

My Brother My Sister

Siblings Talk Frankly About Their Feelings
for Their Brothers and Sisters with Schizophrenia



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My Brother, My Sister

A group of brothers and sisters of individuals with schizophrenia recently gathered to share experiences. These are their stories.

Paul

Paul was eleven when his brother, who was several years older, became ill. He did not realize at the time that his brother had no control over what was happening. As a child and adolescent, he felt that his brother ruined everything all the time, and he blamed his brother for making his mother so unhappy. He remembers coming from a public holiday where he and his friends had been enjoying playing with sparklers (fireworks). He ran into the house to find his mother crying. It occurred to him that she had probably been trying to conceal the situation from him, and he was overcome with rage at his brother.

As time went on, it was a case of diminishing expectations. Maybe his brother might not get to university; maybe he wouldn't finish high school; maybe he could get a job, etc. As he felt increasingly powerless to remedy the situation, feelings of weariness and a kind of boredom set in. This at least had the positive effect of diluting his anger. Finding out that no amount of care and attention could change things and that no amount of coaxing and cajoling could encourage his brother to take part in activities led to resignation. His brother managed to hold a job for a number of years, but now is unable to work.

"You certainly have a responsibility to your sibling," Paul said, "but a certain amount of 'distancing' from the situation – of selfishness, in short – is defensible and indeed necessary. It is a question of being fair both to your sibling and to yourself."

Jake

Jake spoke as the brother-in-law of a young man with schizophrenia. He knew about schizophrenia before he met his wife, so it was not a total shock. Jake remembers that one of his former girlfriends had a brother with schizophrenia and she believed that he was just lazy. Jake took a psychology course in university while becoming an architect and learned all kinds of theories that were much too simplistic to explain a complex condition like schizophrenia.

He said that he admired his brother-in-law for "doing what he wants when he wants," but realizes that he doesn't really have a choice in the matter. "In a way it is almost like a death since nothing much is expected of the person anymore," Jake noted.

Nora

Nora's younger brother was on full scholarship for a masters' degree when he got sick. Thus she was able to grow up, get married and leave home in a normal way before anything happened. She has gone through the soul searching that occurs: Why him and not me? Maybe it isn't schizophrenia. Etc. Nora can now approach her brother without difficulty and is trying to interest him in activities. Their mother died

quite recently. This has raised the question of what will happen in the future, since her dad cannot live forever.

Right now, her brother cannot even cash his government cheques. Nora felt that if he moved out he might begin to learn how to cope with such things. She could see positive things in her brother that lead her to believe that change is possible.

"Because he doesn't recognize that he has a problem we cannot get around the difficulty of managing his money," she said. "He won't sign documents so we know that down the road we will be blocked," she continued. "We have a new family doctor who asks us 'How do you know there is something wrong?'" At this point the frustration showed on Nora's face. "He's fastidious and he's clean so we don't have hygiene problems like some families. It's the little things that tell you there's something wrong. He doesn't read. He does nothing for hours on end. I arranged for a check-up for him but the doctor wouldn't tell me anything about it. There doesn't seem to be a link to pull everything together."

Dealing with medical and other bureaucracy is particularly frustrating, Nora said. "We only want to know he's been looked after. My father believes in the lazy theory, but then he wouldn't let him go to do a small job even though he seemed ready to do it. I know he's fond of art, but he says: 'Dad will make fun of me if I do art.' I know there are possibilities because on the day I was taking him to the art gallery he phoned me early in the morning - he and got up three or four hours earlier than usual to make sure he hadn't got it wrong and that we would be going." Nora didn't expect incredible changes - she only wants to give her brother some degree of happiness.

Sandy

Sandy had seen a video in which one of the family members had a brother with schizophrenia. He seemed an absolute saint, and she felt that the true story was not being told. She saw it as a duty to set out the negative aspects of being a sister of someone with schizophrenia, to express the unpleasant side of one's feelings. She felt that there is nothing to be ashamed of in feeling negative. "You owe it to yourself to face the negative aspects so you can know yourself and come to terms with a whole array of feelings."

