

Some Parents with Mental
Illness Have Families



What We Know

- 67% of women, and 75.5% of men, living with severe & persistent mental illness in the community, are parents (Nicholson, J., et al. (2004) In CMHS, Mental Health, United States, 2002. Manderscheid, & Henderson, SAMHSA.)
- Only 20% to 30% of them are raising their children (because most have lost custody)

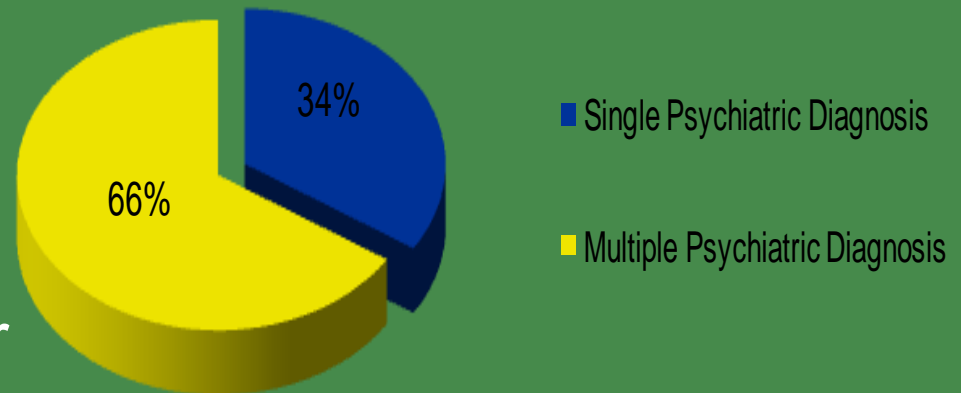
What We Know

- **A 2-year study in England in 2007 found that almost 17,000 children care for a mentally ill parent, with little or no help from the state** (Aldridge & Sharpe, Loughborough Univ. 5/2007, *Daily Mail*)
- **A 2005 study in Australia found that one million children were living with a parent with a mental illness** (Maybery and Reupert, http://www.copmi.net.au/about/aims_objectives.html)

What We Know

Data from Wisconsin's Invisible Children's Project shows that 2/3rds of 85 parents with mental illness had multiple psychiatric diagnoses –

- Depression
- Anxiety
- PTSD
- Bipolar Disorder
- Schizo-Affective Disorder
- Postpartum Depression



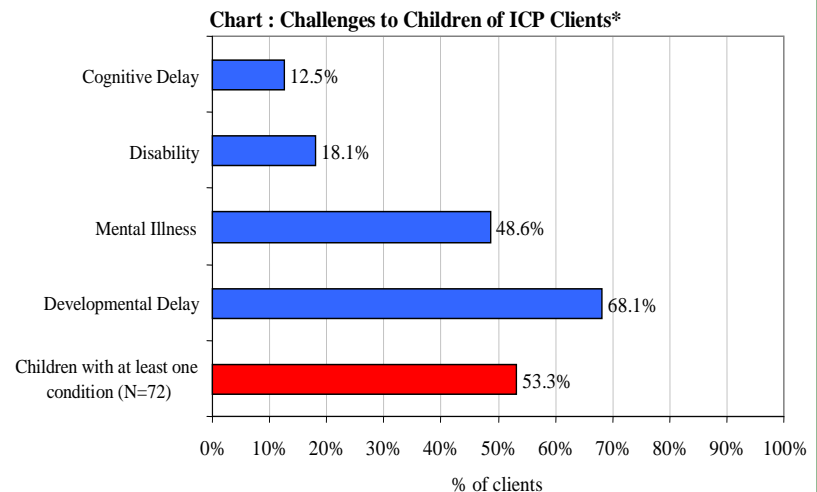
What We Know

Impact on Children of Parents with a Mental Illness: More Than Half of Children Have a Disability

Data from Wisconsin also showed that 53% of 72 children had a mental illness, cognitive delay, developmental delay, and/or disability.

More than half of them weren't receiving any treatment.

ICP Children



*Percentages total more than 100% for categories in the blue bars as children could have more than one condition.

