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## A SPLIT MIND

### *Interview*

**Sue:** *“I try not to think of my son as a schizophrenic, but by his name. Schizophrenia is part of it but he is also my son, child of God, uncle, worker, just like all of us.”*

**Celia:** I’m Celia Fielke and you’re listening to Messages of Hope. Today I’m talking with Sue about supporting her son through mental illness. When did you first know that something was not quite right with your son?

**Sue:** As a younger person he’d been very sociable, a little go getter. But in his later years of high school we noticed that he was changing. He was becoming more withdrawn and not really communicating. We looked for explanations naturally and so we thought a lot in terms of physical things. Was it something like chronic fatigue? But there wasn’t really an answer specifically and so the trend continued. He became more and more withdrawn and found it difficult to communicate, even to express what emotions he was having. He wasn’t seeing friends anymore.

**Celia:** So how were you feeling emotionally when you’re thinking something’s not right here?

**Sue:** Confused. We were not at all confident about how to try and be helpful or just where to go.

**Celia:** What eventually happened that began to bring some clarity to your son’s mental health?

**Sue:** After quite some time and also him taking an action where he needed to be hospitalized, there was a diagnosis of depression. But even then there seemed to be some realization that maybe depression wasn’t the full answer.

**Celia:** Can you talk about what led up to that first time in the hospital?

**Sue:** When I look back I think God must have had a hand because I assumed at this particular time of day, it was late afternoon, that my son was at work because that was the normal thing for that day. But then his work rang up and said that he’s not in. So I was taken aback and rushed out to his room which was a little detached from the house. The door was locked and I couldn’t get any response so I forced it. I broke in and there he was basically out to it. I could see the empty packaging of what he had taken. He actually came to and started running away and I virtually had to go and try and chase him and say “please get in the car. I need to take you to hospital.” He did get in the car and I drove him to emergency.

**Celia:** So after his time in hospital you still didn't have a clear idea of what was wrong. Did that make you more fearful?

**Sue:** Yes, I was very anxious when he was coming home because at this stage there was still a lot of uncertainty about what was really going on. There were certainly times of questioning should I go to work today or should I be here in case something happens? So you were aware that at times you very much feel that you're taking a risk but as much as I could I would go on with usual things but try and have a plan in mind. Remind my son "Look I'll be back at such and such a time. If you need one of us before that leave a message for me at school" or we'd suggest some action that he would take. In those early years we kept a book, like an exercise book, and either in an evening or early in the day we would sit down together and we'd write maybe four or five things that he would aim to do that day. It might just be have a shower. Eat lunch. But as time went on they became more involved things until after years it would be catch the bus to work! But yes it is quite daunting when you're worried that there is a danger.

**Celia:** After many years, and a second major admission to hospital, your son was finally diagnosed with Schizophrenia.

**Sue:** I remember one occasion, not very long after the diagnosis of schizophrenia, where initially there's sadness but also before long some feelings of relief too because not only is there a clearer path with treatment but I remember a bit of a light bulb moment where I was reading through a list of symptoms of schizophrenia, say there's about 15 things, and maybe there were nine or so things where I thought "oh yes that's what we've seen, that's what he's like, that's our experience" and suddenly thinking "oh that's normal for schizophrenia!" And as time has gone on there have been occasions where maybe my son has expressed a particular fear or worry where I've been able to say "well you're thinking that way because of your illness." So that helps me. It's hard to know to what extent that helps him and yet a comment like that has appeared many times to just help him settle and perhaps let go of that particular worry a little bit.

**Celia:** What are some of the other things you've learnt about schizophrenia?

**Sue:** Well I'd vaguely had this idea of split personality but the more we lived with it the more we thought that's not what it is. But at some stage I heard the expression 'a split mind' which is a lot closer. There are times in something our son would say where there seemed to be a couple of thoughts that really had nothing to do with each other but he was sort of putting them together. So that was a closer concept, a split mind. Things are just not connecting in the way we would normally expect. Also I'd heard words like paranoia but I'd had no idea of the degree that fear, and often to us irrational fear, is just so consuming and restricting and crippling. I'm grateful that he has been a person who will always take his medication. That's an enormous challenge for people when the one they're concerned about might suddenly stop and that just throws every thing further into chaos. But he's done that. He's continued to have very regular support from a GP and psychiatrist. He fully cooperates with doing those things.

**Celia:** How have you found support through all the unknowns, challenges and self doubt?

**Sue:** A constant for me has been prayer. And there are those desperate times that it's hard to even know exactly what to pray for. So often my prayer would simply be help, have mercy on us. And again you do access what help you can get from medical people. And you do get help. It's really important to continue with the other important things in your life.

So my various friends that I can meet up with and have coffee, that really helps me and I'm not necessarily talking about my son. I'm just living and relating and find it helps me keep going. For me, going to church helps a lot. I do feel I need to be there and that's nourishing for me to receive God's grace and strength.

**Celia:** So how does that actually help, can you explain that a little more?

**Sue:** I think the best word for me is reassurance. I know if I'm really immersed in the worry, I'm focusing on me or focusing on my son, I know in my head God's there with us but I'm not really focusing on that and I'm getting to a point of thinking that we are battling all on our own. So just coming into his presence to be reassured. "Yes I'm right in there with you in all this" is enough to keep going. Okay, God's on our side.

**Celia:** It's been about twenty years since you first noticed your son changing from a confident person to being withdrawn, and 10 years since he was finally diagnosed with schizophrenia. Most of that time he's been living with you at home. How do you feel about where your son is at today?

**Sue:** He's getting into his late 30s and it's only been the last two years that he's lived independently! After a few months of a stressful adaptation, he is now coping pretty well with having his own little place. He can certainly manage basic skills and he knows we're just a phone call away. We see him regularly. Nowadays also I see in my son that there's just little elements of enjoyment in his life. Lately there have even been a few little chuckles here and there and you suddenly realize I haven't heard him laugh for years. Look there are just little things sometimes that keep you going. Little rays of hope.

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