

Research examines coping strategies used by family members of violent children with severe mental illness

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Credit: University of Maine

Research led by a University of Maine sociology professor explores how family members of children with severe mental illness and violent tendencies persevere through stressful situations.

In a recently published study, Karyn Sporer looks at the importance of positivity, education and community, and examines strategies [family](#) members identify as being helpful when challenged by stressors related to living with an aggressive child or sibling with [severe mental illness](#).

"Our communities are poorly equipped to support not only the needs of persons with severe [mental illness](#), but also the needs of their family members and [family caregivers](#)," says Sporer, who adds the study focused specifically on the family members and how they remain "somewhat positive despite living in incredibly stressful and sometimes dangerous homes."

Data from interviews with 42 parents and siblings of violent children with severe mental illness were analyzed to identify three primary strategies family members attribute to their ability to endure: gaining insight and knowledge, joining [peer support](#) programs, and identifying a silver lining.

Participants reported gaining insight and knowledge about mental illness and the mental health system by reading self-help books and doing research, as well as attending seminars, trainings and conferences. Many participants said they sought self-education after feeling unprepared for the demands of caring for a person with severe mental illness, which they attributed to a lack of information provided by mental health practitioners.

Family members also relied on peer support as resources for guidance and encouragement. Looking to others for support, whether online or in person, reduced feelings of isolation and helped participants manage their emotions by introducing them to a community whose members faced comparable adversities.

Challenged by acute and unpredictable aggression by their child or

sibling with mental illness, participants shared stories of positivity and resilience in interviews. It was through silver linings that participants credited, in part, their ability to persevere, the study found.

These "golden moments" often are ordinary occurrences for most families, such as watching a movie together or witnessing a child smile. Family members of aggressive persons with severe mental illness described these moments as rare, making ordinary moments extraordinary, the researchers say.

Giving attention to these strategies, the study determined, may prove beneficial for other family members and caregivers confronted by mental illness, violence and the complex mental health system.

The researchers recommend mental health practitioners help identify, locate and engage with the primary strategies to minimize [family members'](#) sense of isolation and confusion, and improve knowledge about mental [illness](#).

"Finding the "Golden Moments': Strategies of Perseverance Among Parents and Siblings of Persons With Severe Mental Illness and Violent Tendencies" was published in the *Journal of Family Issues*.

More information: Karyn Sporer et al. Finding the "Golden Moments": Strategies of Perseverance Among Parents and Siblings of Persons With Severe Mental Illness and Violent Tendencies, *Journal of Family Issues* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0192513X19860170](https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X19860170)

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