What We Know

Many of the children of parents with mental illness suffer in silence

Many adult mental health providers are not aware that their clients are caring for children
BECAUSE THEY DO NOT ASK

What We Know

- Having a mental illness does not automatically mean you can't be a good parent. Parents with mental illness, if given sufficient support, can be fine parents, because mental illnesses are eminently treatable.
- But if the mental illness is not treated, if the children are not identified and helped, and if the family is not supported, parental mental illness can have long-lasting and negative effects on the children.

An Invisible Child's Story

**Parents With
Mental Illness
Have Families**



Mary

Mary grew up with a father who was bipolar & suicidal – an alcoholic, with violent rages who physically attacked her mother. He was unpredictable, one moment loving and nurturing the next angry & punitive.

Mary left for college with guilt for leaving her mother & siblings. **She attempted suicide**, her self-confidence shattered by the trauma she had endured.



She was hospitalized with severe depression and anxiety for 10 months when she was 17.

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Beth was the oldest of five siblings with a mother who had severe schizophrenia. Their father had died in a plane crash.

At age 21 and married, she learned that her mother had deteriorated, home had become unbearable, and her twin sisters (age 15) were living alone after being abandoned in another state in a run-down part of town. She invited them to live with her. She and her husband raised them.



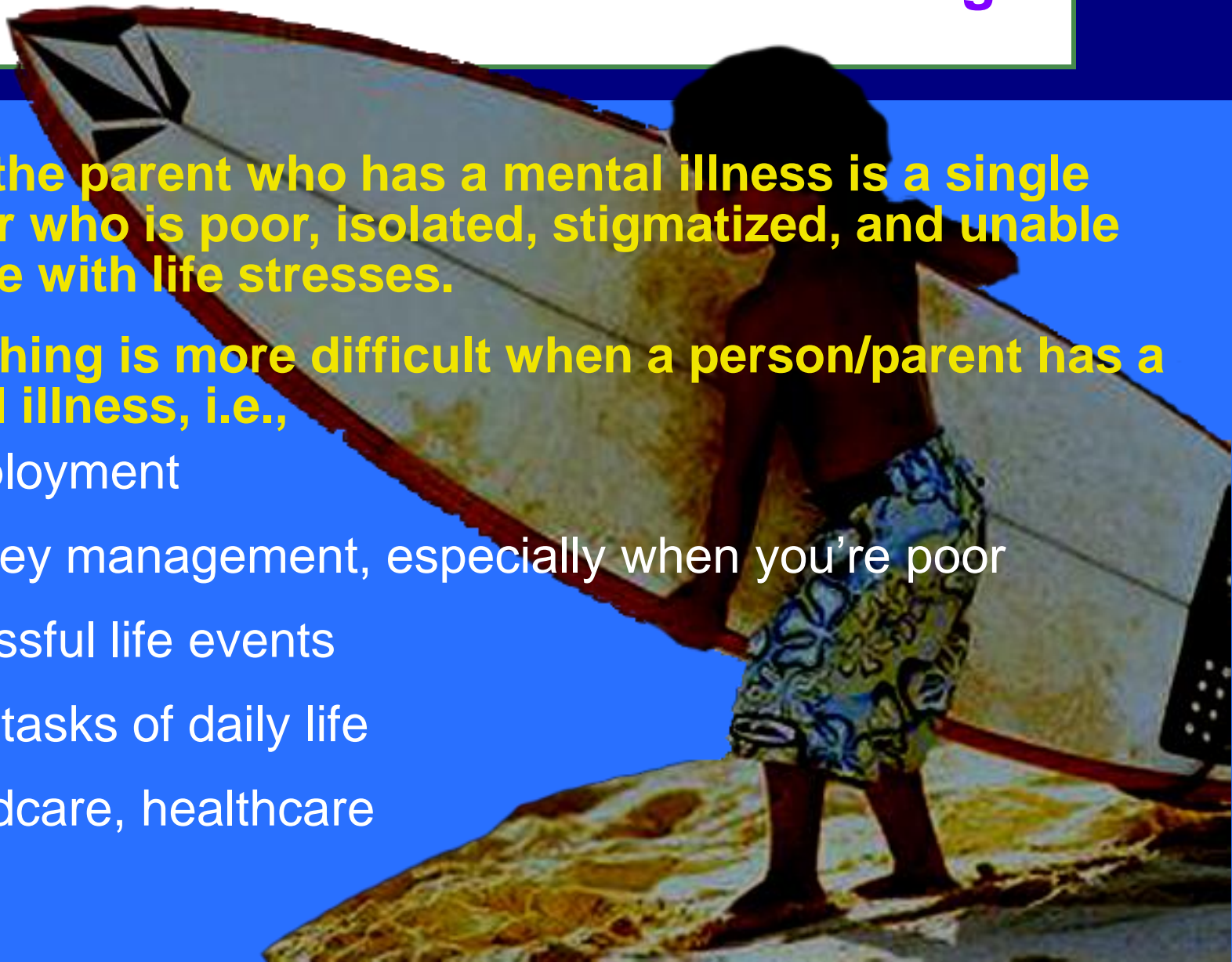
Their younger brother remained at home with their mother; he was diagnosed with schizophrenia and died in an institution.

