First Person Account: Paranoid Schizophrenia—A Sibling’s Story

by Georgia P. Brown

The article that follows is part of the Schizophrenia Bulletin’s ongoing First Person Accounts series. We hope that mental health professionals—the Bulletin’s primary audience—will take this opportunity to learn about the issues and difficulties confronted by consumers of mental health care. In addition, we hope that these accounts will give patients and families a better sense of not being alone in confronting the problems that can be anticipated by persons with serious emotional difficulties. We welcome other contributions from patients, ex-patients, or family members. Our major editorial requirement is that such contributions be clearly written and organized, and that a novel or unique aspect of schizophrenia be described, with special emphasis on points that will be important for professionals. Clinicians who see articulate patients, with experiences they believe should be shared, might encourage these patients to submit their articles to First Person Accounts, Division of Clinical and Treatment Research, NIMH, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rm. 18C-06, Rockville, MD 20857.—The Editors.

My older brother, Richard, started a gradual downhill slide approximately 4 years ago. He was 26. He had gotten married very young, at the age of 21. Approximately 4 years into the marriage, my brother and his wife had a son. Problems had started surfacing before the baby was born. My brother had started going to school on a part-time basis, which was fine with his wife. The problem between them was that Richard did not want to work while going to school. He quit a very good job, claiming that the company was moving from one building to another and wanted him to help carry boxes. His rationale was that it was not part of his job, so he refused and then resigned. This was followed by a bout of depression, lasting about a year and a half.

Except for immediate family members, Richard had minimal contact with the outside world. He did not work and had quit school, claiming that the professors in his school were racist and gave him failing grades regardless of his efforts. He had started to spend his days sleeping very late and watching television. His wife, who was working full-time, became pregnant around this time. Richard started saying things like his wife’s parents were poisoning him and that he was not the father of his son. He claimed that his son was a product of his wife cheating on him with one of their good friends. His wife begged him to get some professional help. Richard refused, so his wife went for counseling herself. Finally, she asked him to leave, saying that she had tried everything and nothing seemed to be working.

I had gone off to college the fall of the same year that my brother got married. I was only 16 then. After graduating from college, I felt very independent and vowed not to return home. So, I got a job and my own apartment. All that I described in the previous paragraphs was based on secondhand and thirdhand accounts, as I witnessed none of these occurrences myself. I knew my brother wasn’t working and had quit school, but he did not seem very different whenever I visited.

When we were growing up, I remember Richard being very shy

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Richard was a typical older brother—he did not want me hanging around too much. The relationship between my younger brother and me was much different, as I did not have the “older sister” attitude. We did virtually everything together.

Richard had remained in my parents’ home until he got married and returned after he and his wife separated. Around the same time, my parents had decided to relocate to Florida. My father went first, leaving Richard in the home with my mother and younger brother. While I was steadily progressing, trying to build a career and starting graduate studies, Richard was steadily deteriorating. He had started to exhibit periodic and unpredictable bouts of verbal abuse and threats of aggression. This caused problems between Richard and my younger brother, as a lot of the verbal abuse was directed toward my mother. I remember visiting one day, only to find Richard and my younger brother trying to get at each other, with my mother trying to keep them apart. Trying to talk to Richard was fruitless, but I was able to get my younger brother to calm down. My younger brother later explained that he had slammed Richard up against a wall for being verbally abusive toward my mother. Richard then wanted to fight back. Richard and my younger brother are around the same height, but my younger brother has a much sturdier build and weighs about 40 pounds more. I pointed out this fact to my younger brother, reminding him that he could possibly kill Richard if they got into a fight, or even vice versa. He never touched Richard again, although he has been tempted many times since.

My mother and father differed on topics concerning Richard, and my younger brother and I tended to agree more with my father. Richard was becoming more and more verbally abusive and sometimes had violent outbursts. My parents were now totally responsible for him financially.

Out of nowhere, Richard announced that he was going to join the Navy. We were all supportive, thinking he had just snapped out of it. He lasted only 8 months in the Navy. Nobody was really sure what happened. We know he had finished basic training and he had what he claimed to be kitchen duty. Richard was always considered lazy and almost always refused to do what he termed “menial jobs.” According to him, he had started to experience dizziness and numbness of the feet and had several blackouts. He said he was discharged from the Navy for medical reasons. We know, from seeing his prescription bottles, that he was prescribed Tegretol, a seizure medication, and Pamerol for depression.

When Richard returned from the Navy, he again lived with my mother and father and became even worse. At first he got a job as a copier technician and he was doing well. Then he started saying that the supervisors were sabotaging his work. He then proceeded to resign. My younger brother had now graduated from high school and was working. We got progressively fearful for my mother’s safety, as she was alone with Richard most of the time. We had gotten to the point where we thought my mother should just abandon him, just for her own safety. However, my mother refused to do this, saying that she would not put her son out on the street. My father disagreed and pointed out to her that her safety came first.

At this point, Richard had started saying things such as people were poisoning him, the FBI was after him, and he had a helicopter following him, and he had some valuable chemically oriented information that “they” wanted from him. He had even said that my mother was on “their” side. He had started writing a lot. He wrote down Egyptian symbols of different sorts, chemical equations, different theories about HIV/AIDS, and information about brain chemicals. I was unfortunate enough to observe these writings myself.

