

From: Anonymous

"You have PTSD".

The words stung, even though deep down, I knew it to be true.

All my life, I have struggled with anxiety. And guilt. Feeling responsible for everything that goes wrong. Feeling worthless and unwanted. Feeling like never measured up. Always fearing the worst. Feeling accountable for other people's happiness, trying to please others and take care of their needs, but always falling short. I could never do anything right. Night after night I stayed awake with racing thoughts and a racing heart due to anxiety...all stemming from one source. One person.

The trauma started in early childhood. He told me I was ugly, worthless, and I would never amount to anything. My siblings and I were in his way. He went into daily fits of rage and terrible mood swings, throwing objects at us, yanking our hair and throwing us on the floor, and beating us with the belt (often the buckle-end.) We always had cuts, welts, and bruises. We walked on eggshells, trying hard to keep from accidentally setting him off. We were always trying to please him. Being the oldest, I tried to shield my mother and my younger siblings from his blows, but I was usually unsuccessful. I remember my mother going to the grocery store wearing sunglasses to hide her two black eyes, and long-sleeved shirts to hide the bruises on her arms. I remember her huddling on the floor of our girls' bedroom to hide from him, all of us muffling our sobs into our pillows.

He constantly yelled about money, He could never make ends meet, even though he had a professional career. He borrowed money and bought a piece of land in the woods. He bought expensive breeds of dogs. And vehicles. He made reckless choices with his money, then he couldn't afford to buy shoes or food for his family. He was sarcastic about my mother's job, saying he "was the only one who actually worked for a living." The pattern has continued, and currently, he sends thousands of dollars to political candidates and countless organizations which solicit funds from him, and then he runs out of money by the end of the month.

If in later years, we brought up an incident of past abuse, he usually claimed he did not remember it. Or he would brush it off and say, "Well, I guess you kids turned out okay!" No, we didn't. We will carry those wounds and those scars with us forever. And if he would hear a story of child abuse on the news, he would remark about how terrible it was — not comprehending that he did those very same things to his own kids.

Emotional triggers can really set me back on my progress. Father's Day is particularly difficult, as is reading well-meaning posts from Facebook friends extolling the virtues of their own fathers. When someone pays tribute to a deceased father, pining away at how much they miss him, I think to myself, "Be thankful that you had a father in your life who created good memories for you....mine only knew how to create excruciating fear and unbearable sadness." But something good always comes out of something bad - I learned from him how NOT to raise my own children.

Borderline Personality Disorder affects approximately 2% to 6% of the U.S. population. BPD is one disorder in a category known as Cluster B behavior. It can be diagnosed in the teen and young adult years. Many people with BPD are intellectually gifted. They tend to have a very black and white way of thinking — known as "splitting" — they may be abusive one minute and charming the next. Another characteristic is a fragile ego — the person craves recognition. Oftentimes, they engage in self-destructive and risky behaviors. Psychotherapy is the main treatment for BPD (sometimes coupled with medication), but often these people do not recognize or admit that they have issues; they think everyone else is flawed. They feel they are always right. For example, my father has very strong political ideas from watching his favorite TV news channel many hours a day. He forces his opinions on everyone, and no one is allowed to disagree with him. If I tell him cannot handle a constant barrage of

bad news, I'm accused of being ignorant and misinformed, and told that I "need to pay attention". The main way I cope with this is to try to change the topic of conversation, but I am not always successful. Recently my father told me I needed to lose 20 pounds (he is very thin, himself.) I acknowledged the fact. But I really would like to have said, "Well, we cannot all be perfect."

I've had several people (including my husband) say, "But that abuse was a long time ago! It shouldn't still be affecting you now." It is common to blame the victim. However, when someone has lived in a volatile, explosive situation for 18+ years of his or her life and continues to deal with the family member's mental illness well beyond that, it becomes part of the victim's psyche. It is impossible for an outsider to fully comprehend the magnitude of the impact. I've recently learned to be more gentle and patient with my own progress, even when it's three steps forward, two steps back.

Living with a person who has BPD is emotionally exhausting. You are constantly trying to keep them from blowing up, and constantly trying to keep them happy. It's a moving target. In my case, have been continually trying to "put out fires", apologizing to others for his hurtful behavior. In public, he might initially appear amiable and pleasant towards others, and the next minute he can start intimidating, insulting, and berating them. And if he feels someone has upset him, he holds a grudge forever.

So, it is understandable that I would have PTSD. Who wouldn't, after dealing with a lifetime of this abuse? My father, although advanced in years, is in very good physical health. So, I can anticipate many more years of his erratic and controlling behavior. That is why I have sought out counseling, first at my church and later attending a few sessions at a faith-based counseling center, where I was encouraged to make some self-care choices and establish some boundaries. "Self-care" initially seemed like I was being selfish. But as my pastor explained, "on an airplane, you need to put on your own oxygen mask before you help others with theirs," Setting boundaries can mean politely walking away from an uncomfortable conversation, telling my father I needed to hang up the phone and attend to some task, or talking him it's not a good time for him to come. Some adult children of toxic parents have had to go "no-contact" temporarily or even permanently in order to protect their own mental health. And it may come to that point for me. However, many people achieve success with a combination of counseling, medication, group support (including Facebook groups), and faith.

We need to raise awareness of all types of personality disorders and all types of mental illnesses. Our family has kept the terrible secret of abuse hidden all these years, fearing even worse consequences, but enough is enough. It's time to bring these disorders out in the open. Only then, can real healing begin, for ourselves, our families, and our society.