

# **STRONGER THAN STIGMA**

A CALL TO ACTION: STORIES OF  
GRIEF, LOSS, AND INSPIRATION!



**IAN M. ADAIR**

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# Rita Lowman

Bank President / *Tampa Bay  
Business Journal's* 2018 Business  
Woman of the Year

*Recovery is a beautiful thing but it also requires daily management and initiative. Both you and your loved ones need positive reinforcement, every day. You have to keep talking and keep the dialogue going. Together, you can get through it.*

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## **My Story**

The call from the hospital came, my stomach dropped, and every worst fear I'd ever had as a parent rushed in so fast it took me a second to remember to breathe. To move. To act. The doctor started to tell us that we were lucky because our son had overdosed but that he had been saved in time. My eyes opened, all those whispers of doubt in my gut became loud shouts and I recognized this was a serious issue we had denied for too long. I realized two things at the same time: My child was alive, thank God, and he needed serious help.

I remember that moment vividly. The drive to the hospital seemed to take ten years and at the same time, ten seconds. I rushed through the halls and when I reached my son in the emergency room I shuddered to a stop. Our youngest son, the smart, funny, clever child who had once made friends with one of the bulls on our farm, was lying on a table hooked up to machines that beeped a steady reminder of a reality I had been blind to until that very moment.

No one would look at me and my husband—upper middle class, successful executives with a happy family—and think we were going through this kind of thing. You can raise several children in the same house, with a happy family or one that lives in chaos, and have a different outcome for each child. Our family was in the middle of what others would call a good, full, and ordinary life. Two grown sons, a long and happy marriage, and successful careers. We thought we were doing great—until that moment when the phone rang and the nurse's tone told us things were bad and that our son was in real trouble.

Clint was our second born son. Growing up, he always struggled with anxiety. Up to that point, he had been acting a little off but I had chalked it up to late-teens behavior. Those are the years when kids rebel, hide away in their rooms a little more, and want to be anywhere but in a room with mom and dad.

We had enabled him in some ways, but there's a thin line you tread as a parent between care and codependency. When Clint was in high school and he'd ask me for twenty dollars, I'd give him the money

without thinking about it. I'd assume he was spending it on food or gas or a girl, not his addiction. In hindsight, I shouldn't have been giving him cash but I loved him and believed him when he told me why he needed the money.

I didn't have any answers, no one really did in those days, and it was such a taboo subject to talk about twenty years ago. I didn't know anyone else who had a child with addiction and mental health issues. Not because they didn't exist but, if other people were going through the same thing, they weren't sharing their pain, their fears, or their advice. I had never witnessed something like this, never had to deal with it, and, even though my husband and I had achieved great things professionally, in that moment I felt more inept than I had ever felt before.

I had to learn to ask the questions, do the research, and to talk to anyone I could. I leaned on my husband and my faith. I knew that if God had brought my son through this, then He had a reason and a purpose for him. It would be another two decades before that purpose was realized. Those years would be filled with wonderful highs, chased by lows so deep they nearly broke us.

On the dark days, I would remind myself of the old adage that God never gives us more than we can bear; even if, in that moment, we didn't think we could possibly carry that weight for one more second. On brighter days, I reminded my son how loved and precious he was. And in between all of it, I prayed.

My son is brilliant and I've heard him have some of the most amazing conversations with other people. Along with that brilliance came some depression and anxiety, but I thought what he was going through was normal and would eventually sort itself out. I would ask him if he was okay and he'd say he was fine. And I believed him until that day in the hospital, when I realized he had a serious problem with his mental health and addiction.

About 20% of Americans who have depression or an anxiety disorder also have a substance use disorder.

Source: Addiction Center

If you're a parent with a child who is battling mental illness or addiction, you have to open your eyes and recognize what is happening. I didn't open my eyes soon enough. Our child was suffering but, in reality, the entire family was suffering.

## ***Path to Wellness and Recovery***

We had to learn the hard way that most people who suffer with addiction don't recover after one visit to a rehab facility and not every mental illness improves after the first course of treatment or counseling. Many people need two or three stays in a facility and have to try several combinations of medications before they can finally start the recovery process. I know the tendency is to push someone who is hurting toward recovery and I know how hard it is to wait for your loved one to be ready for help. If they aren't ready, the chances of relapse are very high.

