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Hope in the dark

There may be no such thing as a miracle cure, but don't tell Autumn Stringam. The Alberta mother won a life-or-death battle with bipolar disorder thanks to a controversial and unlikely treatment. In a new book, she chronicles her journey from madness to mental health We never know what we will inherit from our parents: Green eyes? Maybe athleticism. Or perhaps, a fractured mind.

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CREDIT: Pat McGrath, the Ottawa Citizen

Author Autumn Stringam suffered from bipolar disorder for years. After the suicides of her mother and grandfather, she expected the disease would take her life too. Then her father took action.

Autumn Stringam grew up in small town Alberta with a mother who had undiagnosed bipolar affective disorder. With no words to describe their mother's condition, the kids knew her either as Angry Mom or Dark Mom. The children -- they were a brood of 10 -- never knew which one they'd encounter.

Stringam preferred Angry Mom, as she explains in her new memoir called A Promise of Hope: The Astonishing True Story of a Woman Afflicted with Bipolar Disorder and the Miraculous Treatment That Cured Her. "She was better than the mom who slumped down the stairs to take in the destruction with dull hooded eyes, her shoulders rounding toward her chest, her belly slumping forward over her hips. This mom did not talk, let alone sing. Her empty eyes said she might never sing again."

Stringam's mother Debora was 40 when she committed suicide, just as Stringam's grandfather had done.

Stringam vowed she'd never become like her mother. But then she did.

She was 20, already the mother of a baby boy, when her mom killed herself. By then, Stringam, too, had been hospitalized and medicated. Importantly, she had also been diagnosed. Finally there was a name for the "mood swings" and "behaviour problems" that stalked the family.

Stringam's book on her family's mental illness -- her 15-year-old brother Joseph was also stricken -- is a beautifully written, achingly sad account of her mother's shattered life and its echoes in her wounded children.

That the book was written at all is almost a miracle. For how could Stringam, who needed a five-drug cocktail to quiet her mind, emerge from the muddiness to write anything, let alone something so poignant?

This book tells that story, too.

Stringam's dad, Anthony Stephan, dedicated himself to finding a treatment that would prevent his daughter and son from committing suicide.

In the end, he and hog-feed salesman David Hardy developed a controversial nutritional supplement that saved his children and is now used by thousands of mentally ill people around the world.

Stringam, 34, bright-eyed and mentally clear, is now travelling the country to publicize her book. She knows that each time she opens her mouth, she'll be invited to wade into the controversy about Truehope, the company founded by her father, and Empowerplus, the nutritional supplement that it sells.

Just as there are thousands of supporters -- many of whom credit their health to these supplements -- there are others dedicated to discrediting Stringam's family and motives. "If you don't trash me in your story, you'll get a letter of complaint from our detractors," Stringam warns.

She insists she did not write the book to publicize the product. Instead, she says, she wrote it for her children. "Now that I'm well, I realized they might never know the truth about our family. I don't want them to have stereotypes of mental illness, I want them to see mentally ill people as real."

When her family was in Halifax recently, they passed a homeless man outside a Tim Hortons. Stringam explained to her children that the man was mentally ill and deserving of compassion and generosity.

One of her daughters reached for the loonie in her pocket. Instead, Stringam suggested buying the man a meal. After asking him his name and chatting, they offered the food. "I want them to see the humanity in those who aren't as fortunate as me," says Stringam.

Her 14-year-old son has read the book and now understands the intergenerational effects of mental illness. "I think he has finally forgiven me."

She struggled to find a positive memory of her mother. In one of the first passages she wrote post-recovery, Stringam writes of a moment in the garden on their acreage. "I see my mother moving in slow motion. At times my view is misty, like the view through a steamy window or a fine rain ... Her slim legs, full breasts and rounded tummy speak of motherhood and God's grace -- the kind of beauty you find only in a woman about to give life to another soul."

The moment is fleeting.

Soon the children -- there were six of them then, including a baby without even a diaper bag -- are shooed into the family Bronco. Not by Angry Mom or Dark Mom, writes Stringam, but by someone else entirely: "Strange, apathetic. She is blank, empty, spent, a breath exhaled for too long."

The Bronco heads toward the Peace River. "I hear her voice, robotic, flat, but certain," writes Stringam.

"It's time," her mother says.

The Bronco lurches. "No, Mom, please, no, please, please, please," young Stringam screams.

"I can see the river's muddy edge. I can see the roiling waters of the Peace River, wide and swift."

The Bronco plunges into the river. "It pulses darkly against the tires, rocking us inside, slapping up against the doors, nudging at the Bronco, licking, lapping,

waiting, waiting."

And next her mother melts in sobs over the steering wheel. She can't go through with it -- she can't keep driving into the river.

Stringam carried the memory with her, but had no sense of what it was like to want to die until falling into a severe depression during her first pregnancy.

Like her mother, Stringam was a teenage bride, marrying Dana Stringam, a kind-hearted, calm young man, who had no idea. Before long, he had a pregnant wife who emerged from darkness only to become a paranoid, arm-flapping, face-scratching subhuman consumed by the urge to stab herself in the belly.

