

A Boy Broken: Reflection Paper

'A Boy Broken' is a memoir written by Douglas J. Engelman in remembrance and honor of his son, Douglas J. Engelman, and his daughter, Melissa J. Horn. The book talks about Engelman's experience as a father navigating the challenges of his son's Schizophrenia and his daughter's bipolar disorder, and the later tragic loss of them both. He revisits his son's struggles of dealing with constant psychotic episodes and the impact that they had on everyone in the family. For me, this memoir was extremely eye-opening. Not only did it broaden my understanding of what it is like for someone to live with schizophrenia, but it also unveiled the emotional burden that is placed on their loved ones. I was especially touched by how resilient and dedicated his family was to supporting Douglas Jr. through his journey. In this essay, I will be explaining how I responded to the memoir, emotionally, the valuable lessons that I learned about how mental health can affect individuals as well as their family dynamics, and how Engelman's story strongly resonates with my own personal experience supporting my brother.

A Boy Broken by Douglas J. Engelman is a personal memoir that chronicles a father's journey through the heartbreak of losing his son to mental illness and, ultimately, to a tragic ending. The story opens with Engelman's raw and emotional recollection of the moment he learned about his son's death. This was a moment that flipped his world upside down and changed his perspective forever. From there, his storyline takes a shift back in time to when they first started to see early signs of his son's schizophrenia. Engelman recounts how he first began noticing changes in his son's behavior and personality. They were so subtle at first, but soon became impossible to ignore.

As the diagnosis of schizophrenia became more and more clear to them, Engelman describes the overwhelming fear, confusion, and helplessness that he felt trying to navigate his new life as well as his family. His book explores the deep emotions of a parent confronting their worst fear of something they can't fully understand or control, as well as fight the neverending stigma and misunderstanding surrounding such as severe mental illness. Engelman shares how his family struggled to find effective treatments, navigate medical systems, medication changes, therapy, and hospitalizations.

My initial reaction to reading “A Boy Broken” was sadness, but more than anything, I felt empathy. Part of me knows exactly what it feels like to watch someone you love lose themselves entirely. My older brother, Jasper, is three years older than me and was recently diagnosed with bipolar disorder, even though he has shown symptoms for nearly a decade now. When we were younger, he was my whole world. He was the happiest kid, curious about everything, adventurous, and constantly full of energy. He loved playing soccer in his free time, reading, going on bike rides, and spending time with his friends. He would teach me how to play video games, even though I was terrible at them, but I still loved it because it meant I got to learn about the things he loved.

Around the time Jasper turned fourteen, things began to change quickly. He stopped enjoying soccer and spending time with friends. At first, we all thought he was just burnt out from soccer or going through a normal teenage phase of being disinterested in everything. But as the years went on, he became more and more irritable and angry. He spent most of his time alone in his room playing video games, and his anger started to quickly spiral. One night, I woke up to find him standing in the kitchen, swinging a knife at my dad after my dad had unplugged the wifi to make him go to bed. I later overheard my mom tell my dad that she feared they might have to

call the police someday if things continued to get worse. Over time, Jasper became more isolated. His grades plummeted drastically, he barely spoke to us, and the strain of all of our relationships began to weigh the structure of our family down.

When he graduated high school in 2020, we hoped things would change but they didn't. For the past five years, he has lived in his dark, cold room, playing video games while his mental health, as well as our relationship with him, continued to deteriorate. The most traumatizing moment occurred during my junior year of high school, when I walked in on my dad and Jasper in a physical fight. I watched as my dad fell backward and hit his head on the corner of a wall. It was the first time I saw Jasper truly break down, he was overwhelmed by the guilt and heartbreak of hurting someone. After that night, we never spoke about it again. Even though his aggressive behavior lessened, his emotions disappeared entirely. He became detached from the world completely.

Therapists came and went until he finally found one he connected with. Over the summer, he told my parents that he didn't love them and that he sees them only as roommates. When my parents responded by saying, "We love you no matter what," he asked, "Why would you love me if I don't love you?" Hearing that broke my mother in ways I've never seen before. She is the strongest person I know and never gets emotional, but I remember finding her curled up in the corner of her study, crying for hours. My dad, on the other hand, said nothing. I can tell that his silence his way of staying strong for all of us. For reasons I still don't understand, the only person Jasper says he loves is me. My parents and his therapist have told me that I'm "the only one who can reach him, you're his only hope." While that might sound encouraging, to me it feels like an unbearable weight that I've carried around for years. I never asked to be the one holding our family together, but somehow, that's the role I've accumulated. More than anything,

all I've ever wanted was to go back to being a normal family. One that eats dinner together, talks about their day, and celebrates each other's achievements. But that dream faded when I realized that my brother was now a stranger. He didn't know anything about my life, my friends, never came to my graduation, and stopped saying happy birthday to any of us years ago. Although we only just found out that he's been experiencing Bipolar disorder, the effects of it have ripped our family apart from the inside out, and I can only hope that this diagnosis is the answer to it all.