

Suzanne DuBois

*Suzanne is a 49-year-old mother of two from Massachusetts. She is diagnosed with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, and in this chapter she discusses the impact of her mental illness, being separated from her daughters, and what she's learned in over 22 years of mental health treatment. She credits her community support counselor, Nicole Caplin, for her support and assistance in putting this story together.*

My name is Suzanne; I was born in the year 1964. I live in Norwood, Massachusetts, where I was born and raised. My parents had four daughters and I am the youngest. All through my childhood I enjoyed playing with my baby dolls. But when I started kindergarten things really changed for me. I became more sensitive to how I relate to others. To me, other kids seemed different in their sense of awareness and their self-esteem. They seemed great, and my feelings were at a low. I was hurting at that time in my life. I knew something was not right, and from then on my journey in life was difficult. When I was alone I would ask the Lord questions and pray. I had such a wonderful spiritual experience with my higher power. I felt my family did not spend any time with me as a child, doing things like teaching me, so I would have temper tantrums. Something was wrong with me; I had no interest to learn or remember ordinary things like poems, names of writers, etc. But now I realize what life is about: to have some interests and knowledge. For instance, my favorite song, "My Heart Belongs to Me," by Barbara Streisand, symbolizes some of the struggles I had when I was growing up.

My mental illness diagnoses are paranoid schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. I feel blessed to finally be diagnosed after I had so much trouble growing up. Sometimes I would ask myself why I had to deal with life's problems, and then I was told it's not my fault. For a long time I blamed myself, and I looked at life with a lot of sadness. I feel that my mental illness caused other people to judge me and they didn't think I had the capability to be a mother. I felt like people wanted to

see me fail. I never had any help from anyone, no matter how much I reached out. This made me feel very alone, vulnerable, and unsupported. Most of my life I would feel like I was being held against my will because of my mental illness, and sometimes this made me feel like I was being discriminated against. I learned that things weren't in my control, so I was being told what to do for so long. Not only with my mental health but I was being pushed around and I felt like a door mat. I felt trapped and that no one cared about me. I had a lot of unanswered questions about my mental illness, and absolutely no one paid attention to me.

One day I gave up, and I tried to end my life. I was so very close but then my dog licked my face, and then I woke up and rushed myself to the hospital. I had my stomach pumped, and they said I had an acute overdose. From that day on, I wanted to live and to get the help I needed to be healthier. I stood my ground and said I've had enough. I learned there is a greater world out there. I took full control of my life and gained it back in a very positive way. I realize others may or may not have gotten the correct help or the right medications to share their story with us now, so that's why I am blessed to share my story today. Now I hope people recognize me for who I am and not by my mental illness.

When I was in my early 20s I met a gentleman from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. At the age of 23, I became a mother of a baby girl. Then 14 months later I gave birth to a second baby girl. Today I am a grandmother of five; four grandsons, and one granddaughter. I am also an aunt to four nephews and five nieces and a great-aunt. As I saw my family grow I realized how precious life really is, and it was very enjoyable to watch my daughters grow into motherhood. Now I see my grandchildren and love them all so much.

Being a mother, I had a greater responsibility than when I was a teenager. As a mother, life's challenges were upon me and there was a time when I could not provide a home for my daughters and myself. I went to a shelter and the state took my two daughters away from me and told me to seek psychiatric help. I know they said I needed psychiatric help because I was unstable, but I never understood why that made them take my daughters away from me. It still remains unknown to me. It was like anything I did in life was against me. I did not have the answers. Then after going to court, I got full custody of my children. And then again, soon after that, I separated from their father and completely lost guardianship of my daughters again. I lost everything and was out in the street with nowhere to live, until I went to get help through a local mental health clinic. Since then I have been prescribed to the right medications and I learned about my depression and my schizophrenia, and how it affects me.

I have a better understanding about my mental illness after being in treatment for over 22 years. Throughout my treatment, I was very worried about my daughters but I knew I needed to help myself. Others agree that I am now in my recovery. Through treatment, I have learned the valuable qualities of life are to set limits and to stay on my medications. The hardest step was when I finally admitted I have a mental illness and need to take my medication as prescribed.

My treatment setting was mainly a day treatment program. The day treatment program helped me a lot as an individual, but as a parent it did not serve me well.

When I was admitted into day treatment, it led the state system to work against me as a parent. The system failed me as well as my daughters. I say this because when I was in a shelter, the state took away my rights as a parent, and then I was not allowed to see my kids. I had no idea why the state separated me from my daughters, and I feel I did not get any answers. From that point on it was a vicious cycle for the rest of my life.

Despite my mental illness, I did the best I could with my daughters and now they both have children of their own. My oldest daughter works with autistic people, and my youngest daughter works at a daycare. Talking to both of my daughters about my mental illness is challenging because they do not understand; they just know I cannot handle too much stress. My relationship with my daughters is limited because we cannot share each other's life stories and experiences. I felt incapable of teaching them about me, and my kids were in denial about my mental illness. They always tell me I'll be ok. It scares my youngest daughter that I am on medication because she is used to seeing pharmaceuticals in the streets where she lives. As my daughters grew up and went to school, my oldest daughter studied mental illness and today she has somewhat of an understanding about my mental health history. She understands that I need to take medications. As for my youngest daughter, she has a different understanding. She says I do not need medications to help me and thinks I am dangerous. She does not understand that when I take my medication I am better and that I am now on the road to recovery. I gave up and prayed that my daughters would be safe and have a little bit of an understanding as to the world of mental health. Deep down inside they do know but it hurts them, as it hurts me, to say I have an illness. My youngest daughter has seen people on drugs and is totally afraid because of that. I think that is why she is in denial about me being on medications. But she wants the best for me as I do with all my grandchildren, as well as my daughters. My two daughters taught me to get better as they learned from me about how much I cared about them and loved them.

I would appreciate if people would not to judge me because of my mental illness, but instead give me respect as I would like to love and respect them. Mental illness was pointed out to me by others. If you notice mental illness in someone and the person does not see it, please help them as soon as possible and get them into treatment. My sister had problems like that when she was 51 years old. If my sister was not in denial about her life problems, she might have got the help she needed and lived a better life. My sister was angry at my family because she had a rough childhood. My sister did not have a mental health diagnosis to my knowledge, but I do think she had some mental health problems. Because of this, my sister also had issues with parenting as a mother herself. I think it was because of her trauma history as a child. My sister gave up hope and was separated from her children just like me.

I know a lot of men as well as women who chose not to become parents because of their mental illness. If I could tell anything to parents with a mental illness, it would be this: Being a mother changed my world. It helped me as a person to face responsibility and to give and have love. In today's society, mental health treatment has a greater role, which is different from earlier times, like the 1930s when it was

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not spoken of. I would like to say to mothers who face similar challenges that it is one's decision to become a parent. Personally, I wanted to become a mother no matter what, and I was blessed to be able to give birth. It's all how you feel about it. You could be a mother without mental illness but may face similar challenges, due to let's say, alcohol or drug addictions, or even diabetes. Everyone has their problems, and no one is perfect. But you can make the choice not to be a victim and to live in a positive way. I know no matter what, I did a great job as a parent with mental illness. I am proud of the achievements that I have made as a mother and as a person who is recovering from mental illness.