It was traumatic in different ways and on different levels for each one of us. My husband and I had to deal with feelings of guilt and thousands of what ifs. We spent many nights unable to sleep, pacing the floors, worried and scared. It took a long time until we realized that we didn't cause it, and we can't cure it or control it.

I have wished, a million times, that I could go back and change the past, but that's impossible. What I can do—what any parent can do—is be there and be present right now. I talk to him every day and tell him how much I love him. Even when things were at their worst, my message was the same—*I love you and I'm here.*

You have to talk to the people around you. Unfortunately, sometimes those closest to you will often say what you want to hear, instead of the truth. A good friend will not just be a sounding board, but a dose of reality. Even though people think I'm an extrovert, I tend to internalize a lot of things. I have a very good friend I rely on and I also have my husband. He has been the amazing powerhouse behind helping our son and keeping our family strong. I've kept a journal for decades and writing down what I was going through all those years has helped me.

Over the years my best advice from it all is: Don't block yourself off from the world. Talk to a friend or a therapist. Find a support group. You are definitely not the only parent that has gone through this. It takes a village, as they say, and everyone needs a village to help them. We have each other and I am very grateful for that. When my husband and I realized our son was not healthy, mentally or physically, we began to look at options to help him get well. For us, it was a family initiative. I have such sympathy for people who are struggling to find help alone because they often feel judged and isolated. Mental illness is as much of a real illness as addiction, cancer, or anything else.

The hardest thing to accept is that sometimes the person you love isn't ready to get help. You can't give up on them. I've met parents who said it wasn't worth their time to keep talking to their child suffering from addiction because they had stopped listening. I want to tell every parent that it is worth your time! It is worth every single word you say. You don't want to be a member of the other group of parents I have met—the ones whose children have taken that last, fatal step and are no longer here. Those parents would gladly sacrifice everything they have to try one more time to get their child help. Don't stop having those conversations. Don't ever stop.

Almost 21 million Americans have at least one addiction, yet only 10% of them receive treatment.

Source: Addiction Center

## ***Call to Action***

There is no stereotypical family with a child who struggles with addiction and mental health challenges—it happens in every kind of family. That's exactly why I talk about what our family went through—to tell other parents that you aren't alone and that you need support as much as the person you love does.

This is not an easy road, not for the family and not for the person who needs help. Recovery is a beautiful thing but it also requires daily management and initiative. Both you and your loved one need positive reinforcement every day. You have to keep talking and keep the dialogue going. Together, you can get through it.

I encourage parents to look for those first signs, even if they don't know what those signs might be. If your child is in their room all the time, talking too fast, not making coherent statements, maybe eating too much, too little or too many sweets, those could all be indications that things aren't what they seem. When something is different in your child's life, ask questions. Talk to them. Don't be afraid to confront them about whatever is going on, and whatever you do, don't turn a blind eye. Your loved one may need your help, maybe more than you know.

I'll never stop worrying that the phone is going to ring at 2:00 a.m. After everything we have been through, our family has made it a mission to stay close to each other. Those are the people you can depend upon and will help you get through life. Keep them near and keep the communication going.

Look around you. There are people you meet every day whose lives are touched by someone with mental illness or addiction. We need to keep having these difficult conversations. Most of all, keep fighting with legislators and insurance companies to get the support and resources people need. We also need better resources for those suffering and facilities for treatment.

Every night, before my husband and I fall asleep, we send our son a simple text: *I love you. Have a good night.* My heart catches in the minutes I wait until he sends back, *I love you too.* And when I close my eyes, I hope he knows that I'm still saying, *I love you and I'm here for you. Always.*

I want people to know we have to keep talking to, keep supporting, and keep loving that person in our life who is struggling. You can never take too many steps to help someone you love. I'm working hard to encourage emerging leaders and the next generation to be positive role models who are open and honest about their own challenges. Together we are stronger.

