

Me, My Mom, and Her Mental Illness

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A photo of my mom

Abstract: Hello everyone, the focus of my project is me and my mom’s experience during the pandemic. My mom has schizophrenia so I think it would give people a look into a life that is often disregarded, Black people with mental illnesses. I want to show how the lockdown affected us from both of our perspectives because I had to move back home in the middle of the school semester, during the pandemic so I could take care of her. Our story touches on a lot of intersectional social issues such as race, mental illness, and poverty. It also highlights the lack of help for this particular group of people, as well as the pre existing social conditions that were simply made more visible during the pandemic.

Appendix: The methods used for obtaining the information in the “Fast Facts” and “Antipsychotics” research portions of this project were articles which are cited in the

bibliography section. All other portions of the project are based on the personal experiences of my mother and I.

I'm going to start with some backstory information to put things into context. My mom has had Schizophrenia my whole life and got it while serving in the army. I am an only child. My parents divorced when I was young and my father passed away a few years ago so my family unit has always consisted of just me and my mom. We're estranged from our other family members because there is a lot of stigma around my mom having a mental illness. Furthermore, my mom doesn't have a partner and she's very anti-social so I'm her main source of social interaction.

schiz·o·phre·ni·a

/ˌskɪtsəˈfrɛnēə, ˌskɪtsəˈfrenēə/

nounPSYCHIATRY

1. a long-term mental disorder involving a breakdown in the relation between thought, emotion, and behavior, leading to faulty perception, inappropriate actions and feelings, withdrawal from reality and personal relationships into fantasy and delusion, and a sense of mental fragmentation.

Life Before the Pandemic

Picture this:

It's 3 in the morning. I'm 6 years old sitting on our bed that's in the kitchen. The rest of the house is packed away in boxes. I only have access to the bathroom and the kitchen. I'm watching Adultswim, eating boxed dirty rice dipping sweat because it's hot in Texas. Cowboy Bebop on the television and my mom has on jeans and a sweater, Afro toward the ceiling. She hasn't been asleep in 3 days. Dark circles, surround her eyes and she's blasting music from her old record player, Donna Summer, The Family, Ohio Players. She looks at me as she grooves to the beat of the soundtrack of her youth in the 70s. I look back and her coffee stained smile puts me at ease. My mother was known to have a temper. This is a typical Wednesday night. I have school in the morning but none of that really matters. I always get perfect attendance.

Picture this:

I'm 10 in the 5th grade. We've been staying with my grandma for 2 weeks. She lives in an independent housing development for senior citizens. We're not supposed to be living there but we're homeless again. My mom has to do a storage run and enjoy long car rides so I join her. I have to get my textbooks for school. It's the only thing I've ever had any control over, grades.

School, my paradise away from home where I can blend into the background. I've never had a lot of friends but my teachers always liked me. My mom is having an episode which seems to be ingrained in her personality at this point. She's screaming and cursing in her made up language that sounds like a mixture of German and gibberish. She wants me to put the textbooks into storage. I tell her I need them and she tells me we'll come back. But my mother is unpredictable and not very reliable so I put no trust into her words and cling to the books, my arms wrapped around their spines. My mother becomes frustrated and gets in the car, I go to open my side and it's locked. I yell for my mom to open the door but she starts to drive. I run beside the car clawing at the door handle but she's going too fast and I'm out of breath. I watch the car peel off until it's no longer in sight and start to cry. "How could she leave me?" Replayed in my head as I started to walk down the highway. Tears streamed my face and I didn't know my way back to my grandmas but I knew I couldn't stay at the storage facility. A Hispanic lady pulls her car over and asks me if I need help. I see the rosary beads wrapped around her rearview mirror and nod yes. Me and my mom have hitchhiked with strangers several times before so I hop in her car. She's very kind and soft spoken, nothing like my mother. She's asking me questions to try to access the situation but all I can give her is my grandmother's address. We make it to 35 Seniorway and I thank her for her kindness. She wishes me well and we part ways. I thank Jehovah for sending me one of his angels and proceed to tell my grandmother what happened. She freaks out. Long story short, my mother had a change of heart and went back for me but I was gone so she called the police. They ended up coming to my grandma's and taking my mom to a mental hospital because she clearly was not taking her medication. She was there for a month. I missed my mother but it was also a relief to have a break from her.

