

LOSING PARENTS TO MENTAL CONDITIONS



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Not many kids actually come forward with their problems at home, especially when it comes to something as sensitive as their parents. Two of my close friends have somehow lost their parents to a world of their own – depression and Alzheimer's, and I found myself in the middle of their stories.

Ma-Baba, Ammu-Abbu, Mom-Dad – we all have our special ways of calling our number one fans, the ones who first showed us what unconditional love is and taught us everything we know. They support us in ways we can't even imagine; be it ethical or financial or emotional, they are always there for us.

Until one day, you start losing them, little by little. Death is completely different, because one day they are there, and the next day they are just gone. Losing a parent to a mental condition is a loss none of us can comprehend unless we actually go through it. It's because even though the person is right in front of you, he/she is only sharing the space with you physically. You'll feel like you have lost them, even when you're looking right at them.

What most of us don't know is that depression is a real illness and it dwells in the head, taking away everyday moments and filling them with feelings of defencelessness, despair and worthlessness. Caused by changes in brain chemistry, factors that contribute to the onset of depression are: genetics, changes in hormone levels, certain medical conditions, stress, grief or difficult life circumstances. Here is a letter that provides an insight to the mind of an adoring son, Imran Ali (19), who somewhere along the way of growing up lost his mom to depression.

"Dear Ammu, They say that people don't understand the value of what they have until they have lost it, that a person won't truly appreciate the value of their eyes until they have become blind. I don't think I realised the importance of your presence until I lost you. Not to death, but to something worse. Why did you leave me alone? Who would I come home to from school? Who would tell me to study? Who would take my side unconditionally? Who would be my support?"

Betrayal – that's what I felt when you became like this. I thought you'd always be there for me, for our family, but you leaving broke us. There was this emptiness, a void that was overwhelming. Did you know how many people I had to lie to for you? They would ask about you and my answers were always the same 'She's doing well' or 'She quit teaching to give us more time'. I just didn't understand that you wouldn't get better, that it wasn't your fault, and that you needed us more than we needed you. I'm sorry Ammu for not understanding, and for all the times I resented you and yelled at you.

I grew up, from the broken, overweight teenager who was so helpless. I learnt to do everything by myself – from washing my clothes to making my own food. I learnt to live without needing you; we all did. But know that whenever someone talks to their mom near me, it still breaks my heart a little. I'll always be insecure about everyone in my life because how can I trust them to stay when you left. I'll

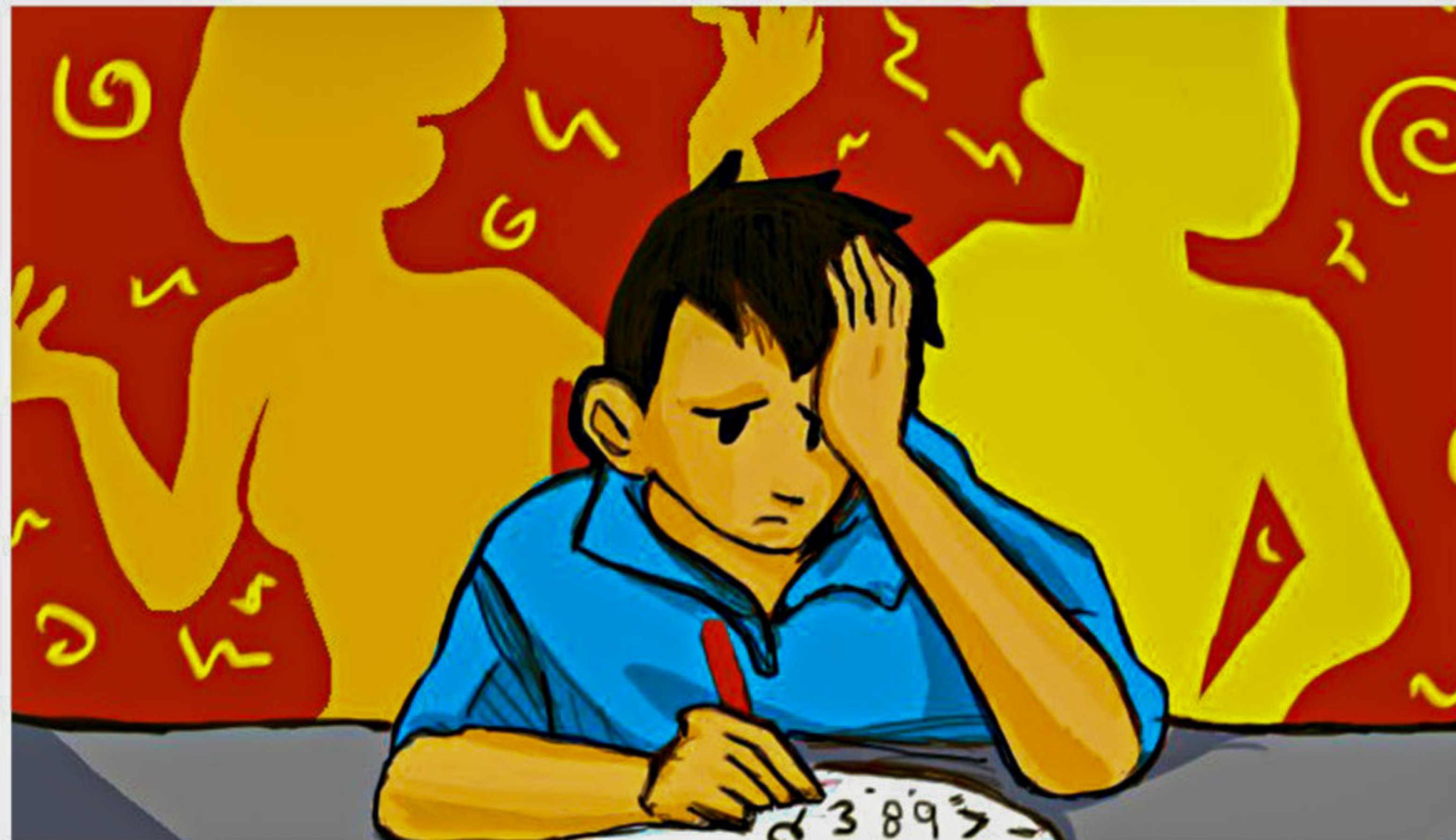
never forget anything about you. Every day, I hope you get better.

