



**NAOMI RUTH COHEN
CHARITABLE FOUNDATION**

“Living in Fear — My Child’s Mental Illness”

A couple of weeks ago, on a nice day in the middle of the afternoon the doorbell rang. My knees turned to water, my bones melted and my stomach turned over like the sinking of the Titanic. Could this be “it”? Could this be the police coming to break the news that my son was in the hospital, or worse, dead? Thoughts, illustrated in breathtaking color, assault me periodically, unbidden, at unlikely moments. Every doctor I see tells me I have high blood pressure. No surprise there.

Being somewhat versed in Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT), I instantly begin refuting the logic of my panicky ideations: What evidence do I have that our son would harm himself, or be psychotic? None. My heart slowed a bit as I forced myself to walk calmly to the front door. The barking dog is not helping my stability. Fingers shaking as I reach out to the unusually brilliant brass door knob, yet another “irrational thought” looms into my mind; “Will this be the last time I open the door knowing our son is alive and well?” Once again, my heart starts racing like the start of the Indy 500... Sounds are muffled as the pounding of my heart drowns out the Fed Ex man’s friendly “Hello!”. The rush of relief leaves me incautious and celebratory, as I gush “Oh thank God you’re not the police!” (Adding silently to myself, “coming to tell me that our son is dead.”)

The open, kind face that comes to our door a LOT, between my husband’s addiction to ordering motorcycle parts, and the annual Christmas Beer of the Month gift from his parents in Wisconsin, clouds over. He beats a polite but very hasty backward retreat to his purring delivery truck. I am so weak with relief I can’t summon the wits or the words to make the joke that would restore the brown uniformed man’s faith in humanity, or at least, in the lady who answered the doorbell. For the rest of the day all I can do is thank God that our dear boy is okay, and stew over the question: “Is this any way to live?”

It is hard work parenting an adult child with a serious mental illness, the risk of suicide is omni-present. I am convinced most of us deal with post-traumatic stress disorder that lurks in our unconscious and pops out at the least anticipated moments. Even when our kids are doing well, we worry. It is exhausting. Only those families in similar situations can understand, and many of them can’t, because they are stuck in inability to differentiate between a biological illness and a culture whose very groundwater is saturated with a bias towards blaming the ill person and or the family. We are constantly living in a combined state of fear and exhaustion. Conferences like the Naomi Ruth Cohen Conference are a breath of fresh air where many of us come to learn, speak freely, without fear of stigma, and celebrate the successes, support the leaders in research and practice, and simply stop hiding for a few hours.

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