



By **Katie Rose Guest Pryal** on April 9, 2015 in **HEALTH**

A Mother's Suicide Attempt and the Guilty Burden of Statistics

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Katie Rose Guest Pryal's previous work for The Toast can be found [here](#).

What does it mean to have a crazy mom?

In the Feb. 2015 issue of *JAMA Psychiatry*, researchers published their findings from an extraordinary longitudinal study. "[Familial](#)

[Pathways to Early-Onset Suicide Attempt: A 5.6-Year Prospective Study](#) followed 701 children of 334 parents who had attempted suicide. This study is unique in both its scope and its duration. Its findings show that having a parent who attempted suicide, even controlling for other factors, “conveys a nearly 5-fold increased odds of suicide attempt in offspring.”

You might not see it if you aren't looking for it, but one of the subtexts of this study is motherhood, along with its favorite hobgoblin, guilt.

Toward the end of the article, the researchers talk about the possible weaknesses of their study. One weakness was this: “Probands are mostly female, so we lack power to detect whether the effect of maternal suicide attempt is greater than the effect of paternal suicide attempt, as is suggested by some studies.”

A proband, for non-geneticists out there, is a starting point for a genetic study. In this study, a proband is a parent. But, as the researchers note, most of their probands were mothers. The researchers are saying that the majority of the parents in this study were moms who tried to kill themselves. They're also saying that results of other similar studies show that, when compared to dads, moms attempting suicide have a greater

influence on whether their children attempt suicide.

OK.

Say you're a mom. You've just clawed yourself out of a debilitating depression. Indeed, you only barely survived, because you actually attempted suicide (once, maybe twice). You are so overjoyed to be able to appreciate your family again, to feel happiness again. But now that you're back on your feet—literally—you come across a study that tells you that your suicide attempt might have fucking cursed your children.

Man, you thought the guilt from not being able to breastfeed your second kid because of your post-partum depression was bad. But that guilt has *nothing* on the guilt you feel now.

You think of mythic curses throughout history. Of Oedipus and the house of Cadmus. Of Moses and his plagues. [Of Jezebel cursing Elijah.](#)

Then you look at your sons.

What does it mean to have a crazy mom?

Naturally, the study suggests interventions for preventing suicide in “offspring.” “Offspring.” So

clinical. So unlike the little-limbed bodies that sprite around your house and yard, leaving contrails of life in their wake.

One intervention, *of course*, is better parenting. “Impulsive aggression was an important precursor of mood disorder and could be targeted in interventions designed to prevent youth at high familial risk from making a suicide attempt.” But in order to intervene and treat impulsive aggression, you’d have to pick up on the behavior in the first place.

Guess whose job it is to notice behavioral changes in their kids and ensure such medical interventions occur? Mostly moms. We make most medical decisions for our children—that’s why [we get blamed for anti-vaxxing](#).

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, who [researched gender roles in medical decision-making](#), “In most households, women are the managers of their families’ health.” Only 20% of fathers select a children’s doctor. Only 16% of fathers take children to their doctor’s appointments. Only 20% make sure children receive the care the doctors recommend. And only three fucking percent actually take care of a sick child, compared to 39% of women—with the rest falling on “joint responsibility” or a

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So, you've just survived depression. You survived a suicide attempt (or, let's be honest, a couple). You have new rituals, new medicines, new doctor appointments—all for you, to ensure your health. To ensure that you can be a good mom.

But now you're feeling some pressure to make sure your kids make it through their teen years alive.

What does it mean to have a crazy mom?

According to the latest scientific research, having a crazy mom means my kids are five times more likely to attempt suicide than kids who don't have a crazy mom.

I came across the *JAMA Psychiatry* study as I was ripping through the psychiatric and neuro newswires, part of my job as a reporter of mental health issues.

Whenever a new study is particularly newsworthy, I read it and write about it. This study on early-onset suicide caught my eye because of its sheer scope. So many people studied over so many years.



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But as I read this study, my work got personal—because most of the parents who attempted to kill themselves were the children's *moms*. In other words, the study was the most epic Crazy Mom study ever conducted. And it was published in February of 2015, just months after I kissed my children good-bye, dressed in dark clothes, and walked into traffic to die.

Hey guys, not sure if you're still collecting *probands with offspring*, but I got one for you right here.

The night I planned my death, I knew, to a certainty beyond any doubt (empirical, reasonable, or otherwise), that my children would be better off with a new and better mother, my husband with a new and better wife.

That's a thing I did that will never undo itself. The tricky thoughts that led to the thing I did, those thoughts that chased me for weeks and weeks until they had me convinced (and I'm a very skeptical person), those thoughts will always be there as memories. They had marvelous suggestions, too. Pills. Car wrecks. Pills and car wrecks.

I can't even guarantee that those thoughts won't come back. I just have a better plan this time.

But here's the thing. I'm a proband now. One with

offspring. It doesn't matter what I do. I've cursed them already. It's too late.

