

When your child has a mental illness

By Shannon Chapman



Parental grief is a common response when your child is diagnosed with a mental illness. Photo: Getty Images

Research reveals some parents go through a grieving process when their child is diagnosed with a mental illness, and it often goes unnamed. Shannon Chapman talks about her experience, and how you can move through the process in a mentally healthy way.

Just over a year ago, my son experienced severe anxiety around going to school. One day during the school drop-off, after weeks of facing tears, panic, and public outbursts from my child sobbing that he 'couldn't cope', I sat down at my desk, picked up the phone and burst into tears. They were deep, heavy, wracking sobs, and something in me twigged, "this feels like something more than everyday sadness." Being a researcher by trade, I got to Googling and came across a research paper that spoke to me – *Grief: The Unrecognized Parental Response to Mental Illness in a Child*.

This might seem like a big jump to you, but the call I was about to make, before the tears fell, was to a child psychologist, asking for an appointment for my son. The thing I'd always feared had come true – like me, my son was showing all the signs of an anxiety disorder, and as his doctor had suggested earlier that week, he may benefit from early intervention with a psychologist. (We had already ruled out anything going on at school or home.)

In that moment, something opened in me, an overwhelming whirl of thought, "my child will struggle, and I can help, but I can't take it away for him." Having experienced a serious anxiety disorder in my

twenties that spanned many years and changed the course of my life, I know you can be looking down the barrel of a long and painful, sometimes life altering journey. I was terrified for him, and honestly, for how I'd cope. There was also a deep sadness that my son wasn't going to live the life I'd hoped for him: anxiety free, confident and just easier. A life without an anxiety disorder.

Fast forward a year later and my son has learned some good coping skills and is on an even keel, but he is susceptible to further anxiety and depressive episodes later in life. At the end of the day, the grief I experienced was brief, but then my son's outlook is good – it may or may not affect him again later in life, and is unlikely to significantly change the boy I know - all things gained from the benefit of hindsight, but in the moment, the what ifs overwhelmed me. What I did learn from the experience and my research was that some parents, upon finding themselves at the business end of their child being diagnosed with a mental illness, may well experience unrecognised grief.

The research points out that the normal grief response of parents to the death of a child of any age is well documented, but parents whose child develops a mental illness can actually experience a similar grief, and it often goes unrecognised or is not validated. Case in point: Your child has a mental illness diagnosis. You feel grief for the future of the child you have “lost” and instantly, for a lot of us, the phrase “first world problem” kicks in – after all, your child will still be with you, you will still even have the child you know and love a lot, if not all, of the time. You rationalise that some parents actually lose their kids which is a “real reason” to feel this grief, and that it's not about you, it's about them, and hey presto, you've talked yourself out of your “right” to grieve. The problem is, just because you rationalise it away, it doesn't mean you aren't actually experiencing grief or that you wouldn't benefit enormously from additional support, it just means you've squashed it down to fester. You can't address a feeling you deny you are experiencing.

What can you do?

No one is suggesting you need to throw yourself a pity party and invite everyone along (it is however your prerogative to do so). But if reading this is causing a twinge of recognition, there are things that you can do. One is to acknowledge your feelings, cut yourself a break rather than rationalise why you shouldn't be feeling this way, and begin to move through the stages. Another is to talk to your GP and get a referral to a psychologist if you feel you are not coping or feeling “stuck” and consumed by your grief, unable to move forward. Share your feelings with those close to you – especially your partner if it is something you can share (just don't expect they have to feel the same way – not everyone will experience grief after such a diagnosis, so telling them they are burying their feelings is not the way to go) For me, I rang my local chapter of Mental Health Carers ARAFMI (WA) Incorporated and did some telephone counselling, one session did me wonders – just admitting what I was feeling was enough to “unstick” me.

If your child is diagnosed with a mental illness and you are finding yourself stuck in a cycle of unhappy feelings and grief, but you don't feel like you should be, take heart that it's not uncommon, and there are plenty of great support services out there to help you through.

Source: http://www.essentialkids.com.au/younger-kids/kids-behaviour-and-discipline/when-your-child-has-a-mental-illness-20130820-2s84g.html#utm_source=FD&utm_medium=lifedandstylepuff&utm_campaign=mentalillnessgrief