I had just moved into my co-op and had what could be termed a house warming. Richard came to the house warming and everything went fine. About 1 week later, he showed up at my apartment unannounced. My fiancé was also there and we were very surprised to see him. I invited Richard in and he gave me a framed picture, claiming that it was a house warming gift and that he had forgotten to bring it with him the week prior. We had a nice visit and then he left.

About 2 weeks later, I got a letter in the mail from him, telling me that there were some important documents in the framing of the picture and that I should keep these documents for him. Thinking “documents” meant birth certificate, passport, etc., I agreed. When I opened the framing, I discovered a folder filled with writings such as those previously described. I did not know what to do with them. I decided just to keep them as Richard had asked...
and also informed my family about the incident.

Approximately a year later, Richard asked me to bring the folder on one of my planned visits to my mother. I had to make a stop and called my mother to let her know I would be late. I heard Richard in the background asking about his folder and that’s when I realized that I had forgotten to bring it along. I was already at least an hour from home. I told my mother to explain this to Richard, and inform him that I would bring the folder on my next visit. When I arrived at my mother’s, she was waiting for me in the driveway and I knew something was wrong. She said that Richard was screaming and cursing about me not bringing his folder and wanted me to return and get his folder “now.” I told my mother that maybe I could go in and talk to him; however, upon entering the front door, I retreated. I could hear Richard in the back of the house, yelling and calling me names such as “bitch,” etc. I wanted to call the police, but my mother disagreed. She wanted us to go out and leave him alone, giving him some time to calm down. When we returned, my mother went into the house and told me he had calmed down. She did not want me to come in as she thought he might flare up again. I had grave reservations about leaving my mother alone with Richard; however, she was an adult and there was nothing I could do if she did not follow my suggestion.

On another occasion, Richard had a verbal altercation with my fiancé. This was a result of my fiancé’s simple response to a comment Richard had made about “getting myself together.” This almost resulted in a physical fight as Richard was pointing in my fiancé’s face and making wild accusations. My mother and I were able to get my fiancé to leave, thereby defusing the situation. On another occasion, Richard smashed up a lot of things in my mother’s living room. My mother had to call the police. She said that by the time the police arrived, Richard was sitting calmly in a chair. The police probably would not have believed that this was the same person who created the catastrophe in the living room, but the evidence was there, and Richard did not dispute my mother’s report that he was responsible.

My mother refused to press any charges and Richard did not object to going to the hospital. He was taken to the hospital, admitted to the psychiatric ward, and released after approximately 3 weeks. He now claims that during his hospital stay he was injected with Haldol against his will. He said to me just a few weeks ago that this was what “messed me up” and “caused me to be weak ever since.” I only visited my brother once during his hospitalization, and my mother and his wife came along. We met with Richard and the social worker in a private room. Richard did not say much and seemed very heavily medicated. The social worker told us that they had run every test imaginable and that Richard’s problem was not organic. The social worker also told us that Richard was being medicated with Haldol and Cogentin. She never actually told us his diagnosis, but I already knew that he was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. Richard later confirmed this, while adamantly stating that the doctors had made a gross mistake and that, in actuality, he was being poisoned with arsenic.

Three weeks after discharge, Richard was back in the hospital complaining of suicidal ideations. He had not followed up with outpatient therapy or medication, even though he now claims that it was medication that had caused him to feel suicidal. He was given another injection of Haldol and released almost immediately. Again he did not comply with medication and has not taken any medication since. In fact, he gets very angry and distrustful of anyone who mentions the possibility of medication therapy to him.

My mother did not tell my younger brother, my father, or me about all of Richard’s violent rages. I know now that she did this, but I did not know then. On two occasions following his hospitalization, my mother had called me saying that Richard had been in the basement cursing and screaming for about an hour. On the first occasion she had locked the door leading up from the basement and Richard had not tried to come out. He eventually quieted down not long afterward. On the second occasion, my mother did the same thing, but Richard did not quiet down for 4 hours. My mother had refused to call the police. It had gotten to the point where I myself was going to call the police out of fear for my mother’s safety. This occurred the night before Thanksgiving in 1993.

On Thanksgiving day, my younger brother, my fiancé, and I went over to my mother’s. My mother had informed us that she wanted Richard out of the house. Richard was calm when we got there. I was very skeptical about telling him he had to leave as I did not know how he would react or even where he would go. After dinner, my younger brother and I stood next to my mother while she told Richard that he could not remain in the home. She told him that after what happened the previous night, she no longer felt safe. Richard’s response was, as usual, unpredictable. He remained calm and went and packed his things. My
younger brother had gotten him a social service case management referral and took him to a motel for the night. My younger brother then went home, but my fiancé and I spent the night with my mother. Richard was supposed to call the social worker in the morning, but instead he called my mother asking, “What should I do?” She was on the phone with him for a while. On Saturday, despite our warnings, my mother allowed him back in the house.

