

## **What it's like caring for loved ones with mental illnesses**

From the Mental health awareness in South Jersey series

NICOLE LEONARD Staff Writer, The Press of Atlantic City

*Original article link with picture:*

[http://www.pressofatlanticcity.com/wellness/what-it-s-like-caring-for-loved-ones-with-mental/article\\_95e3f6e5-71b7-50a1-8896-d8f3fedd1b73.html](http://www.pressofatlanticcity.com/wellness/what-it-s-like-caring-for-loved-ones-with-mental/article_95e3f6e5-71b7-50a1-8896-d8f3fedd1b73.html)

The diagnosis changed his life.

It changed his mother's, too.

Fern Fine and her husband, Scott, knew little of mental illness before their adult son was diagnosed with a combination of schizophrenia and a mood disorder.

A psychologist at a police department told them he was very sick "and will need to be looked after for the rest of his life," she recalled.

Fine felt terrified and alone. And she joined the more than 20 percent of the U.S. population providing care to people with disabilities, old age and physical and mental illnesses.

South Jersey families say raising awareness of mental health and support resources can better prepare other families for when a loved one develops an illness.

The Fines, of Atlantic City, help run programs and support groups for the Atlantic-Cape May County chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

Fern Fine found solace and understanding through her involvement with the alliance and its members, but it took a long time.

She said her son, as a teenager, developed drug abuse problems, which is not uncommon in people with mental illnesses.

"Drug usage can camouflage mental illness, and that is quite daunting," she said. It was after one psychiatric evaluation while her son was imprisoned that an expert told the Fines their son had a severe mental illness.

"Part of me was relieved to know clearly what was happening. There was no more guessing," she said. "But it's a double-edged sword. It was pure and utter disappointment. I can't even fully describe what that felt like."

Like with physical health, mental health comes with insurance stipulations, hospital requirements for psychiatric treatment and laws against the distribution of health information.

"Some nurses and doctors in the hospitals would say, 'You didn't hear it from me, but this is what you need to do,' and that's how I learned to navigate the system," she said of how she learned the backroads and unofficial tips on how to get her son immediate care.

Tina Watkins, of Northfield, was barely 4 years old when her father was diagnosed as bipolar with schizoaffective disorder around the time her parents got divorced.

He was hospitalized, and Watkins and her older sister lived with their grandparents.

Watkins remembers her father sleeping, taking medications, being almost comatose — a hard departure from the fun-loving man she had known.

By 12 years old, the sisters moved back with their father. Still a child, Watkins did the food shopping, cooking, cleaning and paid the bills.

When classmates went to the mall or shopped for prom dresses, she made sure her father took his medications.

“It got very real for me,” she said. “I didn’t have much of a childhood, but you’ve got to do what you’ve got to do.”

But caring for a loved one with mental illness can be more than taxing. It may spread.

Experts at the National Center on Caregiving at the Family Caregiver Alliance in California say research shows family members who provide care to those with chronic or disabling conditions are themselves at risk for emotional, mental and physical health problems.

About 16 percent of caregivers feel emotionally strained, and 26 percent said taking care of a loved one is hard emotionally.

Watkins learned from experience.

On a recent Friday morning, she played with her young rescue cats.

Her front porch is decorated with bright flowers and green plants. A vegetable garden takes up most of the backyard fence.

“I get out and dig in the dirt. I go back to the basics,” she said. “I plant my gardens, flower, vegetables. It is the simplest thing. It helps me just erase everything going on.”

She has found support in her fiancé, Curtis Ray Seitz, her sister and nearby family.

And she recently moved her father to a permanent home in Sicklerville, Camden County, where he is doing well.

Fine found support in family and friends, especially those who know exactly what it’s like to care for someone with a mental illness.

“Nobody teaches us about this,” she said. “We didn’t ask for this, but you learn.”