How Does Mental Illness Affect Parenting?

Often the parent who has a mental illness is a single mother who is poor, isolated, stigmatized, and unable to cope with life stresses.

Everything is more difficult when a person/parent has a mental illness, i.e.,

- Employment
- Money management, especially when you're poor
- Stressful life events
- The tasks of daily life
- Childcare, healthcare



Many Aspects of Mental Illness Impact Parenting:

- Medication effects (confusion, agitation, sleepiness)
- Hospitalization, relapses (when children are most likely to be removed from parents)
- Relationships with helpers – “burning bridges”
- Lack of social supports, child care
- Difficulty with self-advocacy, navigating the system



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Jackie didn't realize her family had serious problems. Her mother was abusive and neglectful, rarely providing her children with food and being irrationally punitive. Jackie thought "this is the way Filipino families are; it's a Filipino thing."

Finally the neglect came to the attention of the authorities, and Jackie and her siblings were put in foster care. It wasn't until many, many years later that they learned their mother was mentally ill. As adults, the children's relationship with their mother has been re-established.

Jackie feels that if they had understood, early on, that their mother had a mental illness, they might have been able to get help for her and not have had suffer the trauma of being separated and put in foster care.



You May Have a Client Who Who Has Lost Parental Rights: It's Very Important to Provide Support

Losing custody of a child can be one of the most traumatic human experiences for parents & children, especially if the adoptive parent does not agree to open adoption

Many parents will seek to have more children to replace the lost child, especially if their trauma and grief are not addressed...

It is critically important to **PROVIDE RESOURCES & SUPPORT FOR GRIEF & TRAUMA COUNSELING**