Sandy grew up in a family of four girls. She was eleven when her 19-year old sister got sick. She believed that her sister was just acting up. Her parents were told that they were too restrictive, too conservative, etc. There was no explaining the behaviours that everyone had to put up with. Things were difficult. She soon learned that her parents couldn't handle any more stress than that which they were facing with their daughter with schizophrenia. "In the sympathy sweepstakes you were in a no win situation," Sandy complained. "If you needed help with a problem, you had to go to a surrogate parent." She and her other sisters were told not to talk about her sister's illness to anyone. She felt that this was very wrong and she wished she had not listened to her parents. She said that it was not until she was fully grown that she confided in anyone about her sister.

When Sandy was a young child, her sister would take her on outings that she remembers with pleasure. Suddenly the sister was not answering Sandy when she tried to talk to her. "What have I done?" was Sandy's reaction. "We had been such

buddies." She was completely bewildered. As time went on, every holiday was full of tension. "You dreaded it."

Sandy was seventeen when her second sister got sick. "She has never been anywhere near as ill as my oldest sister. Even so, she has gone off her medications and has run away before." Acceptance of schizophrenia came slowly for Sandy. "Although I had accepted it intellectually, it was only eventually, when I could feel it in my gut, that I really knew that my sisters did not choose to be this way."

As Sandy sees it, suppressing a sibling's right to have a problem that he or she can discuss with family, is wrong. "You shouldn't be made to feel that one's problems are not important beside the ever present 'big' problem."

Another concern: "I feel that I was given too much responsibility by my parents too young. Sometimes I was asked to look after my sisters and see that they didn't do anything inappropriate. I didn't like it. It was too much for me. Parents often try to force relationships between siblings and their ill brothers and sisters. 'Why don't you take her to the museum?' I don't think they should do that."

"Having to work at home was difficult," Sandy noted. "Studying in such an unpredictable atmosphere was too hard."

Sandy never brought anyone home. "When I came home wearing an engagement ring and showed it to my father, he replied, 'That's nice, who is he?' I hadn't even dared to bring my fiancé home. And – what a romantic proposal from my future husband: I had to let him know that if he married me we most likely end up responsible for two dependent adult siblings. As well, we might never have children, given the high risk of their getting schizophrenia."

Sandy has a third sister who is healthy. "She is married and has a child now, and my other sisters love the baby. But how can we shield her from the hurtful and unacceptable behaviours, acts and words? We want to protect the baby, but we also know that our sisters love her too, and love to be with her." It was obvious that Sandy and her well sister were struggling mightily with this problem.

"Where my parents come from, unmarried daughters live at home. We think that they should learn to live outside the family home, and we are thinking in that direction."

"With this illness you are asked to put up with intolerable behaviour and then you are asked to forgive and forgive and forgive."

A man sitting and listening to Sandy commented that his situation was quite different. He and his older brother were close in age so when the brother got sick, he had to get used to it really quickly. It was an embarrassment that happened in front of everyone at school so there was no question of hiding it. He very quickly educated himself and came to terms with the new reality. "Back then I was disgusted with my brother's behaviour. Now I'm just disgusted at the behaviour of those who laugh at my brother."

Jackie

A sibling relationships can be trying in normal circumstances. There is always a degree of competition between brothers and sisters.

Jackie was one year younger than her brother. She was an outgoing person while her brother was shy. She has guilt feelings because she is healthy while her brother has had to struggle many years to be even partially well. She felt guilt at her achievements and tried to minimize them for her brother's benefit. She never felt shame and was able to accept her brother's illness. She tried to help him whenever possible. Because of her caring attitude, he was able to confide in her and tell her about the voices the paranoia and the bad dreams.

For every sibling who tries to understand, there are those who through shame or other conflicting emotions, fail to support their brother or sister.

This family, however, stuck together and saw the brother through thick and thin. Through clozapine and tricyclic antidepressants he has gone from being unable to go out and having no interest in life to being able to live in a residence in the community, share in the life there and have a few friendships including one with a lady friend. Over the coming year he anticipates being able to take a part-time job. He says that without his family he could not have done it. They stuck by him. "He also stuck by us," concluded Jackie, "and we are all very proud of him."

For more stories from the hearts of people struggling with schizophrenia and other serious mental illness, visit our website at the address noted below.

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