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Adult daughters' experiences of growing up with a mother who suffered from a severe mental illness

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Abstract

Research suggests that the mother-infant dyad is arguably the most important relationship to facilitate early childhood development (Bion, 1962a; Bowlby, 1960; Klein, 1946; Winnicott, 1960a, 1960b). The mother-infant dyad may be negatively affected if the mother suffers with severe mental illness which may affect maternal functioning in a number of ways (Hipwell, Goossens, Melhuish, & Kumar, 2000; Manning & Gregoire, 2006; Oyserman, Mowbray, & Meares, & Firminger, 2000; Panos et al., 2006). The literature acknowledges the negative effects of severe maternal psychopathology on children, even perinatally. The effects of maternal mental illness on offspring have been studied from the period of infancy through childhood and adolescence, and seem to be lifelong (Brockington et al., 2011; Engur, 2017; Fraser & Pakenham, 2009; Hipwell et al., 2000, Manning & Gregoire, 2006; Oyserman et al., 2000; Trondsen, 2012). While there is a lot of research that attests to the impact of maternal psychopathology on infants, children and adolescents, there is less research about the lingering effects of maternal psychopathology on adult daughters of severely mentally ill mothers. Therefore, the aim of this research was to further explore adult daughters' experiences of growing up with a mother who suffered from severe mental illness.

A sample of six adult daughters who grew up with severely mentally ill mothers were interviewed for the current research project, using a semi-structured interview schedule. The interviews yielded the following themes. The participants reflected on how they attempted to put the 'puzzle pieces' of their mother's mental illness together. Another theme that related to the mother daughter relationship emerged. The participants also reflected on how their experiences with their mother influenced the way that they navigated the different dimensions of their identity as women. The theme that related to other caregiving figures in the participants' families, such as their fathers and other women in their families, was reflected on by the participants. A common experience reported on by the participants was that they all tried to cope with their difficult experiences and overwhelming emotions by means of attempting to control different facets of their lives. Another theme was that the participants felt as if they had to keep their experiences with their severely mentally ill mothers behind closed doors. Lastly, ideas for interventions and wishes for others in similar situations was also expressed by the participants.

The findings suggest that the participants' experiences were cumulative. This means that as the participants increased in age, their difficult experiences with their mentally ill mothers

accumulated. Their experiences were also shaped by different developmental tasks that they were navigating at certain ages, Participants reported being profoundly affected by their mother's difficulties. As they got older they became acutely aware of the stigma mental illness which further influenced their experiences. While the participants reflected on significantly challenging and turbulent experiences, they also reflected on how they had gained insight and empathy into other people's emotional difficulties. The participants considered these aspects to be positive personal characteristics that they gained through their experiences of growing up with a mentally ill mother.