

The Moments When Dignity Dies

(THIS is where and when STIGMA starts)

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(Dedicated to and in honor of: Dr. Xavier Amador)



As parents, we do our best to raise our children well – with consideration for others, educating them about “right” vs. “wrong”, honesty, kindness, and trying to impart hard-won wisdom to avoid life’s many pitfalls. The goal, of course, is to prepare them to make their own way in the world – because, with the grace of God, they will outlive us when we are no longer there to help.

Bob Krulish, in his new book “The Abeling Shift”, describes these parental responsibilities in a new light – or perhaps in a very old light our modern technological society seems to have forgotten.

Krulish reminds us that parents’ duties are:

- Not about controlling outcomes
- Not about forcing motivation
- Not about “tough love”

But rather about “balance”:

- Warmth + boundaries
- Compassion + accountability
- Support + autonomy
- Presence + respect
- Belief + structure

Echoing these same ideas, my daughter uses the word “adulthood” to remind her parents that she’s perfectly capable of navigating on her own.

But ... when brain neurochemistry illnesses (SMIs) appear in our families, too often we let our fears overpower our responsibilities to help our “children” grow and get established as adults – finding their way to navigate in the world. This does NOT mean that they will not need various types of help or support. It does NOT mean that it’s appropriate just to “shove them out the door”, as if we are throwing a young child in a swimming pool, yelling “learn to swim!”

But it DOES mean that we have the responsibility of:

- NOT holding them back
- NOT “safeguarding” from failures
- NOT preventing their growth.

Mistakes and failures are life’s best teachers. They are ESSENTIAL to our development – for ALL OF US.

Being overprotective, we let fear overwhelm us when a Loved One struggles with a serious mental illness. We panic when one of these brain neurochemistry disorders interrupts our Loved One’s life – reverting to the parental control mechanism used when our children were very young - “Because I Said So!”.

To be sure, SMIs require us, as parents, to provide guardrails and structure no longer appropriate for our neurotypical adult “children”. All children, of course, NEED structure and guardrails for healthy growth and development. And our Loved One who have bipolar, schizophrenia, and schizoaffective do as well.

The challenge, of course, is to find the right amount of structure and guardrails for our Loved Ones without making their already-difficult journey MORE difficult.

Telling our adult Loved Ones who have an SMI .. “Because I Said So” ... is the exact moment we are stealing their DIGNITY. Even worse, it is the exact moment we are adding terrible weight to their own fear of being “defective”. Predictably, they rebel, as they should, and as would we all.

Moments When Dignity Dies:

- “Because I said so!”
- “Why are you so lazy?”
- “Just stop whining and knuckle down and do it!”
- “Oh, this is my son/daughter. They are disabled.”
- “You are sick! You need help!”
- “Just shut up and take your meds!”
- “When are you going to GET A JOB?”
- “Your sister/brother/cousin/friends can do it. Why can’t you?”
- “If you don’t (fill in the blank), you can just find your own place to live!”

NY Times best-selling author Andrew Solomon introduced the idea of “vertical” and “horizontal” identities in his book, “Far From The Tree”. “Vertical Identities” are those we inherit from our families, by virtue of ethnicity, culture, genetics, family tradition, or religious tradition. “Horizontal Identities” are those we form in community with others who share one or more elements of life circumstances: being gay, having common interests, talents, professions, or hobbies. For our Loved Ones who have an SMI, however, there is neither vertical nor horizontal identity. Our Loved Ones are shunned, blamed, marginalized, rejected, labeled as “crazy”.

If our Loved Ones experience psychosis (delusions, hallucinations, extreme paranoia), their “identity” is often concocted “internally” from the neurochemical misperceptions in the temporarily-miswired circuits of their brain.

So ... how do we stop killing our Loved Ones Dignity?

Short answers are:

1. NEVER TELL. ONLY ASK.

- **ASK** what they are experiencing?
- **ASK** how they are feeling?
- **ASK** how their self-medication (if it occurs) is helping them?
- **ASK** what they are perceiving?
- **ASK** “How can I help?”

2. SHOW THEM DAILY THAT:

- They are CHERISHED
- You love them:
 - more than all the stars in the heavens
 - more than all the grains of sand on the beach, and
 - more than all the drops of water in the ocean.

3. APOLOGIZE FOR:

- possibly seeing things differently than they do
- assuming that you know what they are feeling and experiencing inside
- assuming that solutions and approaches YOU use in your life will work for them – or anyone else

And never forget --- with your Unconditional and Unyielding Love – you are saving lives.