

Breaking the Cycle

Growing up in a home where one of your parents is deliberately hurting themselves in some of the most frightening ways is a very difficult experience to deal with at any age. In my situation I knew from a very young age that Mum was very different from all my friends' mothers. I felt more like the mother than she acted. I would love to go to my friends' homes and then find myself feeling guilty because Mum was home alone. That's often when she hurt herself real bad. Dad became a workaholic because Mum would provoke him to hurt her. Then he simply had enough and could not hurt Mum anymore, so left, unfortunately without me!

I was too young to understand the inner pain my Mum was feeling and why she did such awful things to herself. Yet, she was a good Mum, always wanting to show me love and care for me, the best way she knew how. On good days she would play with me for hours, or if it was a school day, be up we do breakfast and pack my lunch together and she would walk me to kinder and later, school. On a bad day she would lock herself in her room and ignore the world. It was like she was an alien living in another world, far removed from anyone.

I remember the first memory I have of her being taken away to hospital by the ambulance after hurting herself and she was in a real bad way too. Dad came around to get me from the neighbours and took me to visit Mum in the hospital, they had sedated her and took her to the psych ward, which I thought was a prison. I was so scared, there were all these strange people doing and saying the strangest things. I remember asking why Mum was not on a normal ward, thinking that Mum wasn't crazy, so why was she with all these very strange people. People who were running up and down the halls screaming and laughing for no reason, rocking back and forth in the middle of the room, foaming from the mouth and talking to invisible people.

She had physically hurt herself and it needed to heal. I could not work out what was so terribly wrong with her that they had to take her away from us and put in this lonely prison with all these scary people. She was a good Mum, she never hurt us. Mum would cover up any damage to hide it from us, but in hospital it's on show for all to see! I could not understand why she would do such horrible things to herself. How could she stand the pain, because it must have hurt? Was it my fault she did it? Why was she so different?

As a child you have to answer to your friends and teachers who don't understand what's going on at home. They assume they know and tell you how it is in ways that were often extremely derogative of my mother. They didn't know though. You have to try to come up with excuses so you don't have to listen to them torment and bully you. They always seem to ask you questions that you have no answers for and when you can't answer or don't want to answer, you get ridiculed and labelled. You are seen as a freak or the kid of a freak. Kids, teachers and other parents would say Mum was crazy and kids weren't allowed to come and stay or me to stay at their place. It was out – I was the kid of a crazy woman!

It all makes you want to scream at the whole world. You start to ask why me? Why Mum? What have I done for her to do this to herself? Dad said she was selfish and just wanted attention. The doctors and nurses would say horrible things to her when I was there and tell me to ignore her. One nurse told Dad that he should get some balls and get custody of me and take me away from Mum for ever. Saying

what if she hurt your daughter, would you ever forgive yourself. They did not know my Mum, she was gentle and kind, caring and thoughtful, giving and very loving, especially to me. Mum would help me with my homework and reading. She would do sums using things around the house to add, subtract, divide and multiple, we loved playing card games too.

She would always apologise to me and tell me to take no notice of what people said because I was as good as anyone else and better than most!. It was just her bad days when she locked herself in her room, but she would never scream or shout at me, just tell me to play quietly or head off to school.

As I grew older and Mum's self-hurting became more intense and frequent and we ended up having to move away. This was probably the best thing that we ever did because she found the SAFE program.

Suddenly it was like she had something to live for; it was as if a bulb had gone off in her head that said "I need help now!" The program worked with the family too and was very aware of the emotional trauma I had experienced over the years and the scarring I was still experiencing. Mum was very aware of getting me help to work through my own issues that had been brought about by her deliberate self-harming for so many years and the loss of my father figure too. I joined their carers, family and friends program with others who understood exactly what I had been through because in one way or another, they had been there too. I was taught other ways to deal with my emotions, in order not to follow in my Mum's footsteps. I am sure that if I had not received the intervention of SAFE when I did, I would be deliberately hurting myself too. If you have been brought up in an environment where hurting yourself is the response to stress, how do you know any different! I think it was Mum keeping me busy with art, craft and my pets, who I told everything to, which kept it at bay for so long. I have to say though that the urge to try hurting myself was becoming more frequent and intense, I guess you could say I was caught at the right time.

The key response to issues or problems is open and honest communication and that is hard to do without support and help. Kids are not stupid and something like a parent hurting themselves cannot and is not hidden. The kids probably know more than most because it is they that look after things on the bad days! I was lucky, but there are probably thousands of kids out there who will join the inter-generational cycle and become adults who have full on self-destructive behaviours. Will their kids too follow their parents down that dark scary road to hurting themselves?

We have to stop this cycle through intervention. Not just to stop the deliberate hurting, we need to heal them from the inside out, them meaning the whole family. SAFE gives everyone the same vision and everyone works towards a unit recovery. Carers, family and friends are educated to understand what is happening and the best way to respond to it, rather than react. I am a mother now, and I know our cycle is broken, because I have the skills and tools to use to assist others and manage my own triggers or stresses in life. My mother is still abuse free and an awesome Nana to my children.

Thank you Annie and SAFE. Dawn