

# Ending the Silence About Mental Illness

One in 20 American adults is living with a serious mental illness.

## Two Families Tell Their Stories

By Jeanene Dunn, OHM Staff

A physical illness or disorder is usually easy to identify. A person coughing or sneezing may be suffering from a cold or allergies. A cast on an arm or leg indicates that something is wrong with that limb. Unlike these physical indicators, mental illness does not require a cast or bandage. Mental illnesses are a series of diseases or disorders that vary in severity and treatment.

According to data from the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), “one in five American adults will suffer

some form of mental illness in any given year. One in every 20 adults is living with a serious mental condition such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depression or long-term recurring major depression.”

That means there are people we come in contact with daily – friends, family and coworkers – who are silently battling mental illness or caring for someone who is. Two families impacted by mental illness agreed to share their stories with Our Health Matters.

### Alice\*

Today, Alice is thriving. That wasn't the case several years ago. What Alice didn't know was that her untreated and undiagnosed mental illness started when she was a child. She had suffered physical, emotional and sexual abuse, as well as neglect.

During the years her illness was untreated, Alice was on a destructive path. “My behavior was so self-destructive,” she says. “I was so damaged by what had happened to me so many years ago that I just acted out. I had conflicts with everyone, including law enforcement.”

A life-threatening incident landed Alice in a psychiatric hospital, where she was diagnosed with multiple mental health illnesses. Through her struggle, her husband of nearly 30 years remained by her side, as well as her son. Her husband sought therapy so he could better understand her situation and support her.

Alice tried medications that made her feel worse, or not feel at all – a feeling she describes as “the zombie effect.” Her doctors finally got her on the right course of medications and other therapy. Even though it took a life-threatening incident for Alice to get the help she desperately needed, she shudders to think of what could have

been. “I could have ended up committed to a psychiatric facility, dead or in jail.”

### Marian\*

Marian is a business professional doing work she loves for a company she loves. At the office, she is a rock star – hard working and dedicated. Her home life, however, is a different story. Marian is the caregiver for her adult son, who suffers from bipolar and excessive impulse disorders.

“Joe\* was always a difficult child,” says Marian, a mother of three. “I always blamed myself (for his behavior problems) because I was a young mom.” She said Joe's problems in school got worse when he was in the fifth grade, right around the time he entered adolescence. “The biggest thing I noticed was that he would go into rages,” Marian explained. “His behavior was and continues to be very unpredictable.”

Now 32, Joe was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in his mid-20s. Marian said by the time he was diagnosed, he had several run-ins with the law. He has recently been sentenced to serve time in jail due to a traffic violation. Marian worries that he will not be able to get treatment and medication for his illness while he's in jail.

Meanwhile, Marian and Joe share a home. She struggles daily with feelings of guilt and helplessness. “I just want to be able to help my son get better,” says Marian. “He has two children of his own.”

As an uninsured adult, Joe has had trouble staying on the course of medications he needs to manage his illness. One reason is affordability, and the other is Joe's suspicion of the state mental health system that administers his services. “Joe is so suspicious and paranoid that he often does not take his medication,” explains Marian. “And that's when the problems begin.”

The constant stress of her son's illness has left Marian feeling hopeless and depressed. Fortunately, her employer offers an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and Marian is exploring resources for herself so she can be better equipped to help Joe.

*Alice and Marian represent only two of the millions of families in this country who are dealing with serious mental health issues. If you or a loved one is experiencing a mental health condition, your doctor is the best source for answers to your questions. He or she can provide appropriate resources and referrals.*

\*Not their real names.