

Chapter 1: Detective Work

When is a Parent More Than Weird?

Teens often view their parents as a little strange, no matter how mentally sound the parent really is. Let's look at two actual examples of parents' behaviors to see if either one is showing real signs of mental illness.

One day, Lisa came home to find her mother folding laundry on the kitchen table. Her mom was listening to an oldies radio station and wore a pair of clean underwear on her head. As her mom sang, "R-E-S-P-E-C-T! Find out what it means to me" at the top of her lungs, Lisa stopped short, her eyes widening. She'd never seen her mother like this.

In another part of town, Jack noticed something weird about his dad. As he ran upstairs to change for football practice, Jack glanced at his father napping on the couch. He suddenly realized his dad was always napping when he came home and he hadn't worked at all for a few months. His dad's most recent job had lasted only a short time.

Is something wrong with Lisa's mom, or with Jack's dad? Is it a mental illness or just a parent being "weird"? How can you tell?

It's not easy. The title of this book comes from Rinna, who recalls a time when her mother packed a piece of charcoal as her lunch. After that, Rinna laughs, "I made my own lunch – and lunch for my sisters, too. It was just easier." Her mother has bipolar disorder, and has been in and out of the hospital for her problems many times since then.

Okay, most of us can agree that charcoal for lunch is pretty strange, unless you're planning a cook-out. But other than situations like this, understanding what "weird" means can

get a bit dicey. Ask three adults their definition of the word, and you'll probably get three different answers. Ask three kids, and the same thing will happen – only their answers will be completely different from the adults' answers.

Point is, everyone pretty much has his or her own way of defining “weird.” One dictionary -- The Oxford Illustrated American – says weird means “uncanny or supernatural” and then, as a second-level explanation, says the word can also mean “strange or incomprehensible.”

When it comes to a parent's mental illness, all those terms can apply.

And what we think is weird, or different, can change as time passes, too. If you think of something in your life that was totally bizarre when you were, say, six years old, that may not seem so off-the-wall now. And it works in reverse – sometimes we accept stuff as kids, because that's just the way things are, and it's only as we get older that we look back and think, yep, that was weird. If it's all we've ever seen, then it stands to reason that when we grow older and get out into the world – in school, at friends' houses, at the relatives, and so on – we may start to compare and figure out that yes, something in our home lives is indeed different.

That's a big reason why kids don't always know, or understand, that their parent may have a mental illness. If it's the only behavior they have seen, then they have nothing to compare it to. And that's why there are so many differences in when people find out about their parent's mental illness, and what they think of as “weird” at different stages of their lives. Sometimes it's one specific event that clues kids into their parent's problems, and sometimes it's a bunch of things that happen over a longer period of time.

Some kids know early in life that something is wrong at home, even if they can't define it as mental illness. Others learn about it in dramatic, memorable ways. Still others find out that mom or dad is ill through other adults in their family, whether directly or by overhearing

whispered conversations. Even when a child has the right words and some good explanations, he or she usually doesn't have a complete understanding of the illness until much later in life.

Always Knowing

Kelly is one of those who always knew something was wrong, but never knew what "it" was until much later. She grew up in the bayou country of southwestern Louisiana. "Things were never right," she says. "My life was never like anyone else's. I was always aware of that."

Kelly's parents divorced when she was very young. She moved over and over again, going to eleven schools in twelve years. When she was seven her mother told her and her sister they were moving to Florida. Instead, they moved to Hawaii.

"That move took us away from anyone and anything we knew," Kelly recalls. A year later they moved again and lived with her Kelly's uncle in California. The situation became tense and stressful. "So my Mom bought a green bus that had been outfitted into an RV. We lived in that. But even in the trailer park, where all the other kids had their own problems, I just knew things were different."