Stringam was convinced she had a gaping hole in her chest from which demons emerged. She was always afraid. She saw faces staring at her from mirrors and showered with her clothes on so she couldn't be seen. She was so afraid of the faces that she used the kitchen sink as a toilet.

She gave birth to her son, then she ignored him and fantasized about ending her life.

"Three years of my absenteeism while he was at my very side," she writes in A Promise of Hope. "Three years of his wondering if he could ever be interesting enough or valiant enough or good enough or bad enough to catch my gaze without catching the back of my hand. Oh, Little Boy Blue, I am so, so sorry."

All this time, Stringam's father was racing to save his daughter. His research into the causes of mental illness was going nowhere.

During a chance encounter with David Hardy in November 1995, Anthony Stephan confided that his wife had committed suicide, his daughter was in a psychiatric hospital and his son was angry and aggressive and prone to violence.

Hardy knew little about mental illness, but said he'd seen similar outbursts in pigs that were cured easily with doses of vitamins and minerals.

The men set out to create a human version of the pig formula. They spent nights at Stephan's kitchen table mixing concoctions from ingredients from the local health food store.

On Jan. 20, 1996, Joseph received the first bitter-tasting dose. Within days, he began to feel better. After 30 days, his symptoms were gone.

Next Stephan turned to his daughter, now under 24-hour supervision to ensure she didn't hurt herself or her three-year-old. After two days on the nutritional formula, her rapid mood swings and depression began to lift. On Day 4, the hallucinations vanished. By the end of the week, she'd quit all but one of her five medications.

More than a decade later, both children are symptom free and continue to take their supplements, as do Stringam's children. And so do thousands of others, which is where the problems began.

Hardy and Stephan spread news of their discovery, naively convinced it would be embraced. While many ill people tried it and some claimed success, others did not. The men were dismissed by scientists whom they invited to study the mixture.

In 2000, the men went to speak with doctors at Harvard University's McLean Hospital. Dr. Bonnie Kaplan, a research psychologist at the University of Calgary, joined the pair to share findings from her small but hopeful study on the supplement.

Dr. Charles Popper, Harvard's acclaimed child psychiatrist, was at the talk. Although highly skeptical, he reluctantly accepted a bottle. By coincidence, he received a call that night from a psychiatrist whose son had suddenly developed bipolar disorder and was throwing violent, hours-long tantrums.

Dr. Popper needed to visit the boy to get a full reading of the symptoms. In the meantime, he wanted to give the child something that was unlikely to do anything and yet would reassure the panicked parents.

According to testimony he would later give in a 2006 trial over the sale of the supplement, he told the parents about this "really strange treatment." He explained his concerns about off-the-wall claims that it would treat 80 per cent of bipolar patients and that improvements would appear within five days.

Four days later, the parents called to say that their son's tantrums had stopped. Fourteen days later, the child was bright, articulate, sensitive. But when the bottle ran out, he became manic and angry again until they could secure more supplements.

Dr. Popper started to give Empowerplus to patients who had not done well on psychotropic drugs. Three studies published between 2001 and 2004 by Kaplan found significant improvements on 22 adults and children with bipolar or other mood problems. Dr. Popper reported similar results in 19 patients, as did another American psychiatrist.

But none of this research so far has involved blind, controlled trials -- the gold standard in testing -- in which the effects of the treatment would be compared to those of a placebo or another treatment.

Stringam's book details her father's battles with Health Canada. After trying to halt sales, the government agency charged Truehope with selling a drug without approval.

Relying heavily on testimony by Drs. Kaplan and Popper, an Alberta provincial court judge found the company not guilty. Truehope has also been targeted by Dr. Terry Polevoy, a Kitchener-based dermatologist who runs HealthWatcher.net, a website that crusades against unproven remedies.

Today the supplement is legally available in Canada. And yet Health Canada is not satisfied with what is known about the supplement. Earlier this year, it warned it has received nine reports of serious adverse reactions in users. Patients saw a spike in their psychiatric symptoms, possibly because they switched from regular drugs to the vitamin-mineral mixture, the department said.

Stringam's father fired back, pointing out that the supplement had prevented many suicides and noting that most pharmaceutical drugs that target mental illness generate far more adverse reaction reports.

Stringam writes with detachment about these battles, which were being fought while she was trying to build a new life with her husband, new babies and son. She realized that without the supplement, she would lose herself to the demons. So when called upon, she gave speeches about her experience.

In the afterword to Stringam's book, Dr. Popper writes with cautious optimism about "a daring new approach to treating mental illness."

He confirms controlled scientific studies of Empowerplus are in the works, though results will take years. "It would be a mistake to enthusiastically rush to use this treatment," he writes, "and it would be a mistake to off-handedly dismiss it."

He acknowledges that people with bipolar disorder should exercise "caution and balance in reacting to the initial observations on this seemingly promising

approach." And he honours the contribution of Stringam and her family. "(They) have conveyed to us their hope -- hope that new treatments can be found, hope that tragedy can be made temporary, hope that we can work together to make new things happen, and hope that our lives can have impact despite the odds."

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