Richard does not exhibit signs of mental illness all the time. At times he can be very “normal,” conversing, going about his business, and seeing friends. His friends seem to be similar to himself, tormented souls who breach behavioral norms in one form or another. Because Richard could be so “normal” at times, we could not have him committed against his will. My mother was in a lot of denial, not wanting to believe her son was “crazy.” She held on for a long time to the notion that something neurological was wrong with him, especially since he constantly complained of dizziness and numbness in the hands and feet. Richard refused all professional help, saying that nobody knew what they were talking about and that he knew what was wrong.

His verbal abuse and violent verbal rages became more frequent, and he was continually trying to convince himself and us that his symptoms were a result of being poisoned with chemicals of different sorts. With each successive incident, he became worse. My mother always said, “He has not gotten to that point yet,” until Richard did something to prove this theory wrong.

My younger brother had previously moved out of the house and gotten his own apartment. At first, he and Richard were going to get an apartment together, but my younger brother changed his mind at the last minute, saying that he did not want to be responsible for Richard. When Richard hadn’t had any outbursts for a while, my younger brother got him a job as a security guard. Richard then got an apartment, but claimed he could not move in until all his furniture was in place. However, he did not have any furniture. He then proceeded to quit the job and give up the apartment. He claimed that as a security guard, he had to ride around all night in a security car and could not deal with the flashing light. He also claimed that he could not live in the apartment because a water pipe in the bedroom made too much noise. He was becoming an expert at all kinds of excuses. Nothing was ever his fault, and he could always find something or someone, external to himself, on which he could place the blame. My mother was, at this point, very frustrated. She made Richard aware, or so she thought, that this could not go on forever. Richard remained oblivious.

On a more recent occasion, around March 1994, Richard asked my mother for 20 dollars. When she refused, he flew into a violent rage. He started shouting and cursing, becoming very verbally abusive toward my mother. She finally gave in and gave him the money. Upon leaving, he smashed his hand through a glass pane in the front door. When I arrived the next day, broken glass was still all over the floor and blood was on the door. My mother reported that he went to the emergency room and got stitches for his wound. She knew this because Richard had the doctor from the emergency room call the house. Later that night, my mother said a man from a homeless shelter had called stating that they did not have enough room at the shelter for Richard. My mother said she told him that she did not care where Richard went, as long as he did not come back to her house.

Until my mother left for Florida, Richard still visited her home. We warned her about having him visit while she was alone, but she did not listen. Richard still has symptoms and is still refusing medication. I saw him last when I went to pick up my mother for her relocation to Florida. When Richard started talking, I just listened, realizing that it was virtually impossible to carry on a coherent conversation with him. He was rambling on about the Haldol injection he received that caused him to feel sick and that “somebody” had poisoned him with arsenic. When my mother was ready and we were about to leave, Richard said something about us all abandoning him. When my mother started to talk to him, he just started escalating. I hinted to her that it would probably be best if we just left. We drove away with my brother just sitting there on the stoop, and I could feel his loneliness and sorrow, but still I am not sure if I ever want to see him again.

My mother now talks about how she felt like she didn’t know who Richard was, even though she had nurtured him since he was a baby. She comments on how quiet he was as a child, always being respectful. She says that when he was being verbally abusive to her and exhibited violent behaviors, she couldn’t believe it was her son. I understand my mother and I know how hard it must have been for her to accept Richard’s illness. I am happy that catastrophe did not strike and that she did not get hurt. It is hard to believe that there were no signs to warn us about what was to come. I did not see any signs that could have indicated that my brother would grow up to be diagnosed with a mental ill-
I did not always like him, since a lot of times he was selfish and I thought him too dependent on my parents; however, nothing indicated to me what was meant to come.

My younger brother and I sometimes talk, and what we mostly feel is embarrassment and anger at Richard for what he has done to my parents. My mother sometimes blames herself, searching for things that she might have done wrong. I try to reassure her that it was not her fault. I do not know what kind of relationship I want with Richard, or even if I want a relationship. I do know that I wish things were different and that my brother was alright. Sometimes I feel that if I had a closer relationship with Richard before, I could talk to him more. I, however, do not blame myself. I know I did nothing wrong and I have experienced the futility of talk.

I cannot say that my brother’s illness has not affected me because that would be far from the truth. Most of the time, I do not talk to people about Richard’s illness and diagnosis, not only because part of me is embarrassed by him, but also because I feel an overwhelming responsibility to maintain his confidentiality. I feel that if I was a person with schizophrenia, I would not want my sister advertising it to everyone she met, so I don’t talk about it much. I also know that if I had been talking about the process by which Richard became a lawyer, I would have mentioned my family’s name, but in this instance, I refrained. I realize that this is not only my story, but also Richard’s, my parents’, and my younger brother’s, and they may not necessarily want it to be told. For a number of reasons, I also feel strongly about not having children myself, one major reason being what I have seen my parents go through with Richard. I just know I couldn’t handle the emotional turmoil and constant overwhelming responsibility, coupled with the additional feelings of disappointment, guilt, anger, and hopelessness. Then again, dealing with my brother’s illness has also made me very resilient.

The Author

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