A Parent's Story

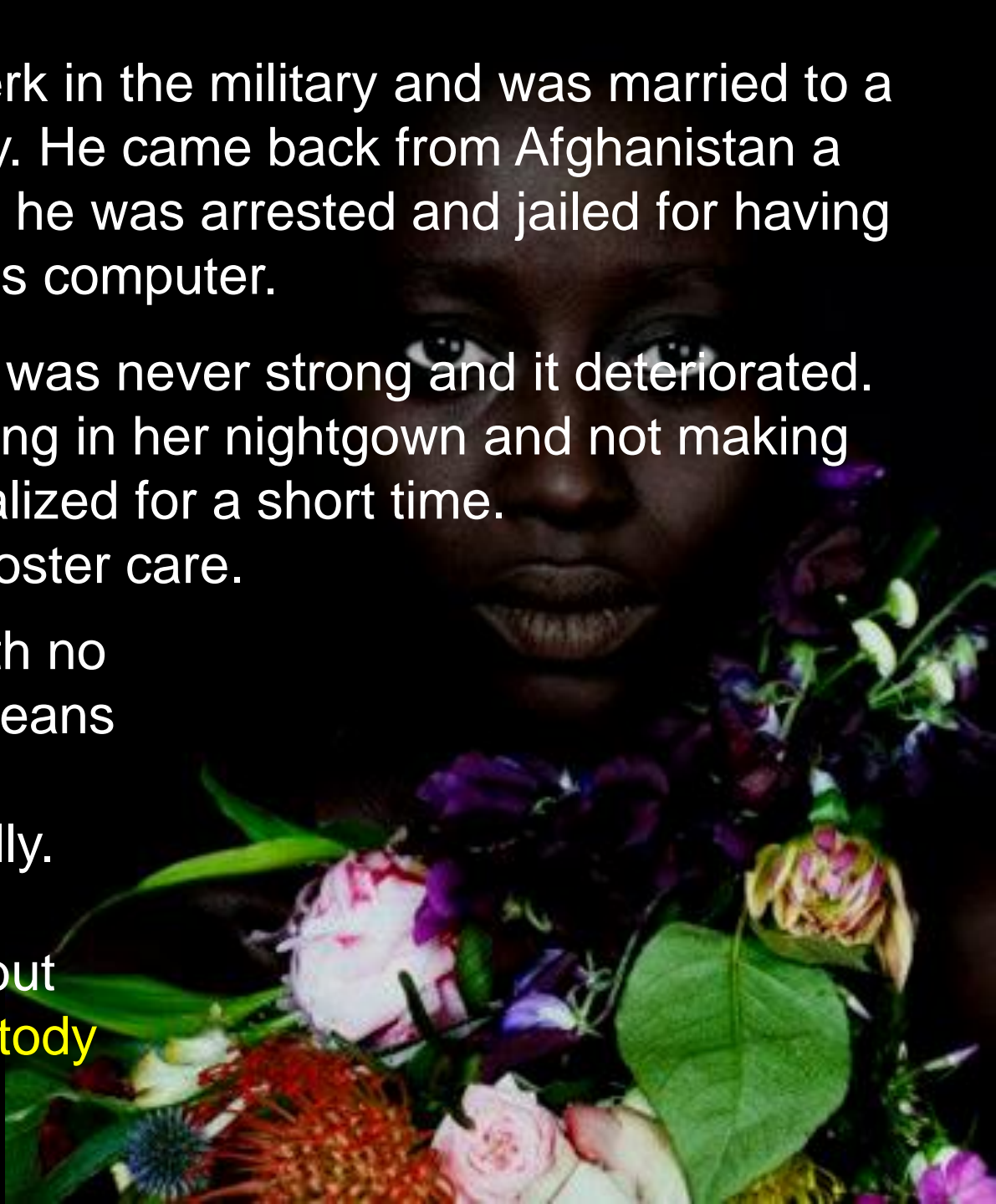
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Sandra worked as a clerk in the military and was married to a soldier; they had a baby. He came back from Afghanistan a changed man. One day he was arrested and jailed for having child pornography on his computer.

