

Jennifer Christine Milner

*Jennifer is a 31-year-old mother of two from New Jersey, currently living in California. In this chapter she discusses her mental health history including suicide attempts and cutting, as well as parenting in the context of domestic violence.*

I am 31 years old. I grew up in Budd Lake, New Jersey, a small town full of farms and woodlands. I have a twin sister and a younger sister. Both my parents were ministers. We all grew up sheltered and very religious. At different times we would have church members living with us in the house and, for a while, we had a live-in nanny. We were not rich but always comfortable, middle to upper-middle class.

I first became a parent at age 24. At the time, I was in a very violent and abusive relationship with my daughter's father. He took me from Jersey to Virginia. He always threatened to have my child taken away if I ever called the cops because of my previous mental health record. Before I met him I had been in and out of inpatient psychiatric wards and two halfway houses for the mentally disabled.

For three years, his threats worked on me and I was scared. When I finally did call the cops, my daughter really was taken away! I was not receiving any mental health services and didn't ask for any which resulted in my losing custody of my daughter. I then married at 28 and had another child at 29. My husband had his own mental health problems and history of being in psych wards and knew about my past history. When I had our son, he used the same domestic violence tactics as the father of my daughter had to make me follow him around the country to keep my child and put up with the abuse. I finally got away from him as well, but he took custody of my son away from me. Child Protective Services took custody of my son away from his father a few months later. CPS gave custody back to me about a month later. I was okay for a while. Then I had some more mental health problems, ended up cutting myself, and lost custody again to CPS. It took a month to get my

son back. It's been 6 months and I have retained custody and gotten mental health help.

It took me a long time to realize I needed help. Growing up, my family didn't believe in mental illness. They thought I just needed to be taught how to control my mind and emotions. When I was feeling anxious or upset, they said I was possessed by evil spirits and that my mind was "too weak" for an exorcism to work.

I remember a few times as a young teenager the school requested that I get a psychiatric evaluation. My parents would say it was against our religion and it wouldn't happen. I have had over 20 suicide attempts. I have been a cutter since age 15 or 16. I suffered from anorexia since about the same time. I have been on and off medication and in and out of inpatient and outpatient programs since I was 18. I have tried halfway houses and shelters, been homeless, and used drugs for self-medication. I have been given multiple diagnoses: bipolar, borderline schizophrenic, suicidal/homicidal tendencies, dissociative personality disorder, PMDD, severe anxiety, and PTSD.

When I cut myself and lost my son in December 2012, I have made a serious effort to get better, to keep my son. I have stayed on my medication. Thankfully the mental health program here in Placer county found the right combination of meds that actually work and help me. I half-heartedly tried in other places but never got the kind of help I received here. During my hospitalization in Reno in 2011, they put me on three different medications. They all gave me terrible side effects and made me feel that I would never be awake enough to take care of my son. So I stopped them as soon as I got out of the hospital. It was a combination of treatment that didn't help and not making the best choices on my part. I'm glad now to be in treatment that is working and that I am taking it seriously. Before, I never really made that decision. I was tired of living this chaotic life and really wanted help and to get better. I now have my own apartment, a small studio, but still my own place for the first time where I make my own rules. It is scary and difficult at times. I still get help from counselors, friends come over and help sometimes, and I get checked up on. But, I am doing much better! I have better self-esteem, and feel like a productive part of society again.

My mental health history was of course, used against me as threats from the fathers of my children, unfortunately those threats came true and I lost custody of both of my children. I eventually got my son back but permanently lost parental rights to my first child. My bad relationships and my mental health problems caused quite a bit of extra stress with my children, and I didn't handle situations well. I never injured or seriously endangered my children, but I did make poor choices. I have learned a lot through parenting classes, and my therapists have helped me gain tools for patience and parenting skills with my mental health issues.

Unfortunately with my son, I have seen him copy behavior of mine, I see him lose his temper and experience anxiety. For a while he started eating less because I didn't eat. I would feed him but not myself, and he started not eating unless I sat down to eat with him as well. Losing my first child completely and facing the same possibility with my second is what gave me most of my courage, strength, and resolve to get better.

The challenges for me have always been patience, not getting so frustrated and anxious, and being able to control my outward actions. What helps me keep going are victories like getting custody of my son back, improving manners, and not having temper tantrums—changing bad behavior to positive, both for my son and for me!

My son is only two and a half years old, but he has seen my scars and often asks if I'm ok. I always tell him yes, but he can tell when I start getting upset or scared, and usually tries to hug me. I feel bad about that, (especially when he sees me cry), but his response usually helps me shake it off faster so I can be a good mom.

If I could start to get better and make progress in life at age 30, anyone can. It's never too late. There are always more tools and resources you can get and use. I would tell any other mother out there facing problems, don't feel ashamed to ask for help. Don't feel ashamed to need help. No one is perfect and no one can be Supermom all the time. Use the love for your children as your strength and motivator to get through the hard humps.