**Less than a month after my interview for this book, on February 26, 2020, my son Clinton Hooper Lowman passed away.**



After almost two years of sobriety and staying clean, his life was finally on the right track. The medical report came back that Clint passed away due to a weak heart. The condition was consistent with heart conditions in my family medical history—both my maternal great grandfather and grandfather also had it.

I am still receiving text messages and emails from the many lives Clint touched over the years. His desire to help others overcome their problems was evident in his willingness to work in the mental health and addiction field. He was a rock for those suffering and needing inspiration to get help. These testimonials have been incredible for us to hear and have helped us through our grieving process.

I simply cannot thank everyone in our lives who has passed on their thoughtful messages and prayers to our family for the loss of my beautiful son.



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# Ian M. Adair

Nonprofit Executive /  
Speaker and Author

*Mental illness and substance abuse destroyed my family. Watching and caring for loved ones battle these diseases shaped my life. Now I have an opportunity and the platform to change the conversation around mental health from one that condemns and diminishes those suffering, to one of empathy and support.*

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## **My Story**

I got home late, just after 11:00 p.m., and immediately noticed there was no one there. This was strange because my mother had been battling cancer for months and rarely left the house. When she finally got home a few minutes after me, I could tell something was really wrong and that she was upset. She wasted no time telling me that my older brother had tried to kill himself, the university staff had found him just in time, and that he was in the hospital. My world, in that one moment, completely fell apart.

Just getting home that night from a long weekend in Texas was an adventure in itself. I remember the date—Sunday, November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1992—because I was out of town to watch my prep school play our championship football game and check out a university near Dallas for myself while visiting a friend. Neither of the experiences went very well, and by early Sunday evening I was back on I-35, heading home to Oklahoma City.

If anything, the ride home was the most exciting part of the trip. Mainly because I fell asleep at the wheel and drove a short distance between both sides of the highway through a rocky median. A jolt from going over a rock, which caused me to hit my head on the roof of my car, woke me up and I quickly pulled over to the side of the road in a panic. Someone even pulled over to check on me and said they were behind me honking for some time in horror of what might happen. I remember thinking how stupid I was and the guilt that came over me for being so reckless with my life, I knew my mom would be upset when I told her. I never got a chance to share that story with her.

I really don't remember much that happened in any detail over the weeks and months that followed. The shock of the news seemed to paralyze me and left me numb to most things that would have normally bothered me at school or with my friends. The emptiness I walked around with had to be noticeable to the people in my life, but no one said anything. I know there were hospital visits, counseling sessions, long emotional discussions, and sleepless nights, but time seemed to just pass by.

It was my senior year of high school, that time in my life was mostly spent taking care of my mother who was undergoing cancer treatment and doing everything I could to keep what our family was going through a secret from the world. No one really knew that much about us. To us, the truth would be used against us in some way. So my father's drug problem, how he abandoned us, the constant moving from city to city, living on government assistance—and, of course, the mental illness—was all kept a secret most of my life.

At one point, I was even living alone because Mom had been admitted to the hospital for her cancer treatment immediately after my brother was hospitalized. I was on a support

list at my school and individuals or families would bring over food, almost every day. The gesture was nice, but the frequency I actually found inconvenient and disruptive; I just wanted to be left alone. Someone must have thought my situation was odd because a social worker and police officer came by one day to check on me because they thought it as reported I was a minor living alone. It was explained to me that this was a neglect investigation case and they wanted to come in and ask me some questions. For the first time, being held back in the ninth grade was about to pay off because I was already eighteen years old. The police officer looked at my driver's license and said there was nothing they could do, I was an adult, and he wished me well and left the house. I don't recall what I actually said to the social worker, but I know it was not very nice because I remember he walked away frustrated and shaking his head.

Looking back on that day, there were signs that eventually led to my brother thinking suicide was his only way out. The biggest was after I received a call from my father on Tuesday, November 3<sup>rd</sup>—the day is easy to remember because it is my father's birthday. The call was completely random—we had no contact with him for a few

Only about one-third of those suffering from an anxiety disorder receive treatment, even though the disorders are highly treatable.

