

Unconventional cure

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Autumn Stringam believes her mother was killed by the silence and stigma that surrounds mental illness.

Growing up in a small Alberta town with a mother who had bipolar disorder, Stringam said nobody talked about the disease.

"She was never open about her diagnosis and was never consistent with her medication," Stringam said. "She committed suicide when I was 21 and my son was barely a year. It was brutal. It was a terrible blow to the family."

It wasn't the first blow that mental illness dealt the family. Years before, Stringam's grandfather, who was also bipolar, committed suicide.

But Stringam was carrying a message of hope when she, her husband and four children were in Regina for two days earlier this week, one of many stops in their cross-country tour.

Candidly she spoke about her personal journey with mental illness, which is chronicled in her book *A Promise of Hope: The Astonishing True Story of A Woman Afflicted With Bipolar Disorder and the Miraculous Treatment That Cured Her*.

The book breaks the silence surrounding her mother's mental illness and talks about her rollercoaster high and low moods.

"There were times when I was just convinced that stay-at-homes just stayed in their pajamas all the time or in their beds," Stringam said. "Then there were times when she'd get busy in the community and do amazing creative things."

Stringam vowed she wouldn't be like her mother. Then she was diagnosed with the disorder.

"She raged a lot when she got high and that's something that I recognized in myself," Stringam said. "Rage was a really serious problem for me."

Stringam was in a psychiatric hospital on suicide watch when she was 22 and her 15-year-old brother Joe, also bipolar, was prone to violent outbursts that terrified the family.

Terrified that his children would also kill themselves, Stringam's father Anthony Stephan confided in David Hardy who had seen similar outbursts in pigs with



CREDIT: Don Healy, The Leader-Post

Autumn Stringam is the author of "A Promise of Hope" which chronicles her recovery from severe mental illness.

ear-and-tail biting syndrome that were cured with vitamins and supplements.

After Stringam and her brother started taking a nutritional supplement that was developed by their father and based on the formula given to pigs their symptoms gradually disappeared. Today both lead normal lives

Stringam admits that taking a formula originally formulated for pigs sounds weird but it's helped her and thousands of others. She acknowledged that what worked for her may not work for everyone but she hopes her book will get people thinking more openly about alternative treatments to pharmaceuticals.

"I'm not as interested in promoting a treatment as much as I am in promoting this notion that people can get well and the stigma that keeps people silent or looking for help -- that stigma is a killer," Stringam said. "The treatment I use may not help everybody but not all answers are found in pills."

Stringam is donating her share of the money from the book sales to Shinah House, a new charity in Alberta that provides transitional housing for mentally ill people who don't have supports.

"It is possible to lead a perfectly normal life and be productive and if people realize that, it would redefine the illness for people," Stringam said. "I hope I'm a voice of hope."

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