

## My Joy, My Fear

I fell in love with my husband's granddaughter soon after he and I started dating. He was raising her alone and she had all the sweetness, vulnerability and joy a 5-year-old needs to win hearts. She also had PTSD from early childhood trauma, and it showed even then, in her frequent breakdowns, her expulsions from summer camps and her need for hugs on the hour.

By 12 years old, she had spent 11 days in a residential psychiatric facility. It was two hours away and we could only visit on weekends. This was heartbreaking, she seemed so young to be separated from us, but she was stabilized and came home. I later learned that some children spend much longer in these facilities. My heart breaks for them.

After our girl was released, we spent months trying to find the right level of support for her. Online therapy was not effective. She could not sit still, and she could not connect with a face on a screen. In-person play therapy was also of no help. When she was in a day treatment program, she made friends with a girl who called her one evening expressing suicidal thoughts. The call sent our girl into a setback. We finally found she qualified for home-based therapy that we could participate in as a family.

It was difficult to take this step. You worry people think you're not a good enough parent. You worry your house may be too messy to invite counselors in, a common state of affairs when you're raising a teen with mental health needs. But she was getting suspended frequently, the school was running out of resources to manage her behavior, and we were exhausted. And we were getting very frightened at what her future might hold. We needed help.

The in-home therapy is showing some real potential, and we now feel we are no longer fumbling around alone trying to figure out how to address her needs. We have a long way to go, but with more hope to buoy us.

By coincidence, I work for the Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Use Services. One evening when we needed help with our girl, a crisis team responded and a law enforcement officer referred us to a behavioral health urgent care for assessment. This is a facility that, like the urgent care facilities most of us have gone to for physical health needs, often prevents the need for an ER visit. They assess the person in crisis, connect them to resources and recommend next steps. My division is working hard and fast to expand the number of these "BHUCs" so that more people have one nearby.

Many of my colleagues have lived experience in the issue areas we work on, or have loved ones who do. Let me tell you, when you do, it motivates you to get up every day and do what you can to help other individuals and families gain access to the resources that are so vital.

It is satisfying to be part of a dynamic team focused on connecting every family with the help they need.

Children's mental health issues start early and often escalate. I urge caregivers to look for the signs and seek out support as soon as possible.

I see the love you have for your child, your joy and your fear, and I wish you all the very best.