So I watch my children closely for any signs of emotional expression beyond the normal, that might represent *impulsive aggression*, even though they're likely too young to even be expressing these kinds of emotions in the first place.

I mean whose three-year-old doesn't toss his banana slices against the wall yelling swears in Spanish?

I can't help myself though. I watch them so closely.

This study tells me that I've planted bombs inside my sons that may or may not explode and destroy us all.

What does it mean to have a crazy mom?

One February not so long ago, I sat through the worst funeral of my life. My best friend's teenaged son had wrapped himself in a cocoon of life-killing gas and gone off to sleep forever. His death was and remains the worst thing I can imagine, and I can imagine a lot.

In case you aren't sure, there is nothing worse than this death of a child, than this death of your only child, than this death of your only child by his own hand. The note he left—so kind, so *like himself*—I don't want you to worry about me any more, things will be better now—nearly ripped his mother in half.

His mother, my dear friend Serena (whose permission I secured to write these words), could only look to herself. What other explanation could there be? He was too young for the world to have done him in. It must have been someone something someone at home, right? Where else could the pain, the unbearable pain that killed him, have come from?

I remember her at the funeral, at the wake, in the weeks after, having to comfort *other people* who would come to her with *their grief over her dead son*.

People are, undoubtedly, the worst.

The worst thing you can say to a mother whose child just died is something like this: *Being here at your kid's funeral makes me want to go home and hug my own child and appreciate him/her so much more.*

That's what parents say to parents of dead kids. It's so fucking stupid. Don't ever do that.

Here's a helpful translation of your terrible words to the grieving mother: *Your dead kid makes me feel really glad about my living kid.*

And when the grieving mother's kid killed himself? Translation: *Your dead kid makes me feel really glad about my living kid, and I'm going to make sure that my kid never kills himself/herself like your kid did.*

My friend Serena told me all of this and more, over the many beers and coffees and let's be honest, more beers, in the years since her son died. We've figured out a few things in our talks together. First, our society really doesn't know how to talk about death. Second, we really, really don't know how to talk about suicide.

It wasn't Serena's fault that her son killed himself. Of course it wasn't.

But if you can take a look into her shattered glass eyes and feel anything else but a guilt that could blow over a building and succeed then you're fit for a luncheon with Hannibal Lecter.

What does it mean to have a crazy mom?

Suicide is a taboo subject. This is not news.

When I first encountered the study, I actually thought to myself, *If I keep my suicide attempts secret from my sons, maybe they'll escape the curse?* Like, is it *knowledge* of parental (whatever, mother's) suicide that causes the increased rate in children? And if I can keep that knowledge from them, would that protect them?

But now I think the reverse is true. Of course it is. I tried to die because there was no one I could tell.

Once I was healthy again, the fact of not-telling appeared before me like a magic fucking mirror. I couldn't tell anyone I was suffering, for a variety of reasons—I was scared of involuntary committal (and losing all of the legal rights and privileges that one loses when one has been committed). I was scared my husband would leave me. I was scared my doctor would put me on medicine I didn't want to take. I was scared of people getting angry with me.

I was scared *because suicide is fucking taboo.*

Suicide didn't almost kill me. The taboo did. Now, when I'm feeling off, my husband can sense it—of course he can, he can sense it when I haven't had my morning coffee—and he asks me about it. *What's up, babe. What do you need.* I might not know the answer to that question. But he has a person on speed-dial who does.

I sit in a wood Adirondack chair my husband made and watch my back-yard sprites with their lively contrails. They zip their bikes over ramps they built. They swing from a rope swing I hung from our maple tree. They holler for me to come play pitcher for their wiffle ball game. These are my offspring. I will watch for impulsive aggression. Of course I will because I can't stop myself. But I will do more than that. I will tell them about being a proband, and about curses, and how to break them.

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Katie is a writer and attorney living in Chapel Hill. She is the author of the Entanglement Series, novels about a group of women making new lives in Los Angeles.



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MaryJane · 57 weeks ago

+29

The only thing that tells me that I did not write this myself is the fact that I do not have a friend named

Serena. Gonna go cry in the ladies' room now.

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murralland · 57 weeks ago

+15

I've been there. All of it, the thought that my sons and husband would be so much better without me.

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blackberry · 57 weeks ago

+55

I'm the offspring of a proband, although I don't know for sure if she ever attempted; the threat was just always there, implicit, in the family fabric. So let me just say: 1) I'm thirty and have never been suicidal, even for a minute, if that is any comfort to you; and 2) unless you let your sons know explicitly (when it is age-appropriate-- I'm not sure how old yours are) that it's okay for them to have feelings about your suicide attempt, it's okay for them to feel sad or frightened or even angry with you about it, then they will believe that their #1 job is to protect you from their own bad feelings. This is a natural conclusion for them to make, because they love you and want to protect you. They love you so much! Dealing with the possibility that my mom might harm herself was and is hard. Doing it while pretending it had no effect on me at all was even harder. So that's my advice. When they're old enough, just open up the lines of communication, let them say some hard stuff to you if they need to, and know that they love you.