Source: Anxiety and Depression Association of America

years at that point—it had no significance in terms of substance, but I told my brother about it anyway. He was really upset about me even taking the call and grilled me for a long time about what was said and how things were left. I tried to reassure him it was our absent jackass of a dad just being himself, completely unaware of the reality and still unwilling to pay child support or support us in any way, but

things for my brother seemed to spiral out of control from there and his suicide attempt was a few days later.

According to the latest available data 494,169 people visited a hospital for injuries due to self-harm, suggesting that approximately 12 people harm themselves for every reported death by suicide.

Source: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

When I was finally allowed to visit my brother in the hospital, all he could ever say to me was, “I’m not crazy.” He never discussed his suicide attempt with me, not once, and did his best over the following years to forget or acknowledge it ever happened. My mother became incredibly focused on my brother’s emotional state and we never discussed the attempt; we were all in denial. Looking back on this time, I still feel a deep sadness. With each year after high school, I grew further apart from my mother and brother.

Even though we had lived through so much together, there just was not much connecting our family anymore.

My father was gone, my mother and brother had their own codependent life together, and I was alone. It was soon after I finished college that I first started feeling real symptoms of depression. For me, these included constant exhaustion and fatigue, I was restless and had trouble sitting still, and feeling empty most of the day. I suffered from insomnia off and on for years, but things were getting worse and it was becoming increasingly difficult to sleep. I also was not finding any

joy in things I had loved for a long time and, after a lifetime of playing tennis at both the college and professional level, I gave up the sport.

These feelings stayed with me for a couple of years and then evolved into something stronger. I suffered my first anxiety attack when I was twenty-five years old and it scared the hell out of me. I felt like my heart was pounding out of my chest and, even though I just came out of the shower, I started sweating and felt incredibly lightheaded. I must have slid down the wall in the bathroom because I remember becoming alert again a few minutes later, still in a towel sitting on the ground, and wondering what just happened. The attacks continued for the next couple of years, but I was lucky—they were not consistent or frequent and I was usually at home alone when they occurred. I feared going out in public in case an attack might happen. I knew I needed to address this soon, but the stigma in those days was very unforgiving. You were either healthy or labeled crazy, there was little in between.

Most of my twenties were filled with excuses for why my depression and anxiety kept me away from friends, events, and celebrations I was expected to attend. I struggled with insomnia, months at a time, for close to ten years. My eating habits were all over the place and my weight constantly fluctuated, but the most unexpected symptom was that I always seemed to be in pain and suffered from headaches, daily. I had recovered from a couple of bad car accidents and some injuries from playing sports, the physical symptoms from my mental illness really started to bother me, especially the severe back pain I was experiencing.

Even though we had been through so much as a family, I knew I could not go to them because of how badly our relationship had deteriorated. It had gotten so bad that now we went long stretches of time without communicating, sometimes going longer than a year without talking. In reality we were all suffering, but at the time we could not see it that clearly. Though we all had a shared experience together, we were fixated on keeping our separate experiences and our pain from each other. We became more distant, so every time I got the opportunity to move away from them—usually across the country—I took it.

Telling my own story was never really an option for me while my mother was still alive because I ranked her pain and suffering, both mentally and physically, over mine. She lived a hard life, at the time she had enough to worry about, and I did not want to add to that. I felt that if I shared what I was going through it would somehow diminish her suffering. A completely foolish thought, I know; but, when you think about it, we all do it. When someone we love has suffered a trauma or is going through a really bad situation, we keep our own problems to ourselves, especially if we feel they are suffering more.

## ***Path to Wellness and Recovery***

I think most people who have mental illness in their family seek to discover more about their family's medical history and learn more about those who suffered. I was no different, probably explaining why all of my degrees and certifications are in behavioral science. I knew, from all of my formal education, that I was not alone and that I could get help. It still took a lot for me to finally talk with someone and figure out what worked best for me to manage my mental health, but the work I finally put in was worth it because it got me to where I am today.

After reconnecting with my mother's side of the family several years after she passed away, I learned even more about her struggle with mental illness and a suicide attempt she never told me about. For years, I witnessed mental health and addiction in my family, but it took me a while to come to grips with my own. We all experience mental illness differently. Too many self-medicate, ignore the signs and symptoms, or fear they are alone in their suffering. After you identify an issue, the real challenge comes in how you are going to respond to it.