Kelly's mom worked in California, but "that's when the problems started – the paranoia – and she kept changing jobs." By the time Kelly was nine, her mother couldn't get another job, "so we fired up the old green bus and moved back to Louisiana to live with my grandmother." Back in her hometown, Kelly's mom "pretty much stayed on the porch or on the couch in her bedroom. We were around even more normal families there and that's when I knew for sure that something was wrong. Plus, my grandmother would say, 'She's having a breakdown.'"

Finding out by Accident

Rinna, on the other hand, knew for sure that her mom was sick because her mom spent a lot of time in the hospital. No one talked about it, though, so Rinna was surprised when she learned that the illness was a mental illness.

“My mom was in the hospital a lot,” she explains. “I don’t really know what she has – schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.” (For an explanation of the major types of mental illness, see *Chapter 3: What's This Called, Again?*)

“She got diagnosed when I was in sixth or seventh grade. And for some reason my parents didn’t tell me why she was in the hospital. We’d go visit her, and I didn’t know why she was there. I thought she had cancer. And then one time I heard them say over the loudspeaker: ‘Visiting hours for the psychiatric ward are now over.’ I said, ‘Wait a second!’ I was really confused, and I talked to my best friend at school. Her sister was best friends with my older sister, and so they had talked about it. They said they thought it had something to do with stress.”

After talking it over with their friends, Rinna and her sisters approached their dad. He tried to explain. “He gave us some pamphlets about schizophrenia and manic-depression and a generic pamphlet written about mental illness.”

Seeing Bizarre Behavior

Ann first suspected something was wrong when she was eleven years old. Her mother stayed in bed for four days and the dishes piled up on the kitchen counter. Ann finally did them all while she was home sick with the flu. Her mother still didn't budge from her room.

Ann describes the dramatic episode that followed soon afterward. “A few months later,” she recalls, “I woke out of a sound sleep and heard my mother screaming outside and racing from one side of the house to the other. She was seeing things and yelling, ‘Look, there's Jesus

coming down from the sky!" She wound up in the hospital for several months, and eventually got shock therapy."

Hearing Whispers

For Angela, who grew up in an Italian family, the idea of a mental illness in the family was completely taboo and hush-hush. Getting any information about what was wrong with her mother took detective work on her part, plus a little luck. Angela recalls, "At a pretty young age I started to realize something was up because she was unable to function a lot, and she would be gone for bits and pieces, and we would hear conversations with the name of the psychiatric hospital mentioned, and shock therapy."

Angela's best friend's mother was also depressed and going to "shock therapy." So the girls put their heads together to sort out what they saw and heard. "We would talk back and forth: 'I don't know where my mom went,' and 'Dad said don't worry about it.' Then we'd also experience moments where my mother just would disappear."

By the time Angela was thirteen, many of her relatives had come over from Italy. With more family around there was even more hush-hush talk. But she also had an aunt who spoke freely. "My aunt would always be the one to open her mouth – I don't know if it was intentional or not – and she would reveal a lot about my mother. She would call my mother 'pazza.' That means "crazy" in Italian. So, you know, we just figured Ma was crazy."

Besides all the remarks and whispered conversations, Angela also remembers hearing her mother up all night, sometimes vacuuming, sometimes sobbing. Angela was afraid, but she also realized her mother was hurting inside.

Putting it all Together

Angela picked up clues about her mother from both the open and the hushed-up talk around her. She also had a close friend who helped her piece things together. But how did Ann, Rinna and Kelly know there was something wrong? They realized it over time, when they saw either too much or too little of some behavior or some emotion.

Normal behavior, done to the extreme, commands our attention. For example, sleeping is normal, but sleeping all day for many days in a row is extreme. People around us will notice. It means we are sick in some way, either physically or mentally. Crying is also normal in certain circumstances. But crying uncontrollably or feeling sad all the time is not. Being up for days with little or no sleep, vacuuming in the middle of the night or getting overly angry about little things makes people wonder, "What is going on, here?"

