

Family Bonds

A Strength & a Blessing

By Andrew Timmons

When I was a little boy, my mother noticed I would repeatedly drop a pen, pick it up, and drop it again. That, combined with other signs—my fear of germs and cracks in the sidewalks, and the need to touch whatever I bumped into multiple times before I could leave it alone—eventually led my parents to take me to a mental health professional. Hours of strange tests followed, including shape and color recognition exams, storytelling exercises, and a computer game that changed the rules of play at random. The doctors found that not only did I have the worst case of obsessive-compulsive disorder they'd ever seen but I also had Tourette's syndrome.

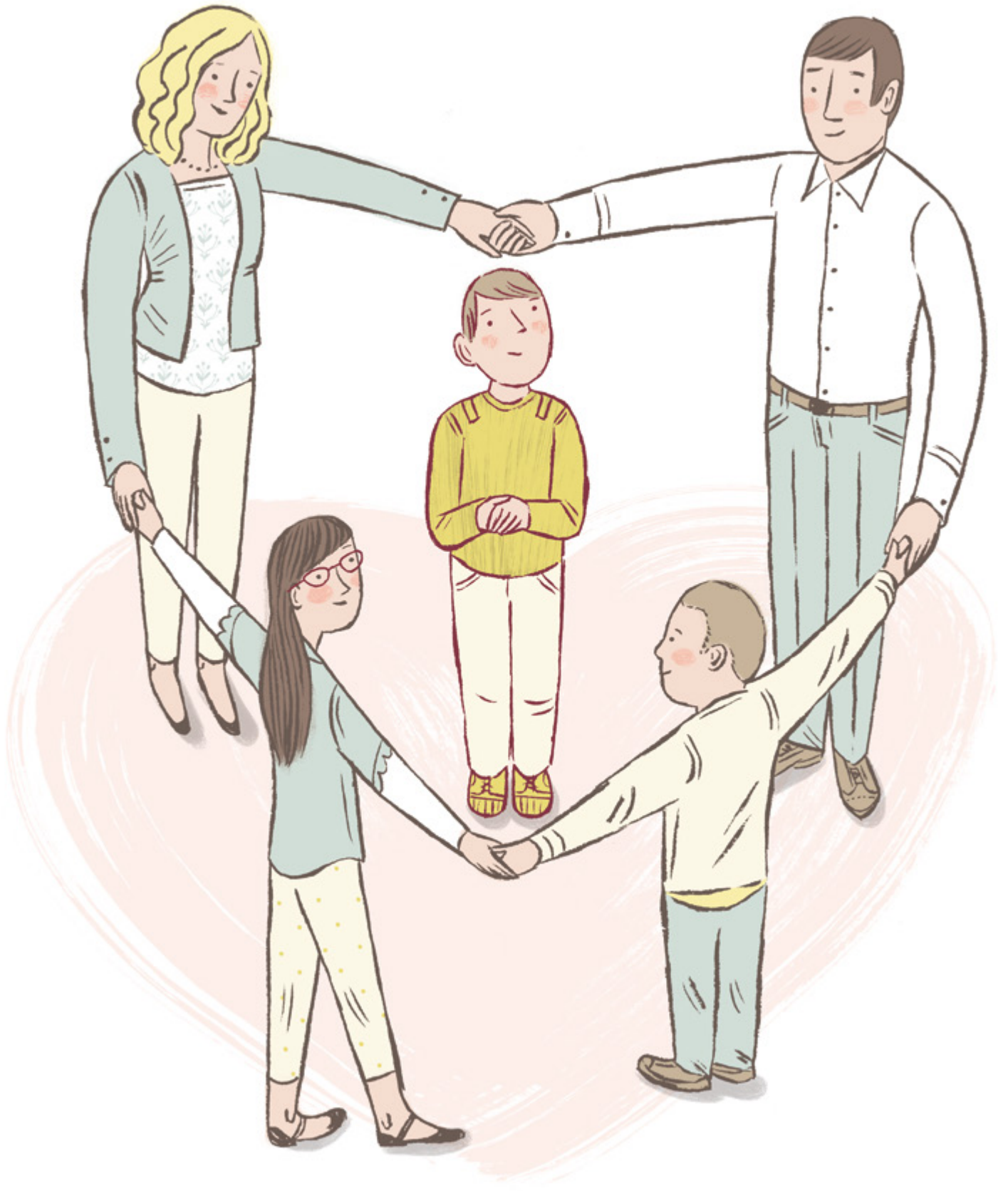
Living with Tourette's Syndrome

Tourette's syndrome is a neurological disorder that usually emerges in early childhood and is often defined by motor tics. These "tics" are involuntary movements of the body, such as a twitch or grimace or even a leg or arm movement that looks like a muscle spasm. They can be frequent and repetitive. It's like having an itch that you just can't resist scratching. I don't want to do the actions my mind sometimes tells me are necessary, but I'll never be at ease if I don't.

I used to hate stairs, because for every step I ascended, I'd have to descend two steps. Other times, because of these involuntary mental compulsions, I might feel forced to make perfect symmetry in the number of steps that I took. If I miscounted or got fed up and tried to "cheat," I'd have to start over or else I'd never overcome the urge to go back and fix it. Plus, if I didn't properly follow the "correct" pattern, I would always have to make another equally flawed attempt so as to cancel out the first flawed attempt. If both flawed attempts weren't identical, I would have to start over and make the same mistakes to match each individual flawed attempt.

