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**PSYCHIATRIC REHABILITATION
& COMMUNITY SUPPORT**

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*Anguished Voices:
Siblings and Adult Children
of Persons with
Psychiatric Disabilities*



Edited by
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CENTER FOR PSYCHIATRIC REHABILITATION

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Anguished Voices: Siblings and Adult Children of Persons with Psychiatric Disabilities

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Contents

-
- Rex M. Dickens* **1** **Introduction**
Diane T. Marsh
- Lisa Ewald Albury* **5** **Coming To Terms:
A Sister's Odyssey**
- Annie V. Saylor* **13** **Nannie: A Sister's Story**
- Robert F. Penning* **19** **Emergence**
- Susan L.* **27** **My Mother, My Family**
- Karen Kinsella* **35** **Having Two Fathers**
- Dean Hogan* **43** **My First Punching Bag**
- Laura Donahue* **49** **Playing With Kelley**
- Rex M. Dickens* **61** **A Family Album**
- 75** **Annotated Resources**

Introduction

In the following personal accounts, we invite you to share the difficult journey of siblings and children of people with mental illness. Until recently these family members were lonely travelers, encapsulated in their own anguish and generally unaware of the larger family to which they belonged. This larger family includes the legions of individuals who have a beloved relative with mental illness. Within the last decade, largely through the Siblings and Adult Children (SAC) Council of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI), adult siblings and children have come together to explore the personal legacy resulting from the mental illness in their families, to receive support and understanding from other similar family members, to learn about mental illness and its treatment, to develop coping skills and strategies, and to advocate for a more humane system of mental health care.

NAMI was founded in 1979 as an outgrowth of locally developed self-help groups in various parts of the country. There is now a national office that coordinates support, educational, and advocacy functions, and that represents a network of over 1,000 local affiliates. The SAC Council is the unit within NAMI concerned with adult siblings and children. In addition to the national SAC Council, there are local SAC affiliates throughout the country that offer

support groups and other activities specifically for these family members.

If you would like to locate the SAC group in your area, contact the national NAMI office or your state NAMI affiliate. Many resources are available for you through NAMI and the SAC Council, including a *Group Facilitator's Guide*, an *Information and Resources Booklet*, and a newsletter, *The Bond*. In the words of one family member, "The first SAC meeting changed my life. The group has been like a beacon, providing me with information, support, and understanding."

The mental illness of a close relative is a catastrophic event for young family members that has repercussions throughout their lives. In the past there has been little awareness of this impact among most professionals and parents, or even among siblings and children themselves. At present adult siblings and children are gaining insight into their own experiences and sharing their wisdom with the larger community. This book is an outgrowth of that process.

So too is a second book, *Troubled Journey: Siblings and Children of People With Mental Illness* (Tarcher/Putnam, 1995). The latter book offers a comprehensive examination of the experiences and needs of siblings and children, both as young family members and as adults. The voices of family members are heard throughout *Troubled*

Journey, in brief vignettes that complement the text. Some of those vignettes were taken from the powerful personal accounts included here. We are grateful to the contributors for giving us permission to make additional use of their material.

Confronted with the maelstrom of mental illness, siblings and children often struggle to avoid becoming helpless bystanders or secondary victims themselves. The universal dimensions of such an emotional struggle were outlined by Joseph Campbell in his classic book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. From ancient myths throughout the world, he outlined three stages: Separation, Struggle, and Return.

Separation, characterized by fear, involves leaving the land of the known for the unknown. A guardian usually attends the boundary, an unrecognized helper who protects those who cannot handle the trials beyond. After the threshold, the struggle through the wilderness begins. Fear dissolves and the hero or heroine becomes empowered for the journey. Dragons (fears) and sometimes the Underworld (unconscious) are encountered, along with other strange events and people. The return or renewal is accomplished with spiritual treasures of secrets revealed. The hero/heroine, finding what has always been there, is enriched and has grown in compassion and strength. Suffering is redeemed as meaning is found.

From a mythological perspective, siblings may be viewed as "Frozen Souls" who are struggling with ongoing trauma and with loss and grief, sometimes cutting off or compartmentalizing painful feelings in their effort to survive. Similarly, children of people with mental illness may be viewed as "Hollowed Souls" who are dealing with primal issues of self; their early experience with parental mental illness often leaving a void at their core.

Here, we present the journeys of family members who are siblings, children, and

both siblings and children of people with mental illness. Individually and collectively, their stories illustrate Campbell's stages of separation, struggle, and return. Separation can be precipitated by a personal crisis such as the death of a parent, a crisis for their ill relative, or a failure in a relationship, marriage, or job. In spite of warnings by gatekeepers, family members may feel compelled to undertake a quest for understanding and resolution. The unknown territory is entered and traversed without clear direction, relevant knowledge, or prior experience. It is a personal journey, yet simultaneously a universal one. With time, renewal and redemption are achieved, and the individuals return with new understanding, greater compassion, and expanded lives.

Mental illness has a profound impact on the lives of siblings and children that has been largely unrecognized. Mental health professionals have generally treated mental illness by myopically focusing on the afflicted individual. Parents often are overwhelmed and embroiled in their own anguish. Siblings and children may be forgotten family members, retreating behind a facade of conventionality. Often the full impact on these family members becomes apparent only much later, years or decades after their initial encounter with mental illness.

The failure to recognize and address the impact of mental illness on family members can have devastating and persistent effects, including the introduction of secondary trauma. Unmindful participants include mental health professionals who withhold necessary information, parents who deny or minimize the impact of the illness on well family members, and friends and relatives who discount their grief. Further, siblings and children themselves may be fearful of opening a Pandora's box of emotions. Mental illness in the family becomes a whirlpool that sweeps up everyone. Granted, mental illness is a powerful disrupt-

tive force, but our collective ignorance in dealing with it certainly magnifies the impact. It does not need to be this way.

We are grateful to the individuals who have shared their personal stories, which offer compelling testimony to the depth and breadth of the family experience. There is a wealth of information contained among these accounts, reflecting both the universal themes that characterize the family experience and the unique circumstances of individual lives. As their narratives convey, once mental illness erupts in families, it unravels the fabric of normal family life and exacerbates and soon overshadows other circumstances. It is, indeed, a troubled journey, but one that can have redemption.

We offer the accounts of eight family members who have close relatives with serious mental illness: three adult siblings, three adult children, and two multigenerational family members who grew up as both a sibling and a child.

We would be interested in hearing from you if you have been moved by the accounts and wish to respond or contribute in some fashion. We can be reached at: Diane T. Marsh, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology, or Rex M. Dickens, University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg, 1150 Mount Pleasant Road, Greensburg, PA 15601. Phone: (412) 836-9684. NAMI and the SAC Council can be contacted at: National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, 2101 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 302, Arlington, VA 22201. Phone: (703) 524-7600. ♣

Rex M. Dickens and Diane T. Marsh