*Love,
Your son, Imran"*

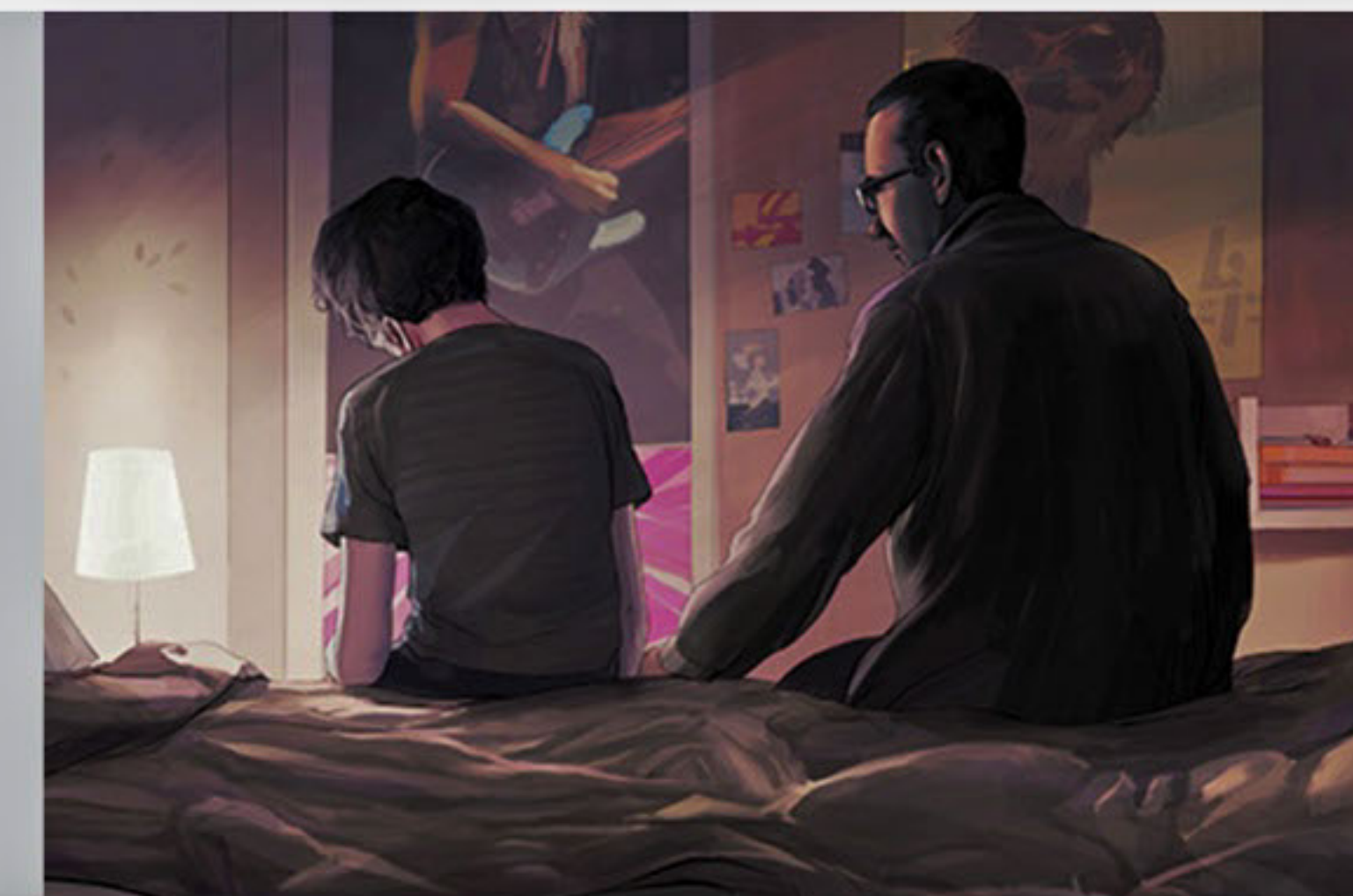
Depression is a very common condition, but children tend to avoid this topic. There is no area of life that does not suffer when depression is present. Of course, it is completely normal to overreact in the beginning,