You might see now why I would hate any encounter with stairs.

In my struggle to cope with Tourette's syndrome, my family became the biggest miracle of all.





BE PATIENT

“If you are the one afflicted or a caregiver to such, try not to be overwhelmed with the size of your task. Don’t assume you can fix everything, but fix what you can. If those are only small victories, be grateful for them and be patient. Dozens of times in the scriptures, the Lord commands someone to ‘stand still’ or ‘be still’—and wait. Patiently enduring some things is part of our mortal education.”

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “Like a Broken Vessel,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2013, 41.

Of course there were other challenges less drastic than staircases. Imagine applying similar imaginary rules to actions like picking up toys, going through doorways, misspelling a word, tripping over my shoelace, breathing, blinking, coughing—basically any everyday action that so many of us take for granted. And that’s just the physical tics. I also have verbal tics that compel me to make noises—weird noises—in public!

Family Support

Despite all these challenges, I had the most ideal childhood that I could have imagined, thanks to my family. My parents, my greatest blessing from God, were always there for me, providing encouragement and understanding whenever I needed it most.

My mother has been an angel of love and peace, showing me so much care and concern. She has unwearingly encouraged me to try new things, to make new friends, and to never give up, no matter how hard life became.

My father also patiently helped me in some of my most difficult moments. One day I was panicked and feeling ashamed because I couldn’t understand my algebra homework. When my father got home from work that night, he stayed up with me until 4:00 a.m., patiently guiding me in the right direction so I could figure out the answers.

My siblings were always there to help me too. My mother recalls opening her bedroom door one

night to see me standing at the top of the staircase with a gloomy look on my face as I mentally prepared myself for the ordeal of going downstairs. My younger brother, about five years old at the time, stood beside me at the top of the stairs and said, “It’s okay, Brother. I’ll go down with you.”

Other times my older sister would come to the rescue. There were many times when she would walk in on me performing some ritual of arm waving or finger snapping and find me close to tears of frustration because I couldn’t stop. At those times she would run to get my mother or father, who would pick me up and hold me to help me forget whatever absurd compulsion had taken control over me.

Medicine and Miracles

It’s been years now since my diagnosis. Eventually, after many unsuccessful trial runs, we found a drug that suppresses the majority of my tics, though I still have urges every now and again. This medicine was invented by doctors the same year I was born. Combining the medicine with the help of my family and priesthood blessings allowed me to go through school like a normal kid. I even served a full-time mission for the Church, despite doctors’ expectations to the contrary.

I thank God every day for blessing me with such an amazing family. I try to imagine how I would have managed if things had been different—if we didn’t have family home evening every



week, if we didn't read scriptures together every night since before I could talk. What if the members in my family hadn't made a commitment to go to each other's Little League games and piano recitals, or have sit-down dinners and make Sunday our "family day"? My family isn't perfect, but they've been more than I could have ever asked for.

I understand now why the adversary tries so hard to destroy the family, the most basic social unit. It is from our families, including our vast heavenly family, that we draw strength, comfort, and encouragement. I have seen the power and influence that a righteous family can have on an individual. The family is ordained of God, and true happiness can be found when we live righteously and sustain each other within the sacred family bonds of love.

The greatest blessing of my life, the one that was made available to me the same year I was born, is not the miracle drug that relieves me of my medical condition—though it *has* helped me live a normal life. It is my family. With Heavenly Father and my eternal family, I can overcome anything.

And that's a miracle. ■

The author lives in Idaho, USA.

NOTES

1. See *What Is Tourette Syndrome?* (brochure), Tourette Association of America, tourette.org/media/WhatisEnglish.proof_.r1.pdf.
2. See "Tourette Syndrome: Symptoms and Causes," Mayo Clinic, mayoclinic.org.
3. "Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder," National Institute of Mental Health, nimh.nih.gov.
4. See "Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder," nimh.nih.gov.

ABOUT TOURETTE'S SYNDROME

Tourette's syndrome manifests itself through tics, meaning "involuntary, repetitive movements and vocalizations." These tics can begin to appear in children five to seven years old and may vary from mild to severe. Tourette's is reported to be "3 to 4 times more common in boys than girls," and the cause of the condition is currently unknown, though genetics and environmental factors likely play a major role.¹

Symptoms of Tourette's may include the following:

- Motor tics, such as eye blinking, head jerking, nose twitching, stepping in a particular pattern, touching or smelling objects
- Vocal or phonic tics, such as grunting, coughing, throat clearing, repeating one's own or another's words, using obscene words²

ABOUT OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER

"Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is a common, chronic and long-lasting disorder in which a person has uncontrollable, reoccurring thoughts (*obsessions*) and behaviors (*compulsions*) that he or she feels the urge to repeat over and over."³

Symptoms may include the following:

- Anxiety about germs or becoming contaminated
- Needing to arrange objects in a certain order
- Fixation with being clean or with washing hands
- Needing to double-check (making sure doors are locked, oven turned off, and so on)
- Repeatedly feeling the need to count⁴