Picture this:

I'm 14, a freshman in highschool and my mom comes to pick me up from band practice. We live in North Carolina. It's 90 degrees outside & my mom gets out of the car she's wearing a brown suede dress down to her ankles, black combat boots, sunglasses, a face mask, black leather gloves, and a black velvet hat with parakeet feathers glued to the sides. One of my friends is concerned and asks if she's hot but I tell him she always dresses like that and make a quick getaway to our vehicle.

Picture this:

I'm 16 and homeless

Me and my mom had been living out of her car and showering at the YMCA. It's fall in New York and slightly chilly outside. Me and my grandma got into an argument and she called my high school and told them I was homeless to spite me. They set me up at "A Friends House"-a

short term shelter for homeless or runaway youths. None of the parents here care about their children. None of them try. My mom didn't try. 2mo later I was freed from my "youth support" prison and moved into a studio apartment located inside a basement with my mom.

Picture this:

I'm 18 visiting my mom in a mental hospital. I don't know how I feel about anything and my dad recently died. The doctor tells me my mom isn't cooperating and I'm not surprised. My mom doesn't take orders from anyone. She painted her face black and told me she was ready for war. It takes about a week for the medication to kick in.

Picture this:

I'm 20 visiting my mom at a different mental hospital. She's been there for about 2 weeks. I give her a hug because I miss her so much. They have her on really strong tranquilizers. Her cheeks are sunken in and her eyes glazed over. She's lost about 20pounds since being there and tells me she doesn't like the food. She gives me a weak smile and tells me she's happy to see me. She's talking really slow and tells me she's tired. The medication is really strong. I smile back and hold back tears. It's extremely painful for me to see my mother in this state, in this place, again. I sit with her for an hour as she struggles to keep her eyes open. I finally leave walking past the other patients who have a greater resemblance to zombies than humans. Shells of themselves. Before I walk to my friend's car I stop at the bathroom. Lock the door and cry. Breathing heavy through sobs. I don't know what to do or how to help her. So hopeless.

Antipsychotics

•Chlorpromazine (Thorazine)-Drowsiness, dizziness, lightheadedness, dry mouth, blurred vision, tiredness, nausea, constipation, weight gain, or trouble sleeping may occur.

•Fluphenazine (Prolixin)-drowsiness, lethargy, dizziness, nausea, loss of appetite, sweating, dry mouth, blurred vision, headache, or constipation. Serious Side effects: feelings of restlessness, mask-like facial expression, greatly increased saliva, tremors, unusual mental/mood changes (such as depression, worsening of psychosis), confusion, unusual dreams, frequent urination or difficulty urinating, vision problems, weight changes, swelling of the feet or ankles, fainting, skin discoloration, butterfly-shaped facial rash, joint pain, or seizures.

- Haloperidol (Haldol)- Dizziness, lightheadedness, drowsiness, difficulty urinating, sleep disturbances, headache, and anxiety may occur.

- Perphenazine (Trilafon)- mild dizziness or drowsiness; blurred vision, headache, sleep problems (insomnia), strange dreams, loss of appetite, vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, increased sweating or urination, dry mouth or stuffy nose, breast swelling or discharge, mild itching or skin rash.

- Thioridazine (Mellaril)- dizziness, drowsiness, difficulty urinating, restlessness, headache, blurred vision, dry mouth, stuffy nose, vomiting, constipation, diarrhea, breast swelling or discharge, changes in your menstrual periods, weight gain, swelling in your hands or feet, impotence

- Thiothixene (Navane)- dizziness, drowsiness, feeling restless or agitated, sleep problems (insomnia), breast swelling or discharge, changes in your menstrual periods, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, changes in weight or appetite, dry mouth, increased thirst, impotence, or loss of interest in sex.