it's nothing to be embarrassed about. Keep yourself healthy and guide yourself on the path your mom or dad would like to see you. One day, when they're better, they'll be proud of you.

Another devastating disease is Alzheimer's – a progressive mental deterioration that can occur in middle or old age, due to gradual degeneration of the brain. It is the most common form of dementia. As the disease advances, symptoms can include problems with lan-



when you don't exactly know why they're acting the way they are. Nevertheless, over time, you will know. You will get through all the stages. Along with medication, research says psychotherapy and lifestyle changes have brought out the most positive outcomes. According to Imran, if you have a parent suffering from depression, go ahead and talk to someone else about how you feel. It's okay to feel antagonistic, but you will get over that. Do not bottle up your emotions and most importantly,



guage, mood swings, loss of motivation, not managing self-care and behavioural issues, eventually leading to death.

Sabriya Jahangir Priya (20) talks about her father, who was diagnosed when she was three, in her letter. After growing up without him, while putting it all in words for the letter, she realised for the first time, her mom did everything for her. She was Priya's Wonder Woman.

"Dear Baba, I don't even know if I would've called you Baba or Abbu. I have no memory of you interacting with me and that's sad, I know. This once, I was in tears while watching one of my childhood videos where I heard your voice calling out my name. For that significant moment, I felt so unfortunate and helpless but don't you worry. You did everything for me through Ma. I consider myself lucky to have a mother who is so strong. Thank you for marrying such a wonderful woman, Baba. All these years went by, never have I ever felt the need of a father because she was always there.

During the early stages of your illness, Ma spent most of her time in distress. As your condition got worse, you started becoming violent. It's amusing how it never frightened me though. I guess Ma had already made me strong enough, just like her. When I was in middle school, I was asked a lot of questions about you, questions I had no answers to. 'Does your father recognise you?' or 'Do you talk to him?' You should talk to him a lot, he'll be happy!' Honestly, every time I look at you, I never know what to say. I can stare at you all day and not have a word to say, but that doesn't mean I have no feelings for you. I know you love me.

If you ever get well, the probability of which is close to zero, just know that Ma has sacrificed her entire life for the both of us, and she hasn't complained about it once. We both have heaps to thank her for. As much as you were away from our day to day lives, you were equally a part of every Eid, every birthday, everything. You still are. You have always been a part of us and always will be.

Love,

Priya"

Unfortunately, there is no cure for Alzheimer's as of yet, but the onset can be delayed and there is treatment for the symptoms. When asked if she has any advice for someone who has a parent suffering from Alzheimer's, Priya mentioned the following things. First and foremost, have patience – that is what you need the most. You cannot be selfish because the fact is, everything at home will revolve around the sick parent. Moreover, she stressed on the importance of mental stability of the child. It is absolutely normal for the child to question their fate and feel unlucky, but just remind yourself to hold on; you're strong enough and you'll make it.

Two different disorders and two different stories – depression and Alzheimer's are common conditions but losing parents to these illnesses are heart-breaking. Feeling devastated and embarrassed is a typical reaction, but remember, you're not the only one going through this. There are more Imrans and Priyas out there who have been in your shoes. If you have a friend who's in such a situation, be there for him/her. This is nothing to be ashamed of. Just hold on and you'll make it through life.

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