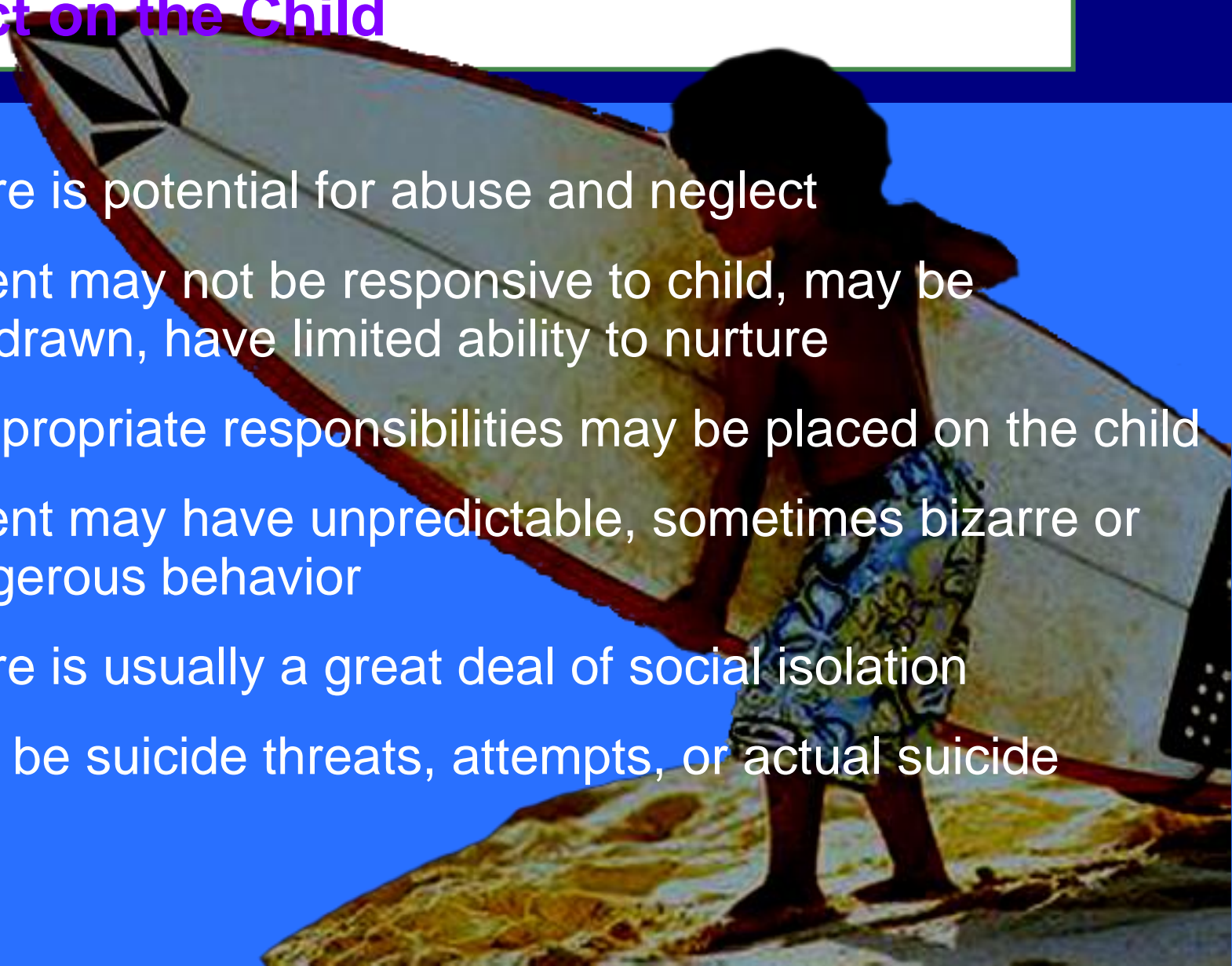
Sandra's mental health was never strong and it deteriorated. She was found wandering in her nightgown and not making sense. She was hospitalized for a short time. Her baby was put into foster care.

She was discharged with no planning, no food, no means of support, and barely functional psychologically. She was able to obtain benefits and get a job, but **she never regained custody of her child.**



Parental Mental Illness Can Have Major Impact on the Child

- There is potential for abuse and neglect
- Parent may not be responsive to child, may be withdrawn, have limited ability to nurture
- Inappropriate responsibilities may be placed on the child
- Parent may have unpredictable, sometimes bizarre or dangerous behavior
- There is usually a great deal of social isolation
- May be suicide threats, attempts, or actual suicide



Parental Mental Illness Can Have Major Impact on the Child

- **Has higher risk of own mental illness, PTSD, developmental delays, other disabilities**
- Child is unfamiliar with what a healthy family life looks like – may not know their family has problems that can be helped
- May become withdrawn and isolated
- Feels angry and/or guilty, or that it's his/her fault that the parent is ill
- May have to take on too many adult responsibilities

Some of the Issues/Concerns of the Child

- Who will take care of me/how will I survive? (if parent is hospitalized or incapacitated)
- What is my mom/dad's problem? Is it my fault?
- Will I get sick like that?
- Will anyone find out? Will kids make fun of me? What should I say?
- Why can't I have a normal family?
- I hate him/her! (May feel guilty about feeling this way)

