

# Unschooling Children Who Have Mental Illness

Book Review: [\*Stressed to Best: Stats and Hacks on Tweens/Teens with Anxiety and Depression\*](#) by Mary Herrington

This starts in familiar territory for a homeschooling book—children bullied at school, the school’s response is poor, the children are homeschooled, and the mom has an awakening:

It began like most homeschooling adventures do, with curriculum, intention to school at home, and schedules. . . . Then, it happened. By 8:15 am, a blank look of fear glazed her eyes. I told her she had to pay attention, we were in school and she had to do what the assignment was. I was doing school at home. She began to shake and the anger boiled over. Liz yelled at me the following phrase I will never forget: “If I wanted to be bullied, I would have stayed at school.”

Acknowledging that her daughter, Lizzie, has a point, Mary Herrington and her explore their homeschooling options and discover unschooling, which works for them. The story then gets deeper, as the aftermath of Lizzie’s processing disorders and learning disabilities, as well as the school experiences that left her with post-traumatic stress disorder, become pronounced in her teen years. Herrington writes, “Puberty kicked in full force and threw her, and our whole family, for a loop. For the average teen, puberty is hard on both the adults and the child, but with a mentally ill child it is even harder.”

The candor and resourcefulness of the author are refreshing to read. Here, she has to protect her daughter and defend their right to unschool during a hospital stay:

Each hospital she attended had been in-patient hospitals where she was required to “go to school” for 8 hours a day. The teachers didn’t know what to do with her since she didn’t have textbooks,

workbooks or worksheets. She did have books of interest to read, drawing supplies and a composition book to write stories and poems in. I was told these were a distraction to the other students.

In one hospital, the teacher bullied her. He belittled her in front of the class, saying she was “worthless to society” and that is why she was in the hospital. He told her she was “stupid” and would “remain stupid unless she did worksheets, copy work, and read from textbooks.” I was livid. I went in to the director and explained that Liz’s PTSD was caused by the school system and by law she had the right to self-directed learning. I brought with me the state statutes on homeschooling regulations to prove it was, indeed, legal. The next day, she was left alone.

Mary moves from her personal story to an overview of homeschooling methodologies, including a sample daily schedule for each method, describes the process of deschooling and how it worked in her family as they leaned into unschooling, how friends and family can help you expand your learning community, an FAQ about self-directed learning and why it works for her family, and many useful resource lists. But what makes the book stand out is when she discusses mental illness and her two children.

Self-directed learning is not for everyone. It is not for every parent. It is not for every child. It is for a select few who have the patience and the belief that when someone has the intrinsic motivation to do something, they will act upon it. For many, the system of institutionalized education is more of a burden than a gift. That was the case in our home with Liz and Sara. The system encourages conformity where there may be none. We don’t ask a child with a broken leg to run a race, yet when a child has anxiety and depression, they are required to show up and perform.

Society is asking them to do what is not possible under those conditions. Asking our children to do more than is possible can create a no-win situation for which they feel trapped. Desperate people do desperate things. I remember my daughter telling me

she would rather die than go back to school. She was only 12. She was also very serious.

Herrington provides support and insight into not just how to best support your child, but also to help parents know when to seek help. Unschoolers are often skeptical of labels as a useful tool, but Herrington shows how they can be liberating in the right circumstances.

The label of learning disabled doesn't need to put your child in a box. It is their key OUT of the box, to a world of exciting learning and love of exploration and learning. When I was diagnosed at 23, it was as if someone had finally handed me the answers to all my questions. I knew I wasn't dumb, yet I had attended my sophomore year of college for 3 years. Having the diagnosis of ADHD, auditory processing disorder, dyscalculia and dysgraphia (as well as some others) better helped me understand why I process things differently. It is why I can see through the b.s. on many things, cut right to the point, and see a truth others can't. It is also why I miss body language signals, wiggle my toes and talk a lot. Getting a diagnosis doesn't limit someone's life. By getting all our children tested, we were better able to meet their individual needs. It enabled us to be able to help crack the code for learning with them.

Herrington describes how she and her husband managed to get through their considerably difficult child-raising experiences and shares some things that have helped her family cope with mental illness.

There aren't many homeschoolers who openly discuss mental illness in their lives but [Mary Herrington](#) shows us how people can successfully manage even these difficult lives. Herrington notes, "Don't let the mental illness of your children become their, or your, focal point forever. Yes, it is a part of who they are, but it ISN'T who they are. It doesn't need to define their life, their relationships or their future."

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