

Case study

Jane talks about how her son's mental health had an impact on the whole family.

We are, I think, an ordinary family. There are five of us - me, my husband and our three children. My oldest daughter, Nic, is a teacher and lives in Newcastle; she has a caring partner and two lovely little boys. My youngest son, Mike, left university a year ago and is travelling. He contacts us regularly and sends pictures of his adventures. Both of them are happy. My other son, Al, lives in a shared flat with people he hardly knows; he has few friends and is often isolated and sad.

Nic and Mike don't need us so much anymore. They tell us when things go wrong but also when things go right. Al needs us in a very different way. The appointments, the meds, the anxiety when he is sad and lonely, the desperate need to 'make him well', are way beyond us.

Al was a happy child, he had lots of friends and was sociable. Looking back, he was one of those children who were always included by others; one of those children you don't worry about. Looking back, which we do a great deal, Al was fine until he was 19. He tells us this too.

He went to university in Manchester when he was 19. For a year or so things seemed good. When the periods between hearing from him became longer we thought he was having too much fun to think about home. We were very wrong. His use of recreational drugs had increased. He tells us now this was to blot out the sad feelings.

We went to visit him because we began to worry when he didn't come home for Christmas. When we found him it was really shocking. My beautiful boy seemed like a stranger. He was dirty and smelly, his hair was long and he hadn't shaved in ages. He was curled up on his bed and was struggling to speak coherently. We were terrified and had no idea what to do.

We took Al home and tried to help, encouraged him to wash, to get dressed in clean clothes, to eat, to talk to us. We did this for 16 months. On some days we talked quietly to him. On others, I'm sorry to say, I shouted and raged at him. Nothing seemed to make a difference; he just stared or turned over in bed. We were so very afraid for him. He had no interest in living.

I had a job I loved that carried a lot of responsibility but I know now, looking back, that I was underperforming. I couldn't concentrate and it was hard to tell anyone about Al. I think people felt we were letting him wallow and that he should 'just get on with it'. In the end you just stop telling people. After 15 months I left my job. I never told them the real reasons why.

Al refused to access any benefits or support so we were supporting him. I was no longer working so money was getting tight. We tried so hard to access help. The counselling services wouldn't take Al on. The GP said he was an adult and needed to come himself to seek help and that it sounded like 'drug issues' so to go to the drugs service. The drugs service said they couldn't talk to us without Al and Al refused to talk to them. We tried to access private services which resulted in a bill for over £1,800 and Al being even more withdrawn.

My husband has always been very easy going and laid back but he became increasingly depressed. He went to a GP who asked lots of questions and showed an interest. He came to the house to see Al and referred him for a mental health assessment. We felt listened to, we felt some hope for our son.

The person Al saw was the beginning of the future for all of us. Al was given medication and seen regularly by people who were able to understand his distress and to help him begin the slow process of recovery. That was nearly two years ago. Al has a room in a shared house now but comes home to stay when he needs to. He talks to us now and has started college. Al has good days and bad days, maybe he always will, but there are more good than bad now.

When Al was recovering we learnt so much from the Assessment & Recovery Team caring for him. We learnt to celebrate the good days, to have realistic targets and hopes. I stopped nagging him to be 'normal'. Our son had come back to us, back to living again. He is different from before but we no longer try to get back to the before, we live with the now.

Depression is a terrible and a cruel illness and needs to be recognised and understood. It can happen to anybody, to any family. It can be totally debilitating but things can get better. Al is learning to recognise the triggers for slipping back down and has helped us to do the same. He wants to be well.

When mental illness strikes in a loving family it affects everyone and can become a disease of the whole family. You need to stay strong, care for each other and take every ounce of help that is offered. Help is out there so please get it soon as you can.