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**blunderbusst** · 57 weeks ago**+21**

"just open up the lines of communication, let them say some hard stuff to you if they need to, and know that they love you."

Really great advice for everything all the time.

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tiny_bookbot · 57 weeks ago

+9

I'm the offspring of a proband too, and I did have some dark moments in my teen years, but the harder part was the broken trust between me and my mother for a while. I was 15 when she attempted, and we never really spoke about it again, so all my emotions got nastily bottled up. I was so angry and hurt. And we got through that--we are deeply close now and I love her tremendously (not that loving her ever wavered). But I think it's so important AND so brave to be willing to talk to your kids about this. I wonder how much sooner we would've healed if we'd talked.

But we did heal, and I did make it through my teens without ever attempting self-harm. So did my younger sisters. I think there are scars we carry, but that's part of life--trauma can blow into anyone's life, and it'll leave marks. But we love each other, and we all work hard to support each other, and we live better now than we did then. There's hope, and talking to them gives even more hope.

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rae · 45 weeks ago

+2

daughter of probably up to two probands here.
i sincerely don't know how to feel close to a
human
don't know who made it that way but here i am
and i refuse to reproduce b/c i won't curse yet
another generation
to feel empty and alone like i do

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jaaaneishere · 57 weeks ago

+31

This is beautiful and I am so glad you are alive.

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Joss · 57 weeks ago

+57

I'm one of those proband offspring (who ended up
with mental illnesses of their own) and man, I have
complicated feelings about this.

Whatever my mom was thinking when she tried to
kill herself, however genuine and noble and even
loving her intentions were, that doesn't negate me
finding her after those attempts. I still had to call the
cops and go to the hospital. That trauma exists. I
think a lot of the time we as those offspring are told
to separate our parent from the mental illness. But
that isn't easy, or always possible. Statistics saying
we're five times more likely to kill ourselves aren't a
means of throwing additional guilt at our mothers.

It's a reflection of the truth we live.

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[3 replies](#) · active 57 weeks ago

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blackberry · 57 weeks ago

+32

Yeah, I feel you. There's this weird sense when you have a parent with a mental illness that things in the family are never happening to you-- they are always happening exclusively to your parent. The trauma you, Joss, experienced, finding your mother, somehow gets subsumed into her trauma. You become a footnote in the story. Nobody ever asks.

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Joss · 57 weeks ago

+28

Yes, exactly.

The stigma the author talks about damages everyone impacted by mental illness. You become that footnote, and then the deep taboos around mental illness very often create situations that deny children any outlet. It's hard to have a parent that, through no deliberate fault of their own, isn't a one hundred percent available support for coping with the trauma you have. It gets so much more complicated when they're the source of all that ish.

That's the thing about mental illness. It creates a lot of hurt and pain without there being an easy culprit to assign blame toward.

I have a lot of empathy for the judgement that mentally ill parents have directed at them, but at the same time I think those parents need to respect that their illness often IS something that hurts their children in profound ways. That truth isn't a weapon to inspire guilt, to make them feel bad. It's a reality and something they must be cognizant of the impact it has on the way they raise their kids.

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ash · 57 weeks ago

+14

Thank you for this comment. As the child of a parent with mental illness (depression and anxiety, not aware of any suicide attempts) this article brought up some complicated feelings for me as well. I really feel for the author, and this is a beautifully-written piece, but it's painful to see these facts about "proband offspring" framed as shaming mothers with mental illnesses. As someone who grew up around mental illness, I don't choose for the things I experienced to haunt me. I feel the effects of living a life with a parent with mental illness every single day, in my anxiety, in my wariness to trust or be open with others, in recurring nightmares of various incidents. Sure, I understand now why those things happened to me, that it was not all my fault, that my mother was in pain and did the best she could, but that doesn't undo a thing.

I don't know. It's difficult to express what I'm feeling, but I just wanted you to know you're not

alone. Thank you.

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ratknits · 57 weeks ago

+10

One of the things that scares me most about my depressions is that they will make me unfit to have children, even though I very much want to. I'm really grateful to you for writing this.

[Reply](#)

[3 replies](#) · active 57 weeks ago

[Report](#)



Mary · 57 weeks ago

+5

I used to be afraid of this as well. Working as a nanny helped me out of it--realizing that I could get through a 10-hour day, while out-of-my-mind depressed, and know at the end of the day that the kids had no idea. Small children are blessedly narcissistic. If you don't make it their problem, they won't notice.

