

## **A Collaborative Approach to Supporting Adult Survivors of Childhood Abuse**

Judy is a 61 year old divorced mother who presents at the local emergency department. She was noted by emergency staff to be "... sad, flat, worn out ... dry, not eating or drinking due to nausea". A five year history of anxiety and depression was also noted. She had recently been commenced on antidepressants by her GP.

Judy told staff she was having difficulty looking after her granddaughter who has behavioural problem and that she felt trapped and not good enough for this new mothering role. Mental health staff noted the absence of her usual therapist, a three week history of suicidal thoughts with prior overdoses and multiple medical and social problems. It was thought, however, that family were protective. A diagnosis of "Situational crisis, psychosocial stressors of problematic grandchild, along with treatment change and severe side effects from venlafaxine overwhelming limited coping capacity" was made and Judy was discharged home with recommendations for another antidepressant and a referral to the local community mental health team.

At the local community mental health centre, Judy was seen by the intake worker. Symptoms were noted to include low mood, lack of interest or meaning in life, irritability, and long-standing suicidal ideation.

Historically, Judy was one of eight siblings. Her mother was emotionally and physically cruel to her, and her father physically violent to her. She described not remembering much of her childhood, but at times had had troubling nightmares involving her brother raping her. She couldn't believe that had actually happened and ended up doubting her own memories. She remembers once telling her mother that her brother had abused her and that, in turn, her mother blamed Judy for the abuse. Despite all of this, overall Judy speaks positively about her mother.

Judy has three children – two sons and a daughter. Her daughter, Miranda, is the mother of the grandchild recently entrusted in Judy's care as she, Miranda, could no longer cope with the child's challenging behaviour. Now Judy, too, expresses feelings of helplessness and fear of hurting the child. On mental state Judy was noted to be, "care-eliciting".

She states that her low mood has been life-long and that she has poor self-esteem. She shares that she has "hoarded" pills to overdose on and off over the past 20 years.

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She added that she couldn't stand being touched, being intimate or even having anyone near her at all. She says she is very sensitive to criticism and is easily pushed over the edge "... I just go off..." and that she "...couldn't handle stupid people".

She says that her family is not protective when it comes to suicide and she shouldn't have to be looking after the grandchildren. She states that her mother "beat us within an inch of our lives" and her father "didn't give a damn". That she hated her childhood and in fact several of her brothers had abused her.

Judy was much relieved to be heard and to receive feedback from the psychiatrist that her childhood had left her with a very difficult legacy.

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This is a de-identified vignette.

Case study Judy: Supporting Adult Survivors of Childhood Abuse 07.13