

“Loving Andrew”:

“You are strong and you are brave . . .”

The tears began spilling down my face, before my therapist had even finished her sentence.

In all the time that I had been meeting with her, I had never expected anything less than compassion. Yet, I had been searching so relentlessly for what I did wrong, that I was certain she would agree with me on some level that yes, I had failed my children.

After all, I dated and married the wrong men, I was too attached to my children - or maybe too detached, depending which child you asked. I worked too much, or worked the wrong shift, or not enough (again, different answers from different kids) I was a poor role model who didn't know how to communicate with my family. The list of my shortcomings seemed endless.

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“When did things begin to go so wrong?” I found myself asking the night I drove home from the hospital emergency room after my youngest son, Andrew, was admitted for suicidal ideations.

No one could have been more shocked than me to find that he was struggling. Since that night, I've examined the story of his life with a fine-toothed comb, finding a thousand examples of my mistakes. (not my courage)

And that's when the self-doubt began.

I fought it. Tenaciously. But when it was reinforced by the voices of my grown children and ex-husband, the fear and apprehension began to plague me.

It's been many years since Andrew first told me that he considered ending his life. During his first hospitalization, I was not prepared for the perceived apathy we received from the hospital staff at our local adolescent psych ward. This was a life-shifting event for me as a parent, so you can imagine, I was incredulous when he was discharged with no plan, few instructions and a handful of prescriptions.

After his second hospitalization within a few weeks of the first, I quickly learned that the purpose of the hospital's psychiatric unit was to stabilize the mentally/emotionally unstable patient. Nothing more. I also realized that I had now entered the unfamiliar world of adolescent mental health, and in that world, my role was advocate and protector - with my job, excruciatingly clear: keep my child alive.

As time went by, there were more visits to the adolescent psych unit than I could count. We worked with many therapists, psychiatrists and medications. Andrew entered a lengthy intensive outpatient program and spent an even longer period of time at a locked psychiatric facility for adolescents.

I can recall only a few of his care team members, as there were only a handful who were part of the team long enough to be memorable. However, not one of them made a difference in the trajectory of his illness.

According to my son, these well-intentioned interventions only made his illness worse. He became elusive in discussing his symptoms and suspicious of the next treatment plan. He trusted no one. Why should he? The only reward he received for sharing the thoughts that taunted and haunted him was another stint in isolation, locked away, medicated to the point where he would not be considered a threat to himself or others.

Upon discharge from long term, round the clock care, doctors continued to prescribe medications to treat Andrew's depression and hallucinations, but drugs only took the edge off. Clinicians expected us to be reassured when they told us that it was a sign of improvement if he only had suicidal thoughts once in a while and the voices weren't commanding harm.

Frustrated as I was with the system of adolescent mental health care, I was also grateful. For even though I could see every day that my son desperately wanted to be left alone, the stakes were far too high for me to comply. Even when he pushed me away & shut me out, as long as he was sitting on the couch bouncing his legs and looking at me like a caged animal, he was alive. And during those days, keeping him alive was all that mattered

Together, my son & I discussed a "safety plan" so we'd both know what to do if things got worse. We included responses for different levels of concern – from grounding techniques to calling 911. I was ready to speed dial crisis hotlines or his therapist, and I tried to be supportive as well as set healthy boundaries, but none of that fixed his depression, calmed his anxiety, silenced the voices, or changed the terrible truth that sometimes, he simply didn't want to live anymore.

When we attended meetings at school trying to determine a plan for Andrew's education, I felt like I was sucking water from a sinking lifeboat through a narrow straw. I didn't care if he failed every class as long as he stayed alive. I didn't care if he stayed home in his pajamas every day if that's what he needed to live.

Please don't misunderstand. It's not that I didn't care if he was an uneducated, unproductive member of society – far from it. But in this moment, I just wanted to keep this amazing, sensitive, and funny son of mine alive until he believed in the hope of his future – a future in which I knew he could be and do great things.

And yet, the visceral, heart wrenching truth was always there. I couldn't will him to stay alive, no matter what I did, and that was the most painful truth I've ever faced.

I wanted to hope for the best as I saw him doing well in school, enjoying his job, and spending time with family, but I wasn't going to be caught off guard again.

It wasn't enough for me to see this tall, smiling young man act as if he didn't need my help anymore. I was determined not to be the last one to know if his depression became

overwhelming, or if the voices in his head spoke in ways for him to believe suicide was a solution.

I was in constant fear, never believing, knowing, or trusting that he was OK. I circled the periphery of his life, watching like a hawk, waiting for any sign indicating I should swoop in to save him. I would describe his behavior by saying, "He seems fine . . . until he isn't."

Meanwhile, Andrew had died a thousand times in my mind. I wondered whether it would always be that way, and whether I would ever be able to relax again. I resided in an ever present shadow of uncertainty of the future. It sat on my chest, crushing me bit by bit, inch by inch, because I knew, even though my son may tell me he is fine, if he wanted to die enough on any given day, he would die.

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Back in my therapist's office, I hear her reaffirm that I am a good mother. I have made mistakes, but all mothers do. She looks me straight in the eye and tells me my son's depression isn't my fault. I agree, but I cannot let go of the guilt I feel for not protecting him from whatever trauma may have triggered his spiraling mental illness.

I tell my therapist that I wanted so much to stop fearing his death and help him start planning his life. I wanted him to hope and believe in his own future, knowing I would always be his safety net. I wanted so much for him – the world, the sun, the moon, the stars.

My therapist acknowledges that she knows all this. She knows I loved my son more than my own life. And she reassures me that my son knows this, too.

But I couldn't save him. At the age of 19, my beloved, beautiful son succumbed to his mental illness and died by suicide.

Depression is a thief and a liar, and because of it, my life and my family will never be the same. I am now a shell of a person. Not brave or strong, in the least. I am told the most courageous thing is wake up every morning to the same nightmare of reality, yet keep going, keep breathing, keep living, even though my child is not.

This is a struggle for me. Each and every day. Maybe someday I will be able to accept that I did the very best I could, and acknowledge that a lack of love was not part of the equation when my son took the final actions that ended his life. He was loved and he loved us - the disease just won.