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houppe · 57 weeks ago

+31

honestly, just based on my own experience, i have to disagree with you: my own mother has been depressed all my life, and i can't remember a time i didn't know that. kids may be narcissistic, but they're also very good little barometers.

admittedly, i never had a nanny, so i can't weigh in on that relationship. but it seems as though interacting with kids for finite

stretches, even extended ones, and getting to take breaks from fronting, is pretty different from having to be available to them 24/7, no? like, i doubt that my mother's coworkers knew she was depressed, because she put on her public face; but when she got home it was like a little black raincloud descending.

i don't know. i mean, obviously i'm glad my mother chose to have children, or i wouldn't exist! but i think you're kidding yourself if you think living with someone who oozes unhappiness doesn't have an impact.

[Reply](#)[Report](#)

Mary · 57 weeks ago

+2

Fair enough. I think there's something important in what you're pointing to about a public and private face for depression. The kids I was caring for got my public face, and that was good for everyone. I couldn't have kept it up 24-7, and in this situation, I didn't have to.

This is why the luxury of having more than one caretaker makes a huge difference--I don't care how emotionally stable you were to begin with, toddlers will break you if you never have time away from them. My point was mostly to say, it's not a simple equation of mentally ill=unfit to be a parent. You can be prone to depression and be a fantastic parent, if you have the

resources and support (which not everyone has, which makes me furious. But anyway.)

[Reply](#)[Report](#)

RoseCamelia · 57 weeks ago

+18

"Suicide didn't almost kill me. The taboo did."

Very astute. You nailed down that truth. Thank you. I admire your strength. You are surviving. You are a mom. All of it takes strength. Your kids have an excellent mother.

[Reply](#)

[2 replies](#) · active 57 weeks ago

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sednarea51 · 57 weeks ago

+22

I want to engrave that on every doorway. I have to say over and over again: No, asking if someone's suicidal will /not/ suggest the idea to them. They're already there. They've been there. Asking them will come as the most blessed relief that /someone is willing to finally talk about it/.

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sorrycassandra · 57 weeks ago

+2

Yes, yes, this, so much this.

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Aaron · 57 weeks ago

+7

Thanks so much for writing this and sharing your

story. I commend you for your courage.

I'm the rare dad in your story. I take care of my daughter when she's sick. I picked her doctor.

I tried to kill myself a few times when I was a teenager, and I've struggled with depression for years. I am pretty stable now.

My partner is struggling with her own depression and suicidal tendencies. We're both in therapy, plus we're working with a social worker on our parenting.

One of my biggest concerns as a parent is making sure that our daughter has better mental health than us.

So one suggestion for you: please stop calling yourself a crazy mom. I'm sure it was done with a tongue in cheek intention, but it's not cute. It's stigmatizing. If we're gonna succeed in removing the stigma, we have to stop with the labels. Crazy isn't helpful. Obviously you're not crazy, since you're coherent enough to publish an article. Save "crazy" for people who can't string enough words together to form a sentence, or those who really don't have any self control.

If it helps, start talking about what it means to be a person working on getting into optimal mental health. It's a pretty normal thing. Many people struggle with mental health. If anything, we live in a crazy society. It's hard to be sane when society is insane. So let's talk about that more. Blame society

for its lack of mental health resources. Blame society for its problems talking about the challenges of parenting. Blame society for its diagnose/drug cycle that doesn't solve anything, just numbs it.

Also, don't forget about genetics. Blame our genes for depression - most of us who struggle with it are suffering from a biological challenge, not just a social/emotional one. There are a lot of things we can do to overcome our genes, and possible even Change them. There are ways we can overcome our challenges in life, including depression. One of the toughest things about depression (imo) is how it makes you feel like nothing will ever get better. That's a lie. There's a lot we can do to make it better.

Which is why it's important to talk with your kids about the *reality* of depression and the challenges of mental health, not just write yourself off as a crazy mom. That sounds like an identity. Don't let your depression define who you are. Don't give it that power. Tell your depression that it can't define you. You are taking control of your life back from your depression. You are you. You're not crazy, you're struggling - there is a big difference.

The big difference is critical for your role as a parent. Your kids, if they are gonna overcome the statistics, need to *see* you modeling the behavior of someone overcoming her own depression. You can tell even very young kids that mom is working on feeling her best, and sometimes it's hard, but mom is going to be ok because she's going to work very hard to be ok. That's a very good lesson for

kids - that the hard work they do will help determine the quality of their life is a way better lesson than the idea that some people are just crazy and that's just the way it is. That's the danger of sticking an identity on someone with a label like crazy - it doesn't take into account how much influence and control we can have over our own emotional state.

I hope that's helpful - it's not my intention to criticize you, just to point out that the devil is in the details. Even if the authors of the study made it seem that there's no way to beat the odds, there are a lot of resources, interventions, and strategies out there to overcome it. I wish you -- and everyone out there struggling with it -- the best of luck, a lot of strength, and patience with yourself. It's easy to get caught up with being perfect parents, and a lot harder to raise great kids. :-)

[Reply](#)[2 replies](#) · active 57 weeks ago[Report](#)

Kay · 57 weeks ago

+34

"Save "crazy" for people who can't string enough words together to form a sentence, or those who really don't have any self control."