Bizarre behavior also grabs our attention. When Ann's mother saw Jesus, it was easy for Ann to see that her mother was "crazy." David and Destiny's mom acted in a crazy way, too. David, age twelve, explains, "She just started becoming paranoid. She was paranoid about mobsters coming to get her." David's older sister, Destiny, describes what happened as a result of her mother's unrealistic fears: "We were in the car. She said she was going to crash it. She said she was being followed by gangsters and other people who were coming to get her. It was my grandmother's car she took, and when we got back to my grandmother's house, my grandmother called the paramedics and they took Mom to the hospital. I was scared, and I was wondering what was going to happen to her."

In Ann, Destiny and David's situation, bizarre and striking events caused them to realize there was something truly wrong with their mom. They probably wouldn't have called it mental illness, unless an adult told them the name.

But mental illness can also be subtle and hard to spot. Early symptoms may not be obvious, except when we look back much later. If the person does not get treatment, the symptoms will probably get worse, until they get to the point where they keep the person from functioning in a job, in a relationship or in managing in his or her life. Then it will be easier to tell that there is an illness.

Finding out Later in Life

Sarah is in her twenties and currently teaches high school English. She only recently figured out that her mother has had a mental illness for many years. Her mother will not go to a doctor for treatment, so she still does not know what illness her mother has or whether she could get well. Sarah can look back to her girlhood and see there were some strange events, but they were so slight that it was hard to tell if something was really wrong.

Sarah's parents were divorced and Sarah lived in New Jersey with her father. In the summer after seventh grade, she visited her mom in Chicago. When Sarah commented on some rust-colored stains on the shoulders of the white t-shirts, her mom said, "Somebody comes in the house and puts them there." When Sarah pointed out that the ironing board cover had a hole in it her mother explained, "Yeah, you know, people come in here and cut this up. They do these things."

Thinking people were sneaking into the apartment, Sarah became afraid to be by herself. When she returned to New Jersey, her father explained that the rust stains came from hanging the wet shirts on metal hangers. And the holes in the ironing board cover simply came from wear. He never said anything, though, about why her mother had these strange beliefs. Perhaps he did not know himself.

Sarah's mother's actions became stranger and more unpredictable. During Sarah's high school years her mother lived in New Jersey in order to be close to her. Two weeks before high school graduation, which Sarah's mother had promised to attend, Sarah received a phone call from a social service agency in Chicago. A woman informed her, "I found your mother living in her car in Chicago." Sarah was shocked. "What?!" she screamed into the phone. "I thought she was living in New Jersey." She had gone back to Chicago and had not said a word to Sarah.

As the years went on, Sarah learned that this "disappearing act" is one of the many strange faces mental illness can present. The only explanation of her mother's behavior that Sarah has comes from social workers who have tried to persuade her mother to accept help. To date, her mother denies there is anything wrong.

Fathers can be Ill, too

So far the focus has been on mothers who are mentally ill, but of course fathers can be ill, too. It may be harder for a child to notice when Dad is ill, since the mother is often the person who takes charge of the day-to-day routine. Children are quick to notice when meals are not on the table and laundry is not done, especially if there are other times when things run smoothly.

Just like with mothers, a mental illness in a father may be hard to see if there is no bizarre or violent behavior. But when there are differences in the way a parent relates, or participates, then a child will notice.

Christina, age 12, says her dad has been acting weird lately. Her father has both depression and mental retardation, and has had both conditions for a pretty long time. But lately, she says, his behavior has changed. "The only thing he wants to do is lie in bed and play Yahtzee," she says. "He doesn't want to play with me anymore," and "he doesn't want to help around the house" with things he used to do – washing the dishes, helping bring things to the

attic and so on. He also gets grouchy more often, she says, and she cries as she explains, “he never spends time with me anymore.”

Part of this change is because Christina’s dad recently got a job as a janitor, which means he doesn’t have the time he used to have to play with her and to help around the house. He’s also more tired when he gets home, so he’s grouchier in general. And he recently married Christina’s stepmother, so there are a lot of changes in all their lives as they re-form their family with three people now instead of two. But to Christina, her father’s behavior is indeed “weird,” because it represents a change from what went before.

