Raising Happy Kids Despite Coping With Bipolar

by KIKI WOODHAM

Being a Mom With Bipolar

“You are SO cool, mom. Like, I don’t even have words to explain how awesome you are.”

A week later, I’m still savoring this. My oldest daughter is ten, and she really believes I’m amazing. She gushes about my coolness, both to me and to her friends.

Yep, I still have a few more years before she comes to the conclusion that I am the stupidest, lamest, most boring person in the world and when she grows up she wants to be ABSOLUTELY NOTHING LIKE ME.

I remember that feeling all too well. Like my girls, I was raised by a mentally ill mother. To say that this made my childhood difficult would be a gross understatement. My mother still won’t admit she’s ill, and never got the help and treatment she needed. I spent so many years vowing I’d be nothing like her when I grew up. I would raise my children my own way, I would live a completely different life, and I would never repeat her mistakes.

Don’t misunderstand – I have a tremendous amount of respect for my mother for raising me on her own, keeping a roof over our heads, and putting food on the table (our family’s finances were predictably precarious most of the time). And despite her many years of illness and instability, I have plenty of good memories of camping trips, drive-in movies, weekend hikes and board games galore.

She was never neglectful. I had new school clothes and home cooked meals and presents on holidays and birthdays. I read books and played outside instead of playing video games or watching TV. And above all, she instilled in me a deep love of language, music, reading, and making beautiful things. This passion carried me through so many difficult years, and defined who I am today.

Lessons Learned

But still, I’ll always wish things had been different when I was young. Sadly, I don’t have a time machine. Like my mother before me, all I can do is give my children the best I have to offer. Just as I did 20 years ago, I still swear to do things differently.

For me that includes taking meds and seeing a psychiatrist and therapist. I eat well and try to exercise enough. I make sure I have time to relax and do the things I love, and I arrange my life in such a way that I don’t run into too many of my personal triggers on an average day. I have a wonderful partner who supports me and helps keep me grounded.

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Lessons Learned

I make sure I stay as healthy as possible so that my kids have the best shot at a happy and healthy life for themselves. I explain my illness to them and to the important people in their lives, not because I want a crutch to lean on, but so they understand that mommy loves them, and sometimes the things I do can't be accounted for and absolutely aren't their fault.

These are the lessons I've learned; these are the mistakes my mother made that I won't repeat. But the good bits from my childhood? Those I'll hang on to. We have a huge cupboard overflowing with board games. We eat dinner together as a family every night, just as my mother always insisted. I still craft and create, and I love books and writing.

Seeing Yourself Through Their Eyes

So often when I look at myself as a parent, I see illness and failure in every direction I turn. I fail to get the kids to school on time some mornings because I can't wake up on time (episodes, medication, bad sleep cycles – you know how it is). I fail far too often to keep my temper in check; I have a short fuse and I yell. A lot. I fail at arranging playdates for the girls because having extra kids around the house in the afternoons is almost always too much for me to handle.

The list goes on and on. I judge myself as weak, selfish, and a complete failure. Sometimes I even judge myself for having children – how could I do this to them? They deserve so much more than a mentally ill mother who yells all the time (even though I didn't know I was bipolar until long after they were born). Surely they would be so much happier without me.

But you know what? They wouldn't. They love me. For now, at least until puberty strikes, my girls adore my creativity and are amazed by what I do. I make lots of unusual things. They join in sometimes, but often they do their own thing, scribbling and doodling at the dining table, our home's central hub.

Our shelves and closets and cupboards are full of art supplies, scraps of useful materials, colored paper, cardboard, and so many kinds of glue and tape, just like when I was a kid. I design t-shirts for a living, but I make anything I can dream up in my free time, from convoluted paper lampshades to screen-printed shopping bags.

My kids can challenge me to a few rounds of Mario Kart or ask for help when they get stuck in Lego Lord of the Rings. I enjoy trying out new recipes and they often get involved; I've tried to pass along my love of knitting, but it hasn't stuck yet. And to my girls, this all adds up to make me the best mother in the world.

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Seeing Yourself Through Their Eyes

That's the thing with kids – they love to see the good in people. They're happy by nature. They don't judge; they embrace. They love everything that makes me who I am, the exact same way that I love them. And whether or not I always feel like I deserve that (deep down I know I do), that love is there every day.

It's taken me the better part of two years to stop blaming myself for my shortcomings and accept myself as a mother just the way I am: flawed, loving, creative, always trying my best, and brimming with the joy and wonder and frustration that comes with being a parent. I've learned that yes, I have limitations that healthy parents don't usually have, but that doesn't have to be a bad thing. I have amazing strength as well – and most of the time, my kids give that to me.

It's a wonderful sort of symbiosis. We couldn't live without each other, and I can't imagine life any other way. They're a big part of the reason I work so hard to stay healthy, and they were the reason I checked myself into the hospital for a month last year when I knew I wasn't safe from myself anymore. It was the hardest thing I've ever done, but it was the beginning of so many wonderful new things for me, and I have my beautiful girls to thank

for it.

So now when I feel like I've failed them, I look at myself through their eyes, and I love what I see.

Unknown Territory

Parenthood is scary and frustrating enough when you're healthy. Nothing can quite prepare you for the ups and downs, the scrapes and bumps, the sleepless nights, the love and heartbreak. But for those of us parenting with bipolar disorder, we have to learn the hard way how to cope with the added challenges our illness brings.

We might feel like we're lost, but I like to think of it as pioneering. We're a new generation of explorers, forging ahead into unknown territory. We know the destination, but have no idea yet how to get there. All we know for sure is that we have to love and accept and care for ourselves. When we are healthy and happy, our kids are healthier and happier as well.

So do things your way; don't fall into the 'normal people do ___' trap (what does normal mean, anyway?). Go with whatever works for your family, because no one knows them better than you.

Cherry-pick the good bits from your own childhood, and add in new stuff your parents never thought of. Take breaks. Ask for help. Share your experiences, both on and offline. Don't be afraid to admit you're frustrated or tired or feel like you can't go on. We're all here to pick each other up, brush off the dirt, and carry one another just a little farther down that long, hard road called parenthood.