And, um, maybe don't use it then, either? If what we're talking about is erasing stigma? "You're not crazy, because THOSE PEOPLE are the crazy ones" is not exactly helpful to people who have lost contact with reality or have that predisposition or family members who have. People with those experiences exist and are not as rare as you seem to believe and also have dignity and worth that counts for something and

are truly living with an incredible amount of stigma as it is. If you know that people fear going to mental health professionals for suicidal thoughts, is it such a stretch to imagine that people fear as much or more going to a mental health professional for having heard voices?

Honestly, I have a much bigger problem with people saying, "No, no, THAT is the crazy-standard, of course YOU'RE not crazy, that's people with [symptoms of psychotic disorders/severe mood disorders/dementia/developmental disabilities]" than I have with people calling themselves crazy.

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lyricalikons · 57 weeks ago

+19

Dude, you just totally mansplained motherhood and mental illness to a woman who wrote an article on motherhood and mental illness.

You started out by commending her for her courage, but then you proceeded to question the validity of her perspective and replace it with your own perspective. This is her story, not yours, and you shouldn't tell her what to do or how to feel. If you do have a helpful suggestion from your own experience, then you ought to write a comment that is simple, humble, and respectful of her wisdom.

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Gertrude · 57 weeks ago

+31

As another "offspring" of a "proband" noted, please just make sure your children are at an appropriate (older) age before you tell them about this. Get clear with yourself about WHY you would tell your children about it. Telling your husband, your therapist, and your friends-- that is talking to PEERS and indeed, breaking a taboo, and that is important. But telling your kids before they are able to understand what depression is might be . . . sorry to say . . . selfish. When my own suicidal mother told me and my brother about suicide . . . I was seven, and her narrative was manipulative. I came to believe that she was the sacrificial lamb, the pure and spotless, the perpetual victim who had given up what she most wanted (death) in order to please her antagonists (including me and other family members). I grew up thinking that I was a bad kid, and that I had also better always behave, I better do as she says, I better always be happy, I better never be angry with her, OR ELSE she would kill herself. Indeed, this did lead to my own depression and suicidal ideation later in life (but honestly, I remember praying for leukemia at 10, so it had happened much earlier). Ok, so all that to be said -- just because your kids might not grow up to be suicidal too doesn't mean that this isn't a common occurrence. You have nothing to feel guilty about if you do not use your suicidal as a threat to your children, but some parents do.

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Allii525 · 57 weeks ago

+12

I am so glad you wrote this. My mother refuses to

disclose the depth of her depression to her on-again/off-again therapist, and it is so hard for her, and hard for us too. She once told me between my freshman and sophomore years of college that she was suicidal, and her relationship with me and my brother (already fraught to begin with) were the only things keeping her here. I nearly stressed myself to death worrying about what would happen to him when I went back to college and left him alone there with her.

I feel very fortunate that she has never actually attempted suicide, but even "just" the depression is so painful... and the "what if" that's in the back of my mind every day is terrible too. Please keep holding on - you are so thoughtful and strong, even when you don't feel like it.

[Reply](#)[Report](#)

laurenipsum · 57 weeks ago

+7

The Toast is knocking it out of the park today. Thank you for writing this. I feel so grateful to be able to hear your story. I hope you can feel our love and compassion and empathy -- mine and all the other Toasts here -- coming through the internet tubes.

[Reply](#)[Report](#)

Mary · 57 weeks ago

+33

I'm another child of a woman who attempted suicide. I have also struggled with severe depression and suicidality. Some thoughts:

My mother relied on me and my siblings from a young age as a source--almost her only source--of emotional support. She shared her depression, traumatic experiences that had happened to her, and her suicide attempts with me, beginning when I was around 8. I grew up believing that I needed to protect her, that I was the only thing standing between her and death, that I had to shield her from any anger or fear or sadness that I might be feeling. She also had--has--a difficult time distinguishing between herself and me. So when I talk with her about my own depression, she tells me how I am just exactly like her in every way. It makes it hard to breathe.

You absolutely should share your struggles with your children at some point. You absolutely should reach out and tell people about what is happening and has happened with you, for your own sake and for theirs. But I would gently suggest that you talk to your kids about your depression and suicide attempts only after consulting with a good therapist who specializes in working with kids. Young children are not equipped to deal with the fact that their parents are vulnerable. They just aren't. Your kids need to believe that you are invincible, because they need not to have to be invincible themselves. They need to know that you are stronger than their fear and rage, so that they can become stronger than fear and rage themselves. It needs to be inconceivable for them--at least for a while--that you might ever go anywhere. Even if you can't be sure of this yourself, trust me, you can fake it for them.

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Joss · 57 weeks ago

+8

I had a very similar experience and yes, this is really, really important to keep in mind.