Getting Help for the “Invisible Children”

Issues you may want to address with the child:

- Help them understand what mental illness is.
- Explain that the parent does not mean to behave that way, and may not even know that he/she is ill; but **acknowledge that sometimes the parent’s behavior is very hurtful to loved ones.**
- Give child opportunity to openly discuss feelings about parent.
- Explain that it’s normal to feel resentful, angry, sad, confused, ashamed, guilty, etc.
- Make sure they know that because their parent is ill does not mean they will become ill too.

If You Are an Adult Provider, and Think the Child Needs Psychological Help. . .

- In your discussions with the parent, you may learn that the children are suffering from behavioral disorders. What do you do?
- You will want to get them seen by the appropriate child/adolescent mental health provider agency:
 - Do you know how to do this?

Getting Help for the Child

- You may also need to help the parent get special education for the child and other types of assistance through the State Department of Education.
 - Do you know how to do this?

If You Are a Provider of Services to Children and You Suspect the Parent Has a Mental Illness:

You may want to get that parent assessed and treated.

Do you know how to do this?

Do you know how to get parent treated by state mental health system?

Do you know what to do if parent is not eligible for this system?

What Do Families with Invisible Children Need/Want?

MHA in Hawaii conducted a needs assessment. We asked:

What would help you be a better parent?

- Child Care?
- Support Group ?
- Parenting Education ?
- Hands-On Parenting Training (in-home) ?
- Child Care for When You Need a Break ?
- OTHER?

What Do Families with Invisible Children Need/Want?

We also asked:

Which of the following services would be helpful to your children?

- Counseling/Therapy ?
- Big Brother/Big Sister (or other mentoring program)?
- Support Group?
- After-School Activity/Program ?
- Tutoring ?
- Diagnosis/Assessment of Mental Health Problem ?
- Other?

What Do Families with Invisible Children Need/Want?

We also asked:

What gets in the way of your getting services you need to help you and your family?

- Transportation?
- Child Care ?
- Financial Problems ?
- Physical Disability ?
- Substance Abuse ?
- Language ?
- Other?

What Do Families with Invisible Children Need/Want?

We found (N= 29):

- Most frequently mentioned support needs were: **hands-on parenting training (in-home), parenting education, and support group.**
- Services they felt would be helpful for their children were **after-school activity/program, counseling/therapy, and tutoring.**
- Barriers that interfered with their ability to access services they and their family needed were primarily **financial and transportation problems.**
- 19 were women, 15 single parents; by far most common diagnosis was **depression**; and average number of children was about **two** per parent.

Resources:

- Wisconsin MHA: Parenting Education Curriculum, with Workbook, Facilitator Copy, Facilitator Outline, Contact Kristina Finnel kristina@mhawisconsin.org ; (414) 276-3122; www.mhawisconsin.org
- Children of Parents with Mental Illness – COPMI – Australia network of dozens of programs as well as a nationwide initiative. www.copmi.net.au
- Employment Options, Clubhouse, Marlboro, Mass.; Chip Wilder, cwilder@employmentoptions.org; 508-485-5051 x 240; www.employmentoptions.org

Resources Continued:

- **“Parenting Well When You’re Depressed: A Complete Resource for Maintaining a Healthy Family,”** published by New Harbinger Publications. Written *by parents for parents*, the first self-help manual for parents living with mental illness. www.parentingwell.org
- **Author: Joanne Nicholson, Ph.D.,** Center for Mental Health Services Research, University of Massachusetts Medical School. Joanne.Nicholson@umassmed.edu . She has established an active, consumer-based program of research on parents with mental illness and their families. <http://www.umassmed.edu/cmhsr/faculty/Nicholson.cfm>

PRESENTED BY MENTAL HEALTH AMERICA OF HAWAII

Thank you to Martha Rasmus, Wisconsin MHA masmus@tds.net, for her assistance.

For further information:

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Help Make Them Visible