- Trifluoperazine (Stelazine)- drowsiness, dizziness, anxiety, dry mouth, stuffy nose, blurred vision, headache, tiredness, constipation, weight gain, trouble sleeping (insomnia), breast swelling or discharge, missed menstrual periods, swelling in your hands or feet, impotence, or trouble having an orgasm.Serious side effects: twitching or uncontrollable movements of your eyes, lips, tongue, face, arms, or legs; tremors, drooling, trouble swallowing, problems with balance or walking; very stiff (rigid) muscles, high fever, sweating, confusion, fast or uneven heartbeats, feeling like you might pass out, seizures, yellowing of the skin or eyes; urinating less than usual or not at all, pale skin, easy bruising or bleeding, joint pain or swelling with fever, swollen glands, muscle aches, chest pain, vomiting, unusual thoughts or behavior, and patchy skin color, slow heart rate, weak pulse, fainting, or slow breathing (breathing may stop).

This is a list of the most popular antipsychotic medications used to treat schizophrenia and includes the long list of side effects that come with each one. The purpose of this part is to point out some reasons as to why people with mental illnesses might not want to stay on their medication. Some side effects that my mom has personally had to deal with are consistent drowsiness, dizziness, tremors, weight gain, loss of motivation, shortness of breath and nightmares. The most unsettling one for my mom was the tremors. No one should have to choose between hallucinations or delusions and a permanent nerve disorder.

Fast forward to the pandemic

Poem 1: Everything was the same

I chuckled at the world as my everyday reality bled into the lives of the middle class. Food pantries have never been foreign to me. Government assistance lines where acquiring section 8 felt like the lottery. Can I trade you some food stamps for money, because the products with the red label are sold out again. People are starving in the streets, sleeping on the concrete but this has never been foreign so why should I worry about you when you never cared about me? Welcome to my cookie cutter piece of poverty, I hope you enjoy your stay here, until the government sets you free. Until life returns to normal and the memories of your misfortune are a bad dream. Me and the rest of the forgotten will be waiting for the people to pull back the curtain exposing the rotted roots of our societal tree.

(It's a poem about how everyone became poor during the pandemic but me & my mom were already poor so our lives didn't change much.)

Picture This: When the virus first hit my mom felt terrible because she became even more isolated in the house. Before the pandemic she didn't leave the house much but would go out to eat at a restaurant once a week to get social interaction and maintain a relationship with the outside world. However, when everything shut down she couldn't do that anymore. Food is one of the few sources of comfort she has in her life so when restaurants shut down it left her depressed and lonely. We also don't own a car so she relied mostly on a senior citizens van that only goes to certain locations so it was hard for her to get to essential places such as the bank in order to pay bills.

Poem 2:

Quality Time
& that was our thing
Whether it be
Jumbos
New York
Fortune
Saffron
Golden Corral
Buffet
We always went
To buffets
& we always
Had 2 plates

Plus dessert
& that was our thing
Watching
Netflix
Hulu
Cable
Movies
Shows
Except for
Horror
That was our thing

Poem 3:

Pandemic
One thing
I've noticed
Since the Virus
& life was
suspended
Borders unbroken
Barriers unspoken
There are no
Old people
On the train
Mostly the
Young &
The healthy
Dare defy
The safety
Of their
Solitude
For human touch.

Picture This: I hadn't seen my mom in a month because I didn't want to spread any unwanted pathogens. Unfortunately, when you live in low income housing it can be hard to social distance. With a hundred neighbors all within the same building, how is she supposed to cut out

space for herself. Check the mail, germs. Do the laundry, germs. Use the elevator, germs. With so many shared facilities, how is she supposed to stay safe? The virus will spread the same way the bed bugs did.