I knew that, in order to heal, I had to start forgiving myself for thinking I could have done more to help those around me who had suffered or died. My brother's suicide attempt was something I could not stop. My mother's every day battle with mental illness was something I could not fix. My closest friend in college died after a long battle with addiction, and I carried around a lot of guilt for a long time believing I could have done more to help him. Recovery and healing



really have so much to do with forgiveness. Forgiving others can be hard but forgiving yourself can sometimes feel impossible.

My path to wellness has been paved with small successes, teachable moments, and daily affirmations. Sometimes even the little things, like getting out of bed and eating, can be difficult. So I start every day with one simple action—making my bed. I read it somewhere that even the smallest victory or success early in your day can help propel you to keep moving forward. So that's what I did, I forced myself out of bed and then made it. I consider this to be the best advice I ever learned concerning managing my mental health, and continue the practice to this day.

Taking care of yourself is hard work—actually, it's really hard work—and managing mental illness is an everyday and forever process. You constantly have to value your accomplishments more than anyone else and block out anyone trying to diminish you. You have to let yourself know you are doing a great job and, most importantly, you have to be proud of your work and efforts.

My self-care involved addressing some real factors impacting my mental health. I had to remove people from my life who were draining me both mentally and emotionally. That included family and longtime close friends. I'm open to welcoming people back, but you have to recognize that recovery requires the right support system and people to help bring out the best in you. Every major accomplishment in my life has happened after I went through this process and, although I miss having certain people around at times, I know I made the best decision for me.

## **Call to Action**

Around the age of forty, I really started to open up more about my family's challenges with mental health and addiction. The more I shared, the more liberating those moments became, and I felt free for the first time. Everything became clearer in my mind—not just what I no longer feared in my life, but what I wanted from it.

I ultimately became a mental health advocate for a lot of reasons, some are deeply personal and others I'm more open about. My goal

with every presentation, article I write, and speech I give is to end the stigma associated with mental illness and addiction so those suffering get the help they need. Fear should not keep someone from getting treatment or help, but that is the power stigma has over us.

As an advocate for mental health awareness, my mission is clear: mental illness and substance abuse destroyed my family. Watching and caring for loved ones who battle these diseases shaped my life. Now I have an opportunity and the platform to change the conversation around mental health from one that condemns and diminishes those suffering to one of empathy and support.

Every chance I get, I remind people that we all go through painful situations and fight battles many will never know. To everyone working on managing their recovery or mental illness: I want you to know that you are strong, you will get through this. And when you do, be proud of your resilience and progress, every day. I was silent about my depression for so long and kept what I was going through hidden from everyone in my life, even close family and friends. It can take a while until you feel comfortable to share your story, but now that I am there—I never want to be silent again. I want anyone suffering to know—help is out there; you are never alone.

I encourage everyone to speak their truth. Remember that humility, vulnerability and authenticity go a long way in reaching your audience. You never know who your story will inspire, motivate, or even save—so keep sharing it!

**For more information,  
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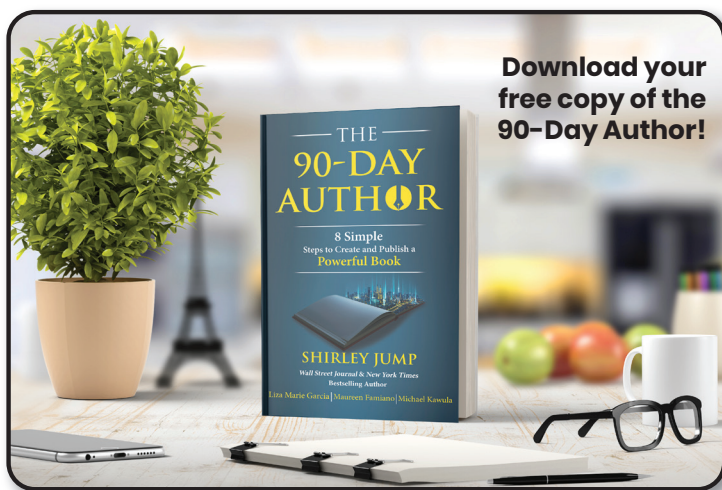
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