

The FAMILY Files

Insight and inspiration for your family's mental wealth

FamilyMentalWealth.com/FamilyFiles

Issue: 3 Published: January 2019

How could I have let this happen?

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Feelings of guilt and shame filled my mind as I looked at my 14 year old daughter laid in a hospital bed, following an emergency admission due to the life-threatening effects of Anorexia Nervosa. My wife had tried to help me see how ill Lizzie was becoming, but I wouldn't listen. I hoped that it would pass.

After months in an inpatient unit and years in community care Lizzie did eventually journey through to recovery. She continued her education, got to medical school, and is now a happy, healthy, hospital doctor.

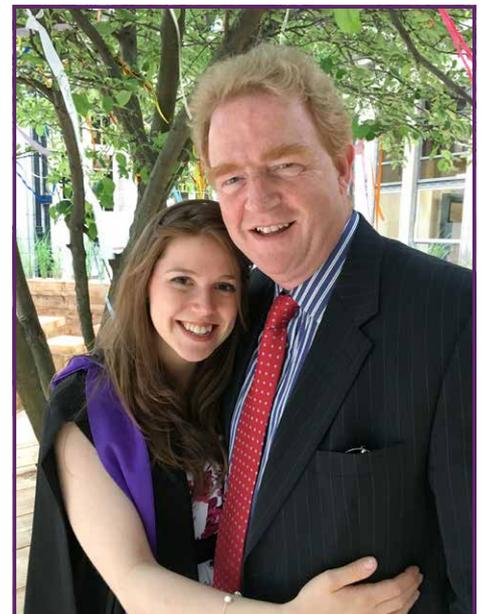
When she wrote her book *Life Hurts: a doctor's personal journey through anorexia*, Lizzie included an appendix in which she summarised an academic paper exploring the different reactions of dads and mums to their child's eating disorder. It was only then that I had the answer to my question: 'What kind of father am I?' It turns out that I am quite a normal father actually. Many of us adopt a cognitive and detached approach, rationalising the illness away.

It's as if we have two boxes in our brains: one labelled 'harmless' and the other 'dangerous'. If we see our children wearing strange clothes or listening to weird music, we put it in the 'harmless' box, assuming it is just a passing phase. But if we see them experimenting with drugs, or risky sex, we put it in the 'dangerous' box and take notice. My great mistake, and that of many fathers like me, was to see the early stages of the eating disorder as harmless, whereas in fact they were very dangerous.

However, over the months that followed, I slowly gained insight into what it felt like for Lizzie to live with anorexia. I began to understand the intense anxiety and guilt she experienced when she faced food or couldn't exercise. Gradually, I discovered how I could join my wife in providing appropriate support for Lizzie as she battled against the disease; and how we could use non-directive coaching skills to help her refocus on her life goals. As she says: I changed from leading her on, to cheering her on.

I couldn't fight the illness for her. I had to love her, believe in her, and help her to believe in herself again. It was Lizzie who had the lead role in fighting this disease. I was just a supporting actor.

I am now passionate about helping other fathers and their families. That's why Lizzie and I tell our father-



Celebrating Lizzie's graduation from medical school

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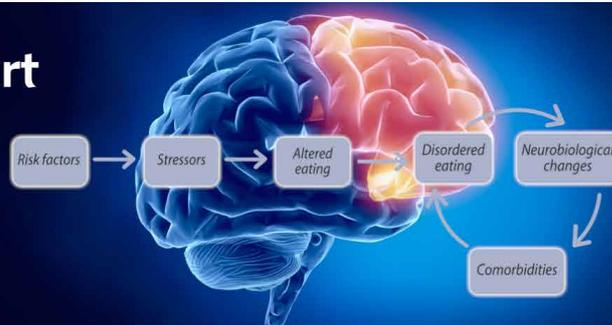


daughter story in public events and on TV. It's why we provide resources on FamilyMentalWealth.com. And it's why we are so thankful for experts in the field, such as Prof Janet Treasure of King's College London, whose recent article in The Lancet says: 'Two major themes have emerged from research focusing on the role of fathers. First, some fathers have admitted that they have difficulties conceptualising eating disorders as an illness. Second, they assume that this is women's business and they need to take a step back to counterbalance maternal overprotection. These reactions emphasise the importance of providing families, particularly fathers, with the information and skills needed to support recovery.' I know, from my own experience, how right Prof Treasure is.

Framework for Family Support

Helping families understand how mental illnesses develop, and what they can do to help at each stage

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To cite: Pollard NJ. (2019) How could I have let this happen? The Family Files (FamilyMentalWealth.com), Issue 3