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thestonefruit · 57 weeks ago

+2

Whoa.

[Reply](#)[Report](#)

selkiesecrets · 57 weeks ago

+2

Thank you for this.

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Kate · 57 weeks ago

+7

I am so sorry for your struggles and difficulties. You are not alone and neither are your children, and your love for them shines through your piece.

My mother first, passively attempted suicide when I was seven. She also went into traffic (she was jogging, on the 70s-era advice of her psychiatrist at the time). After that, her bipolar disorder was successfully treated with lithium for many years. Her second suicide attempt (that I know of) was when I was 37, and that time she died. Her death and her illness are both part of my medical history and part of my girls' history, and I've told them openly about her suicide (they are 9 and 5), in an age-appropriate way. I feel like giving them information and not

keeping things secret is the best way to help them, and me. (Some part of me wonders if that study controlled for keeping things secret forever, for offering treatment options or not, for openness and clarity and lack of stigma around depression and mental illness.)

I am fortunate that I don't suffer from depression or bipolar disorder and have never had suicidal urges. A mother's depression or suicide (attempted or completed) does not have to be a curse--it is a hard thing for the kids, and a terrible burden and struggle for the mother, but it doesn't necessarily doom them any more than a mother's cancer would doom them to suffer the same. My mom, despite her decades of struggle, loved me and my brother, and I believe, with all my heart, that she fought and stayed alive for us and did the very best she could. Was it always perfect? No. But it was enough, and it was a blessing, not a curse.

[Reply](#)

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voltairineballis · 57 weeks ago

+8

Oh, oh, OH. I remember being firmly convinced my children would be better off without me. My husband and I had an open relationship before they were born, I had picked out my successor in their lives (nonsense actually, the woman had moved on with her life, but no matter how logical a suicide might be, they are never really reasonable). I never came up with a plan more complex than staying in bed until I wasted away, and my husband never let me do that, and I don't know, things changed before I got further than my horrible conviction of my own

worthlessness. I talk about post partum depression at school coop meetings, I deliberately identify myself as the crazy mom, because I learned from my own sick dysfunctional family that we are only as sick as our secrets, but it is still a secret, or at least unknown to most of the other parents in my parenting group, how hard it is to be open about feeling crazy. You can't turn class meetings into group therapy, you have to find the balance between going public with your sadness and making everything about you. Thank you for talking about this, for being one of the other people who talk about this, who will not keep it a secret. Thank you. Also, I wish I could tell you your kids are fine, but I know what that's like to hear, so I won't. I just hope you won't watch them alone, because that sounds lonely.

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hands_flames · 57 weeks ago

+5

"just open up the lines of communication, let them say some hard stuff to you if they need to, and know that they love you."

I am in floods reading all of this. My mother attempted suicide three years ago, which is exactly when I found out she had chronic depression, when I was 23. It is hard to describe the combination of rage, hurt, love and overwhelming protectiveness that I still feel towards her. It is hard to be needed by your mama, knowing she isn't invincible, and seeing patterns in my behaviour that mimic hers.

But since this happened, everybody has started

talking. I talk to my therapist, I talk to my mum and dad, she talks to her therapist, she talks to us kids. I can tell her how scary it is knowing she can't cope sometimes, and I share the ways that I cope. I feel like a surrogate parent to her, my dad, and my younger brother sometimes, which isn't the healthiest, but god damn it's better than the silence we had before.

[Reply](#)[Report](#)

victoria · 57 weeks ago

+4

First of all, this piece was spectacular. Just spectacular.

I wanted to comment on one aspect here: "I will tell them about being a proband, and about curses, and how to break them."

While I never actually attempted suicide, I had what was later diagnosed as episodic major depression with on-and-off suicidal ideation through much of my teens and very early 20s, and I went through severe PPD after the birth of my daughter. Luckily for me, treatment worked incredibly well, and after a couple years of treatment I've been pretty much depression-free and actually a basically content and happy person (I had a brief and not-severe relapse related to circumstantial factors) for the last...eight or so years. I know that's a huge stroke of luck; pharmaceutical treatment worked incredibly well for me and seemed to "rewire" my happiness set point, and I know it doesn't always/often work that way.

I *also* suspect that things could have been a lot

better for me growing up, and maybe I could have avoided or mitigated my PPD experience, if my family of origin had a different attitude towards depression and mental health-related issues. My family was functional and loving, but my folks did not believe in depression as "a thing." (Bootstraps! You need to exercise more!) I asked for help a couple of times and didn't get it growing up (You might not get into a good college if you go see a shrink!); postpartum, when my mental health situation was really an emergency, was the first time I ever had mental health care.