At Christina's age she would, of course, want her dad to play with her and take her places. But high school age kids want to be on their own more. They want to be away from their parents and don't have much interest in what their parents are doing. Teens are often involved in activities and friendships outside the family.

Teens Usually Have Other Things on Their Minds

Because a teenager is so busy, if a parent's first symptoms show up in the child's teen years, the child may not notice. This is what happened to Jack. His father became depressed and lost many jobs due to his difficulty functioning. As Jack reflects on this from his 45-year-old vantage point, he expresses some guilt about not realizing his dad was ill. He feels he might have done something to help. But, in fact, he did not realize it and his parents never talked to him about it until later.

Once Jack was informed, though, it finally all made sense. Jack recalls, "It wasn't until after high school or college that my mom said, 'Your dad's got depression.' And that was when I finally said, 'it makes a lot more sense about why he was home more.' Until that time I was busy with friends, going out, doing sports, whatever, so I didn't care about it until it was explicitly

pointed out." Jack says that his father's depression came out largely as self-doubt and high anxiety. It's understandable that Jack didn't really know about it until it was plainly pointed out.

Alcohol or Drug Abuse Can Confuse Things

Sometimes alcohol or drug use hides a mental disorder. This is what happened to Brian's father. Brian's dad was an extremely successful businessman, who started and developed many companies and who traveled all over the world. "I didn't have a father for the teenage years of my life," Brian reflects. "He wasn't there. From the time I was about thirteen 'til I left for college, my dad wasn't home. He was a workaholic and an alcoholic. He was really good at what he did. He was successful, but as I was leaving to go away to college, he started feeling a mid-life depression, some of it stress- and work-induced."

Brian's father was able to work in spite of his drinking. He never got violent. But then, according to Brian, "he started to feel extremely depressed, and started to learn about alcoholism. He found Alcoholics Anonymous and stopped drinking. A month or two later he was even more depressed because they took away his 'medicine.' He stopped drinking on my birthday, my 17th or 18th birthday. And he hasn't drunk since. But he was extremely, extremely depressed – to the point of being suicidal. Brian's father got treatment for his depression and leads an active and enthusiastic life to this day. (To read Brian's tale about how he copes with his father's, sister's and wife's different mental illnesses, see *Chapter 10: Brian's Story*.)

There are millions of kids who have at least one parent with a mental disorder, whether it is treated or not. Sometimes the child knows about the illness, sometimes not. Even when the child has words for mental illness or the specific disease, it is hard to understand it. In general, parents are reluctant to talk about it, so finding out can be very difficult. (For more about the parent's point of view, see *Chapter 11: And Now, a Word from the Parents*.) Seeing bizarre

behavior or rageful reactions over nothing, hearing family members' hushed conversations or just having a vague sense that something isn't right may be good clues to follow up on.

There is a lot of information in libraries and on the Internet about mental illness. The 2002 movie *A Beautiful Mind* gave us some insight into the thoughts and beliefs of a person with schizophrenia. But no one can diagnose a family member from reading a book, seeing a movie or exploring a Web site. Only a mental health specialist can give a diagnosis after a careful evaluation. A thorough examination will take a great deal of information into account. (For a fuller explanation of how a diagnosis of mental illness is typically made, see *Appendix A: What's up, Doc?*)

Now let's go back to the examples in the beginning of the chapter. Can you tell if one of those parents has a brain disorder? Without a lot more information, not even a professional can tell.

But it just so happens that Jack's dad really was depressed for years – and lying around a lot is a common symptom. What about the mom with the underwear on her head? Isn't that strange? Well, yes, but she was just kidding around, trying to make a boring chore more fun.

As Lisa's sister Dixie explains, "Everybody thinks their parents are weirdos. There's a little crazy in everybody, but it's not always a mental illness."