



Kids' MENTAL HEALTH

LEAN ON ME

Listening. Believing. And making cups of tea. Here Emma Freud and her daughter Scarlett Curtis reveal how they've navigated Scarlett's depression, together

Scarlett:

HAVING DEPRESSION IS A FULL-TIME JOB. It's a full-time job that sucks because no one's paying you, there's very little free stationery and there are definitely no sexy co-workers to flirt with over lunch. In an attempt to squeeze six years of pain into a few sentences: I developed severe anxiety and depression around the age of 16 (I'm now 21), in reaction to some fairly traumatic medical events during my early teens. When I was 17, I gave up pretending I was coping and fell headfirst into a bout of depression that took three years to come out of. I still battle my various mental-illies (a sad slang phrase my best friend and I came up with to make them vaguely more manageable) every day, but I'm getting to a point where they no longer dominate my entire life and that's a miracle in my eyes.

Telling a parent you're suffering with any kind of mental illness has got to be one of the hardest things in the entire

world. You're essentially looking one of the people you love most in the eye and saying: "Hey, you know that thing you spent years carefully pouring your time and money and love into nurturing – I think I broke it!"

One of the most helpful things my mum ever did during the times I was really ill was refer to my mental illness as being "just like a broken leg". Any time I felt I'd failed or let myself down or once again been held back because of the limitations in my brain, my mum would sit me down and remind me "it's just like a broken leg". In her mind it was clear: you wouldn't beat yourself up or feel ashamed for having a broken leg, you wouldn't criticise yourself for not being able to run a marathon if your leg was shattered into three pieces. And the same applied for my brain. In my darkest of times, months shrouded in shame, self-hatred and self-doubt, my mum acknowledged that

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what I was going through was legitimate. She reminded me it was an illness and it warranted the care and time dedicated to recovery that any other illness would warrant. She couldn't take away the demons that had decided to take over my brain but she could take away some of the shame that our minds and our society tells us to feel about being taken down by these demons – and in doing that, she helped my recovery more than I could have ever imagined.

MY ONLY MESSAGE TO MOTHERS WOULD BE

that if your daughter tells you there's something wrong with her, please believe her. There is a big, scary world right outside your door full of people who are primed and ready to mistrust her and there are so few people in her life whose job it is to believe her and to love her. Diagnosing any kind of mental illness is a complete minefield. The lines between teenage hormones, clinical anxiety, heartbreak and exam nerves are blurry and complicated and too nuanced to even begin to go into detail on. But there is one thing that is never blurry and that's the way your daughter feels. If she tells you she's anxious then she's anxious. If she tells you she's sad then she's sad. If she tells you she needs help or pills or therapy, then the chances are she probably does. It's a terrifying act to walk into your parents' bedroom and to tell them you're failing, or that you feel broken, or that you're worried something has gone wrong. And while I hope for all mothers and all daughters out there that this never happens to you, all I can say is that if it does – believe her, hug her, and please *God* make her a cup of tea. *Scarlett is a writer and blogger living in New York. Read more of her work at Scarlettcurtis.com*

wouldn't have been my job to prescribe her insulin: I was not her doctor or her therapist. Trying to take either of those roles resulted in rows, more rows, blurred boundaries and mess. So I tried to listen, rather than heal – though it went against every instinct in my body. And attempted not to make her life harder than it already was.

AND WHEN THE RECOVERY CAME, SHE WAS RIGHT,

it wasn't through my nursing or my advice – it came through her. She slowly, far, far too slowly for someone as impatient as me, inched her way towards something resembling normality. There was no one person, no one moment, no one day which caused a lightning bolt. The progress came in unexpected ways: she asked us if she could have a dog to help her to get out of the house. She started writing about her situation and working out how to honestly communicate the complexities of what she was going through. She found that if she posted her thoughts online and one person said "That helped", it validated the nightmare she was living through. She found internet communities of teenagers in similar situations, and they gave each other support.

And despite having left school at 14, she took the exams for an American university and was accepted. We didn't think she'd make it through the first week, or the second week, or the challenging second term. But she did, and she's now in her third year: her life is still complicated – there are still dark days and fearful nights, but what's emerged is a girl who is happy to stand up in public and say, articulately, that she battles life and sometimes life wins – but sometimes it doesn't. In my eyes, she's remarkable: open, honest, wise, and a brilliant

fighter. I thought my job would be to teach her how to get through tough times – turned out she was the one who ended up teaching me. **Emma Freud is director of Red Nose Day, which returns on 24th March. Find out more at Rednoseday.com**

Emma:

WHEN SCARLETT BECAME ILL, I WANTED TO MEND HER OVERNIGHT... to feed and guide and nurture her back to mental health. When she was little, my job had included nurse, adviser and carer. But once Scarlett got really sick it transpired I couldn't heal her. Slowly, it became clear there was no quick fix and it would be a long and difficult journey towards recovery.

She would come to me and tell me how dark her thoughts were, using the sort of words no mother ever wants to hear their child say, and it was terrifying. All I could do was offer the only solutions I knew. "I've found a new doctor – let's go and see her tomorrow." "No, it won't help – any more than the last one did." "I've seen a new book which might have the answer." "No, it won't make a difference either." "I don't know how can I help?" "Just listen. Just be my mum. Let me talk without judging me – that's all you can do." Had Scarlett been a diabetic, it

Reach out

If any young person you know needs more support, the following organisations can help:
Childline.org.uk
Youngminds.org.uk
Minded.org.uk



"I tried to listen, rather than heal," says Emma on helping Scarlett through her depression