

3 Views of Evolving Relationships in the Transition Years:

A Mother and 2 Siblings

A MOTHER'S PERSPECTIVE

Raising four children is a challenge for all parents, but when one child has significant mental health issues, it is even more complicated. Our goal has always been keeping our family just that: a family. For Nathan, our son with autism spectrum disorder, severe anxiety, impulsivity, obsessive compulsive disorder, pervasive developmental disabilities, and "episodic rage disorder," life is often overpowering. We work hard to maintain his natural supports, including connections with siblings and extended family.

We never know what sends Nathan into a frenzy or rage, and find ourselves working hard to avert anything unexpected. We are determined to make sure that he and his siblings have a normalized relationship. Fortunately, our children have always gotten along well and accepted Nathan despite his challenging and even dangerous behaviors.

As a teen, Nathan experienced extraordinary difficulties, from academic struggles to isolation from former friends, and outrageous eruptions of anger. He refused to go anywhere where there were crowds, even to restaurants or movies. He became increasingly violent at home, punching holes in walls, kicking tables, and tossing dishes at the slightest provocation. At school, he knocked over signs and even kicked others. Nathan's anger and inability to calmly voice what he was feeling caused him to act out in ways that were not safe for him or for others. We went to top-notch doctors, but his mental health diagnoses and co-morbid developmental disabilities made treatment exceptionally difficult. Still, his siblings accepted him and tried to coax him to accompany them when they went out with

friends. Occasionally, Nathan would go with them, but often they came home early because Nathan's anxiety level would change for the worse.

Nathan could be charming and thoughtful, even tender towards pets and younger kids. That, however, could change in a flash. When Nathan was placed in a day treatment program, his siblings willingly joined him at family therapy sessions, anxious to help as they could. When Nathan was placed in a residential treatment program out of state, it was sad yet comforting for his siblings. Our household was calm and quieter then, but as one of our kids pointed out, "it's just not the same without him." During a school break, we took the whole family to visit Nathan, and they were clearly happy to be together. My husband and I visited Nathan once a month, spending weekends with him so we could maintain normal family connections, even though it meant the other kids had to have someone stay with them at home. It was disruptive to family routine, but everyone accepted it.

When Nathan's erratic behaviors resumed shortly after coming home, he was placed in a group home where he found success in a structured environment. He graduated from high school with a modified diploma, in great part because of his developing talent as a glass artist. However, his efforts at employment, even with a job coach, were disastrous. He refused to wear the uniform required and made co-workers, especially women, uncomfortable by staring at them. He upset his siblings by making fun of them, but they seemed to recognize that as part of his mental illness and were able to accept him despite his negative comments.

At 19, Nathan moved into an apartment complex for people with mental illness. However, he was quite vulnerable to others. Within months, he was befriended by people who convinced him they should move in with him. They convinced him to go away with them, stole his checkbook, and fraudulently spent tens of thousands of dollars before we even knew it. We filed a missing person report; his brothers called anyone who might know where he was, and drove around looking for him. After locating him, it took six separate psychiatric hospitalizations before Nathan was placed in a group home, where he is stable and enjoying life and the occasional visits with his siblings.

A SISTER'S PERSPECTIVE

When my brother Nathan became a teenager, our previously close relationship began to change, and he seemed angry at me for reasons that made no sense at all. Though his development stalled, his temper and frustration grew. He was increasingly inappropriate in public places and his mood could shift from happy-go-lucky to violent rage at the drop of a dime. I wanted to hang out with my brother, but he was unkind and unwilling to spend time with me. My parents explained his behavior to me as best they could, and I recognized he was not like my other brothers. It was hard explaining Nathan to my friends, and though I had people over to our house occasionally, I preferred spending time elsewhere. It was just easier to meet friends anywhere else than being at home where Nathan would bother us.

As a family, we met with therapists and doctors to help Nathan, but the

process was difficult for everyone. Some of the therapists were terrible, yet we all went to family sessions anyway hoping it might help. Nathan seemed to be angrier with every passing day and we never knew why. My parents were struggling to figure out how to keep my brother afloat in a world that was not designed to help him at all, and they had to go through some experiences that are unfathomable to most parents. They sent him to other schools and lockdown facilities, and even relinquished his care into the hands of the state when it seemed like it was their only option to get him the treatment he needed. Despite all of that, I never felt like I missed out on my childhood. In fact, I would argue I am a better person today because of it. It was never easy having an older brother with mental illness, but I sincerely doubt that any of us would be as patient, caring, strong and resilient as we are today without my uniquely difficult older brother.

A BROTHER'S PERSPECTIVE

I was an independent teenager and had my own social and sports-related activities, so I was not at home with Nathan as much as when we were children. It was difficult for my friends to understand him. Introducing Nathan wasn't anything like "Hi, this is my brother and he has learning disabilities and mental illness." I just said, "This is my brother." But his anger and lack of control were embarrassing. He was a handful, and very difficult to be around very long, so staying away from home was best for me.

Being close in age, I tried to help him, but he is too headstrong to effectively influence. He is probably in the best situation of his life right now. But I do feel that at some point someone is going to have to take over my mother's role as guardian, and it might as well be me. While I don't have much regular contact with Nathan now, I could if it were necessary.

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