going to watch the fireworks. It was late afternoon, early evening, and my mom had so much to drink that day she was passed out drunk on the couch."

Chernoff would often use the excuse, She's sick. It's a phrase she repeated through most of her childhood.

Lack of communication in the family left her and her sister to figure things out with their mom, Chernoff says. BettyAnn saw herself as a victim. That, combined with severe self-criticism, caused situations where the girls never knew how to deal with their mother.

"I always just remember the alcohol and the blame," Chernoff says.

One of her most vivid memories is of the night her mother finally cracked.

"I remember I was sleeping in the downstairs living room in front of the fireplace because it was cold in my room," she says. "She was walking through on her way to the computer room and she was flailing her arms. It didn't seem like she had control over anything. I didn't know what to do.

"My dad took her in to the hospital that night, and that's when he came back the next day and told us she was admitted into the facility due to a breakdown."

Even after BettyAnn was admitted to hospital and officially diagnosed with bipolar disorder, the family did not discuss her condition. They acted as if everything was fine, Chernoff recalls.

At first, BettyAnn took her medication and responded well. She seemed as if she wanted to change. But, soon, she started drinking again. Her manic stages became frequent and she cycled between drinking, losing sleep and falling into stages of obsession.

"She would be up all day and night," Chernoff recalls. "She would drink, then go into manic phases of cooking, cleaning, being on the computer, or listening to loud music.

"It was 3 a.m. It was alcohol and mania."

In 2010, Chernoff moved out of her parents' home. The same year, she and her mother had their first serious discussion.

'I just asked her why she was always drunk.  
I said, 'I don't understand'

"I went over to her house to help her with something," Chernoff says. "And she had been drinking. I just asked her why she was always drunk. I said, 'I don't understand. Do you not see what this is doing to your family?'"

"She would say, 'I'm stupid. I'm dumb. I'm not worth anything.'

"I just wanted my mom back. We used to go do things. We would go to museums, the art gallery, or we would go shopping. Is that so much to ask? It was just shrugged off like it was nothing."

Less than a year later, on March 15, 2011, BettyAnn killed herself.

"As much as she thought things would be better without her, they're not," Chernoff says. "I don't have a mom. My daughter, Audrey, doesn't have a grandma.

"It's not better."

According to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, mental illness is a leading cause of disability in Canada. One in five Canadians suffers from mental illness or addiction and half of Canadians have struggled with, or are struggling with, mental illness by the time they reach 40,.

In addition, 4,000 Canadians die by suicide per year, an average of 11 per day.

In 2008, CAMH conducted a survey revealing that only 50 per cent of Canadians would tell friends or a co-worker they struggled with mental illness.

In 2015, 40 per cent of Canadians reported feelings of depression and anxiety – but never sought medical help.

Edmonton psychiatric nurse Rhonda Ehnes, says she can understand why people struggling with mental illness don't ask for help.

"It can be a big challenge for mental health professionals to assist individuals who don't recognize mental illness or don't see that they need help.

“Some individuals are very willing and have favourable experiences in the mental health sector ... Others have had terrible experiences in how they tried to access help and they didn't feel like they were listened to.

K.C. is one of those people. Growing up with an undiagnosed sociopathic father, an alcoholic mother and a schizophrenic sister, she says she can relate to people who fail to seek help – because of the stigma around mental health, or the attitude that mental illness should be dealt with by family, and not society.

After reconnecting with her father at 18, K.C. moved into his home with his wife and five children in hopes of rebuilding their relationship, while escaping her alcoholic mother. She says she established strong relationships with her siblings, especially her schizophrenic half-sister.

'The way he sees things are completely different  
than how anyone else would see them'

But the house was anything but an escape, and her father's reckless and aggressive behaviour showed just how severe his sociopathic nature was.

“It was a really unhealthy situation, and he was verbally abusive,” she recalls. “He would always tell me that it was my mom's fault. He said that he tried to be in my life and tried to give child support, but deep down I knew that was not true.”

K.C. says that the first time she realized he was mentally ill was when her brother drank the last of the milk.

“My dad was so upset that he was drinking the milk and not leaving any for the sisters. I was thinking, ‘It's just milk. Just go to the store and get more.’ This was the first time I realized he had a bad temper and something was not right.

“I saw him threatening his wife and telling her he was going to put a fork in her eye. He would tell my younger sisters, who were a year and a half and two-years-old at the time, that their mom was a bitch and a whore.”

K.C. says her father has no concept of reality.

"The way he sees things are completely different than how anyone else would see them ... He has never said sorry and he never says he loves any of his kids."

When her younger half-sister, T.S., was diagnosed with schizophrenia at the age of 16, her father's response was devastating, K.C says.

"He just thinks that she needs to get her head out of the clouds. Or he says that her mom didn't discipline her enough. Or that she just needs to focus on school."

The family never attributed T.S.'s outlandish thinking and behaviour to mental illness. Instead, they thought she was a typical "hippie."

"One day, T.S.'s mom called me and said she was found on the Pattullo Bridge in Surrey on the other side of the railing trying to jump," K.C. says. "The RCMP tackled her to the ground and sent her to the hospital. She was upset, because she didn't feel like she needed to be in the hospital."

'She said there were voices on the other side  
telling her to come to another dimension'

"She said there were voices on the other side telling her to come to another dimension. This was the first time we knew she was mentally ill."

While she was in the hospital, the family was allowed to read T.S. 's diary.

"She was sharing her thoughts, because for a month she wouldn't speak to anyone. Reading that and knowing that her little mind was struggling was heartbreaking."

Since her diagnosis, T.S. has been taking medication, and is regularly admitted to hospital.

"These people are among the many across the country who have to live with someone else's mental illness," Ehnes says.

"Mental illness can affect anyone. It doesn't matter your gender, nationality or age. It doesn't matter whether you have lots of money or whether you are poor. That does not have bearing on how mental health can affect you. The difference is your access to treatments and supports."

K.C.'s family suffers from multiple mental illnesses: alcoholism, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and sociopathy. And, with two children of her own, she says she lives in fear that she may wind up like her parents.

"I don't ever want them to deal with what I had to deal with. I am very aware of myself slipping into depression, and I have had that my whole life. I don't know how much of it is situational, or genetics."

Ehnes says that some people struggle to accept help, and need to be reminded that it's all right to reach out when you're in need.

"But if they feel shame or fear of being ostracized, or they don't want it to be public knowledge, we need to say it is OK, and it happens to everyone.

"Don't wait until you're desperate, because there is help for you."

[Back to Table of Contents](#)