

Taking Care of Yourself to Take Care of Others

Shortly after my daughter started her PhD in psychology in 2001, I noticed that she had become very anxious all the time, and was getting worse. I remember one incident in particular when she called me, paralyzed with panic, and I had to go pick her up. She was hospitalized, and after months of tests, we got the diagnosis: bipolar disorder.

I was shocked and in disbelief. I had no idea what to do. When my daughter was in a manic state, she wouldn't sleep. She walked around constantly and lost weight. As a health care professional—I'm a retired speech-language pathologist—I knew I needed to ask for help right away. But when it comes to your own child, you feel completely powerless.

At first, I looked for help mainly for my daughter. After I found support for her, I had the time to look for support for myself. I went to an agency supported by United Way that helps families and friends of people with mental illness. I attended 10 group sessions, where I learned a lot about mental health. I gained a better understanding of what people with a mental illness are feeling. That helped me put myself in my daughter's shoes.

I also learned how to let go. This doesn't mean you are giving up, but rather that you accept the situation. I learned how to tell my daughter that I was exhausted and that I couldn't always be strong. She then started paying attention to me, just like I paid attention to her. Our relationship has always been good, but this helped us communicate and work together even more.

Today, my daughter is doing much better. Bipolar disorder will always be part of our lives, but now we know how to live with it. I have been on the agency's board for six years. After hearing the stories of the families of people with mental illnesses, I see how invaluable this assistance is for them.

As a parent, you wonder if your child's problems are your fault, but you have to let go of the guilt and ask for help. Once you feel better, you can help others."