Picture This: My mom calls me, coughing violently. She can barely speak. My heart drops because all I can think about are the thousands of people who already lost their lives to the virus. If my mom died no one would know. No one would notice. I'm the only person who cares. Unless my neighbors' noses give way to the smell of rotting flesh. I would be the one to find her body. I get off the phone and cry outside. The room I rent is tiny and I don't want people to hear me. I ask my friends for a favor and they agree to drive me two hours north to my mother's apartment. She refuses to go to the doctor so I come bearing gifts. Vitamin C pills, Tylenol, cough drops, oranges, vegetables, fruits, honey, lemon, ginger. I go straight to the kitchen and start making lentil soup. I will heal her from the inside. After a few days, my mom's fever breaks, I've been closely monitoring her temperature. She has a bit of a lingering cough but I think she's going to be okay.

Poem 4:

Cold, wet down
My face
Past my cheek
To my lips
My eyes must
Be salty
And out of
Nowhere idk
Why I'm crying
Why is my heart so heavy?
I pressed my palms
Against my eye sockets
Until they were soaked
And my breathing
became depressed
I just want these feelings to
Melt away.

Poem 5:

Last night I cried in bed

for about an hour
While listening to sad music
And writing poetry.
I read self help articles
And scrolled through memes
Until the flood subsided
The pain was temporarily gone
& I was washed over by fatigue

(These poems are about how I was constantly sad during this time. Between the transition to online learning, trying to maintain my gpa at school, and worrying about my mother, my mental state was pretty much a mess. I was constantly stressed and had several breakdowns)

2 weeks later(April 24th) Moving Day:

I'm back in Brooklyn for three days and all I can think is what am I doing here? My landlady is a kind woman who understands I currently have no income. Normally I'm a waitress but restaurants are shut down and getting through to unemployment has been a difficult journey. I'm on a rent freeze but my mother needs me. What am I doing here? I tell her I'm moving, we hug and say our goodbyes. She will be missed. My friends and I proceed on the journey 2 hours north once more but this time my life is piled in the trunk and backseat. I arrive at my destination. My mind at ease, this is where I need to be.

Now I will talk about some of the research I found in order to contextualize my personal narrative into some broader issues:

Fast Facts:

- Experts say people with severe mental illness face serious issues during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- People with mental illnesses have lifestyles that increase their risk for contracting the new coronavirus.
- They have more underlying health conditions that raise their risk for developing more serious cases of COVID-19 if they contract the virus.
- Mental health issues often coincide with a unique set of challenges that make it difficult for people to access even the most basic necessities, such as food, medications, stable housing, and healthcare.
- Furthermore, Black communities have always been under-resourced for mental health access which has been intensified by the pandemic.
- Black patients who come for mental health services do not receive the same level of care as nonminority groups. African Americans who come in complaining of symptoms of mood

disorders are less likely to get that diagnosis when they walk out. Only one in three Black or African American adults who need mental health care receive it.

--In addition to this, as most of us already know, people of color are being affected by Covid 19 at higher rates than their white counterparts.

--Nationwide, Black people are dying at 2.5 times the rate of white people. They are also at a higher risk of being homeless.

--Combined, all of these factors put Black people with severe mental illness at a much higher risk for contracting and transmitting the new coronavirus and dealing with COVID-19.

Conclusion: People with mental illnesses are often cast away by society as broken or devalued. This is especially true for Black people who are on the lower end of the societal hierarchy. For my mother the government continues to fail her time and time again. There isn't much of a support system and the health care system often lacks compassion for people like her. During this time many of my mother's physical and mental health doctors canceled appointments and still continue to cancel appointments. Since it's so easy for this group to slip through the cracks and become forgotten about, a lot of the pressure falls on myself as well as other caretakers and family members to step up where society has not. I do mental health check-ins with her and make sure she's taking her medication as well as ensuring that whatever side effects linger are manageable. I also make sure she stays on top of her hygiene. At times it was very hard for me to create stability for her or myself, however through personal research and trial and error I have managed to create routine and stability in our lives. Although I have been successful with this aspect of our lives, as you can see sometimes I have to sacrifice my own well being in order to make sure she's taken care of. The main thing I want people to take away from this research project is the inequalities that are faced by Black people with mental illnesses and how other people in their lives have stepped up to fill in the gaps. Thanks for reading.

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