

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF TO CARE FOR OTHERS

A United Way agency helped Gisèle find support for herself after her daughter's mental illness diagnosis. ♦♦

"Shortly after my daughter started her PhD in psychology in 2001, I noticed that she had become very anxious all the time, and was getting worse. I remember one incident in particular when she called me, paralyzed with panic, and I had to go pick her up. She was hospitalized, and after months of tests, we got the diagnosis: bipolar disorder.

I was shocked and in disbelief. I had no idea what to do. When my daughter was in a manic state, she wouldn't sleep. She walked around constantly and lost weight. As a health care professional - I'm a retired speech-language pathologist - I knew I needed to ask for help right away. But when it comes to your own child, you feel completely powerless.

At first, I looked for help mainly for my daughter. After I found support for her, I had the time to look for support for myself. I went to an agency supported by United Way that helps families and friends of people with mental illness. I attended 10 group sessions, where I learned a lot about mental health. I gained a better understanding of what people with a mental illness are feeling. That helped me put myself in my daughter's shoes.

I also learned how to let go. This doesn't mean you are giving up, but rather that you accept the situation. I learned how to tell my daughter that I was exhausted and that I couldn't always be strong. She then started paying attention to me, just like I paid attention to her. Our relationship has always been good, but this helped



us communicate and work together even more.

"AFTER I FOUND MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT FOR MY DAUGHTER, I HAD SOME TIME TO LOOK FOR SUPPORT FOR MYSELF AT A UNITED WAY AGENCY."

Today, my daughter is doing much better. Bipolar disorder will always be part of our lives, but now we know how to live with it. I have been on the agency's board for six years. After hearing the stories of the families of people with mental illnesses, I see how invaluable this assistance is for them.

As a parent, you wonder if your child's problems are your fault, but you have to let go of the guilt and ask for help. Once you feel better, you can help others." -Gisèle



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