So as my daughter, who is now 10, has grown, I've resolved to pass along three messages to her that I wish I'd gotten, in age-appropriate ways:

1. Depression exists. Here's what it is.
2. People who are depressed often feel like no one cares whether they live or die; that's one of the things depression does. The people in your life *do* care very much about you. This is true even when they seem to be preoccupied with other things, or when you're mad at each other.
3. If you think you might be depressed, or have another mental health issue, help is available to you. Same goes for your friends -- if you hear someone make comments about depression or suicide, there are ways to help them access mental health services.

I basically just try to hit 1 or 3 in a no-pressure way whenever the topic of depression or suicide or mental health comes up in a natural context (through something she reads, or that we hear/see,

or in the course of a conversation, etc.), and whenever I hit 1 or 3 I make sure to slide 2 in there. I know there's no magic bullet, but what I know I want to avoid -- and what I hope I am avoiding -- is this idea of depression as a shameful secret that nobody ever talks about. Even if she never needs the information herself, odds are overwhelming she'll know someone who will.

[Reply](#)[Report](#)

lauralyzer · 56 weeks ago

+3

This blew my mind and made me cry. Thank you.

[Reply](#)[Report](#)

ravenstag · 54 weeks ago

+3

Thank you from writing this. I'm from... ugh... the other side. The offspring. I've found my mother. What can I say... Sure, it changed me. I'd even say that it shaped me.

I just wanted to say that I'm wishing you and you family everything good, from all my heart.

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Helen · 48 weeks ago

0

The theme in the article and echoed in so many of the replies about mothers thinking their kids would be better off without them, and that this is almost a catalyst to suicide, 'successful' or otherwise, is such a profound and solid belief that maybe it needs more investigation by researchers rather than them

standing back and going, "Oh, look! Crazy mothers make for crazy kids and we've proved it."

I said these very words to my doctor when eventually I stopped lying (which I had done because of the stigma of mental health stuff, 10 years ago now, my sense of inadequacy as a mother and not wanting that confirmed by health professionals) but a prescription for Citalopram and off I was sent on my merry way.

Two suicide attempts later, I've never been unhappier, in part because I live with a constant state of anxiety that one step or breath or move or word from me and my children WILL be screwed up for life. I've felt this long before reading this brilliant elucidation of what being a 'crazy mum' feels like.

PND is hormonal but it quickly becomes psychological as thoughts get wired into your mind, I suppose. After years and years, no amount of mindfulness and yoga can end a now deep rooted belief that you are selfish, ungrateful, inadequate and your kids deserve better than you can ever give them.

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Judy · 22 weeks ago

0

Powerful article. I'm here today because I am thinking about committing suicide, & I am worried about the effects it will have on my children. I love them. I just hate myself more, and know everyone would be better without me in their lives. I don't know what to do. Is suicide so different from a

natural death?

Reply

1 reply · active 20 weeks ago

Report



Curren_Belle · 20 weeks ago

+2

Judy, I can't speak from the perspective of a child responding to a parent's death, but my brother attempted suicide about a month ago for the second time. For me, if we had truly lost him, it would have been profoundly different from a natural death.

I don't know if I'm going to say this right, but I don't want to say nothing at all, so here goes:

Because of the intense, invisible pain and suffering that leads up to the attempt, the aftermath of a suicide is extremely likely to trigger feelings of responsibility in surviving family members in a way that can't be sidestepped. You run the scenario of a suicide in your mind and wonder, at each moment, how you could have eased that person's suffering, or made them feel the love you have for them. *I don't mean to say that the effect on me is more important than the pain my brother was/is in, or that the feelings of other people should dictate what he chooses to do with his life.* I only mean to say that having knowledge of the events leading to a planned suicide leaves behind different kinds of scars than those from a natural death.

On a very personal level, which may not be applicable to everyone, I would rather have a

brother who thinks that we'd be better off without him than not have a brother at all. Speaking as the one who would be left behind, being "better" without any given member of my family is not an accurate description of what our life would be like. (And even on the off chance it was, I would outright reject the option to be "better" to any degree if it would cost me a family member or contribute to their suffering.) What I *would* be, without my brother, is inescapably incomplete. That loss would not diminish over time, and there would be no other person who could fill that void in his absence. He is irreplaceable, even if his mind tries to convince him otherwise sometimes.

I sincerely hope that you will give your family the opportunity to help you through this. And if not, then come back to us in an open thread, or in a link round-up and hang out for a little while. We're a pretty fun bunch, and you're not the only one of us who has been there before.

[Reply](#)[Report](#)

Jessica · 17 weeks ago

+1

I cried through this whole article. Because I relate all too deeply. Thank you for being a voice for us moms still struggling to find the words.

[Reply](#)[Report](#)

Bridge · 14 weeks ago

+2

Ok loooong comment here. I normally never

comment but this piece really affected me. First, I want to say thank you for sharing your story, it is brave and honest. Your writing exudes self-awareness and intelligence, and a genuine concern for your children. I can't say whether or not they will be affected or not by your experience, but as the offspring of a pretty messed up proband, I can say that how you communicate with them around mental health (your own, theirs, everyone's) will probably have more bearing on their mood and behaviour than the fact that you have lived through, and may yet live through more, very dark days. When they're older, and if you feel like you want to, have open conversations with them. Ask how it makes them feel. Air out any shame you may feel, let it see the light, and let your children feel heard. I think children tend towards self-blame a lot- help them to own their thoughts and feelings around it. In my own experience, and as several commenters have pointed out, there is often no room for the children to have feelings about their parent's mental health. I was forgotten and overlooked because the alarm bells for my mother were constantly going off and no one could ever notice or attend to anything else.

I was I think 6 the first time, 12 the second, and 23 the last time (to my knowledge) that my mother attempted, or was about to attempt suicide. For long tracts of my childhood, she stayed in an archaic and long since shut-down psychiatric hospital. When she was home (she never had a job, ever) she ranged from lethargic, despondent and weeping to rage-filled, storming and blaming. She was genuinely depressed but I suspect a

personality disorder was also at play. She was the worst combination of narcissistic and self-loathing. I grew up making myself obscure, invisible, compliant and held the solid belief that I could influence her mental health for the better by putting up with everything she did and said. If I was a good girl she wouldn't go back to the hospital. She wouldn't scream at me. She wouldn't stay in bed for a week with her dark hollow eyes. Myself and my father I walked on eggshells at all times. I say this because for me, my existence was consumed by her and nothing was ever talked about, I was never asked how I felt, I was just caught in the tide and felt powerless, a feeling that I have never been able to shake. I was so meek and compliant that no one noticed my behavior change when I endured two years of sexual abuse at school. For me, years and years of serious mental health issues followed: depression, anxiety, panic disorder, OCD, learning disabilities, serious drug addiction, promiscuity, self-harming, poverty and yes, suicidal ideation (though no attempts). It's still happening now at the age of 36 though I am now sober at least. Her suicide "attempt" that happened when I was 23 happened a week after I had a traumatic abortion. I was laying on the couch at my parent's house late one night. I heard the front door click so quietly and I knew something wasn't right. I leapt up and opened the door and saw my mother walking down the street. I chased after her in my bare feet and caught her and wrestled her back home. She had a bag full of sleeping pills, razor blades, and a suicide note. She screamed at me that I had condemned her to hell. I don't remember what I did after that, and no one has ever spoken about it again. So. Yeah, probands

can really fuck up their offsprings. It's a real thing. But I think that probands who talk with their offspring about it, make them feel heard and loved (even if that's really really hard to do, to muster up compassion when you're feeling so low and shitty, I understand) and try to normalize mental illness it is totally possible to raise your kids to be mentally well, compassionate, well-adjusted human beings. It's not that you have mental illness, it's how you're able to talk to them about it that I think would have the greater impact. I get the feeling that your desire to have them be ok is strong and I think that's so key. So is taking care of yourself. I hope you continue to mend and find a place of peace, and remember that depression is not your fault.

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Cleo · 11 weeks ago

0

Thank you for writing this. I am the daughter of a crazy mom. She didn't actually attempt suicide, but she planned it out in great detail, said goodbye mentally, changed her mind for religious reasons, and then told me all about it. I don't think my reaction as a kid was very helpful to her, and being told didn't make me very happy, but reading this makes me really glad she was able to be open about her experiences. Looking back, I don't think I would have realized how much pain she was in if she hadn't been forthright.

The things you write about being sure your kids and husband would better off with someone else sound exactly like the things she said at the time . . . and it was helpful to be reminded that those thoughts,

that perspective, is a memory with the weight of reality. I have sometimes felt hurt by the way she recalls that time, because it's clear that my feelings about it are not very important (in fact I don't think it has occurred to her that I might have feelings about it). That's unlike her. The way you put it made me realize that she was remembering the incident from the point of view of someone trapped in a point of view.

Anyway, all her offspring are adults and still kicking. She may have been a crazy mom, but she was still a *good* mom, and I'm sure you are too. We're still really close. We talk all the time, and my siblings and I talk too. So when that big study gets you down, remember that "everything turned out fine" is TOTALLY an option.

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Dido · 4 weeks ago

0

Does anybody of the "cursed" children have a severe procrastination or a debilitating work inhibition? Maybe there is a connection...

I'm one of the "cursed" offspring too. By chance or not I also suffer from a devastating work inhibition. My working hours are the most painful hours of all my life! Nothing else is so painful, so tormenting as when I try to work. That inhibition ruined me. I procrastinated my life. As if the entire life was a giant work task. With no ability to work I am doomed. Am I killing myself in that way?

I love my mother infinitely, she loves me too. It's not

her fault, she is just the result of her own history. I feel it as a sacrilege but have recently an insight: I've refused to live my life because of fear that my mother would try to take her own life again... To protect her life I do not live mine.

How to live when the one who gave your life wants to take hers!? How to conquer the dying when your own mother says to you: "If you only knew how I wish to die!"!?

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