



# 'La Vie Est Belle... Life is Beautiful'

By KRISTIN REHKAMP

**One of my best and dearest friends said to me recently, "You are amazing. And crazy. But those go hand in hand, I think. Most amazing people have to tackle crazy to find their amazing."**

I laughed—not sure I am amazing. I am simply surviving, like most. Crazy—probably—most definitely. But, when times are hard or life throws you a loop, you have no other choice but to find your way in a different way, to continue living.

But let's start from the beginning.

My name is Kristin, proud mother to a beautiful 12-year-old girl who experienced a panic attack at a well-child check, on September 16, 2020, that triggered acute anxiety/severe panic disorder (a Mayo diagnosis, not mine) that changed our life, perspective, and path forward suddenly and without warning. Any stigmas or preconceived ideas about mental illness, let's just get rid of them right now.

Anna is blessed with a loving family, beautiful home, and safe community of friends and neighbors, and is an A-student and a dancer. Sadly, like any physical illness, mental illness can present just as suddenly, and happen to any of us.

Prior to September 16, 2020, our daughter had no indicators of any underlying mental health conditions or illness. Our daughter's sensory system, following her first and only panic attack, never relented and got progressively worse.

Symptoms included fluttering/upset stomach, dizziness, feelings of being hot, racing heart, perceived shortness of breath, and loss of sensation in limbs. Her panic attacks, or irrational state of fear, could/can last minutes or hours. Symptoms could/can appear seizure-like—uncontrollable body movements, eyes closed or they do not see, brain functions disassociate or go off-line, and sometimes an inability to speak. She enters a state of fight-or-flight—and WILL fight (hit anything and everything) and WILL flee. We have found her hiding in unusual places—once under our snow blower in the garage—and trying to leave the house, a couple of times in her PJs in sub-zero temps. Our daughter often mentions "life does not feel real" and dying feels easier.

In less than two weeks after her first panic attack, our daughter was admitted to a local hospital and, for seven days, waited for an inpatient mental health bed. Her symptoms got progressively worse, terrifyingly worse, nearly resulting in sedation and restraint to calm her body, mind, and sensory system that was malfunctioning.

From that moment on, our daughter was in-and-out of mental health hospitals for nearly two months, and on various different psychotropic drugs that did not appear to do her many favors, despite best intentions. Medications made her feel worse—specifically increasing dizziness—and the induced physical symptoms associated with panic scared her, increasing her anxiety.

It became a viscous cycle. The sicker our daughter felt, the greater her anxiety, and the more severe and often her panic presented. Her world became very small. She was unable to attend sixth grade or dance with her team. We could not attend the children's museum or the zoo for

more than 45 minutes. A hot boat ride, cold water swim, or go-kart races tripped physical symptoms resulting in panic attacks.

She survived in a protective bubble. "Living" was paused.

It quickly became painfully obvious that mental illness does not just impact one person. It impacts a family and a community. There were times my husband and I had to ask our nine-year-old son to take his five-year-old sister into her bedroom. He knew to grab a movie, headphones and to close the door to avoid the unwelcome sounds and sights of the panic attacks that plagued our oldest. I cannot begin to describe how that felt as a parent, recognizing the insanity of the ask and the horrible reason for it.

In addition, I remember tears from our littlest every time we took her sister to a medical appointment. Tears that stemmed from our oldest's second ER visit, resulting in a transfer to a local in-patient mental health hospital. Our littlest never got to say goodbye to her sister and waited 17 days to see her again. Every time our oldest experienced a panic attack, it induced fear in our littlest around the possibility that her sister would be "taken" and not come home.

I remember being in the throes of keeping our oldest daughter safe, while my heart broke for my other two children lost in the chaos of it all. Experiencing things, being asked to do things, seeing and hearing things you would never wish for any child.

Between September 2020 and August 2021, we have logged a total of three ER visits, three extended hospital stays, and a trip to Mayo in Rochester. We have consulted 12 different mental and physical health providers, considering everything from behavioral health to infectious disease(s). We have tried more medications and supplements than any child should ever brave – 40 to date (the last time I counted). We have a medical three-ring binder for our daughter that is bursting at the seams.

In February I put my corporate career on hold, adding care provider to my personal/professional resume. I remind myself every day that my greatest and most important job is and always will be "mom." The job does not come with a fancy corporate title like those I have held in the past, or a paycheck that supported a more than comfortable lifestyle. I have neither of those today...but I have my daughter.

We slowly move forward. Day-by-day. It is truly a mountain our family had to summit before healing could begin. We had to overturn every rock and be ready to accept the truth that there were no quick fixes, infectious disease, or "cause of." We surrounded ourselves by a strong, diverse, and comprehensive mental and physical health team. One team that was both right for our daughter and our family. A team that included Washington County, a medication manager, equestrian therapists, exposure therapists, a pediatric team that did not give up, our daughter's compassionate dance studio and school counselors/administrators who cared beyond the call of duty. This team met two to three times a week this past summer, working with our daughter in our home, her dance studio, and at her school. They met her where she needed them most (both physically and mentally). Rather than avoiding anxiety/panic attacks, our daughter and family learned to shoulder them, plan for them, and accept that the only way was through—not around. ►









◀ We learned not to be afraid and slowly, over time, we watch our daughter's panic disorder recede into more manageable emotions and behavior.

Our beautiful daughter is dancing again, started seventh grade on August 31, and is a stronger version of herself. Along the way, we took some right turns and, I think, we may have taken some wrong turns. But we

learned. We learned about our daughter, we learned about mental illness, we learned how to be a support system and stronger for each other. We cried a lot. We also laughed a lot, and reflected on our blessings.

I am reading the book, *Limitless*, by Mallory Weggemann, a Paralympic gold medalist. Her words resonate deeply and often occupy my thoughts.

Weggemann wisely says, "Life is about the long game, and what seems overwhelming in the moment could very well be pointing us toward something greater. It's up to us to push past the noise of our present, past expectations placed upon us, and into the boundless possibilities of our unwritten future."

From Mallory and others in my life who quietly and patiently guide, coach and love me, I am learning that there isn't really such a thing as going back to "normal" after trauma or tragedy. You cannot go back because somewhere along the way your perception of normal changes, based on your experience. Life for me, for my daughter, for my family, is still limitless. It will just be different.

I have slowly and intentionally molded a very different life than the one I lived prior to our daughter's first indication of a panic disorder last September. Most of the work was quietly done at night when my daughter and family slept. Days were centered around care and—at times—survival. At night, I built a business inspired by my journey, retail background, and love for interior design.

La Vie Est Belle, LLC ([lavieestbelle.live](http://lavieestbelle.live)) is an online storefront with a mission to inspire giving and beautiful living with unique gifts, home décor, and adorable items to delight babies and kids. In honor of our daughter, 20 percent of our net profits are donated to non-profits supporting children's mental health awareness and education.

I joined PrairieCare Fund board of directors, a non-profit grant making foundation with a mission to improve youth mental health and well-being.

I got involved in my local community by joining our local chamber of commerce, a woman's business bridge and local leadership program. We raised \$15K—through generous donations of friends and family—to provide 1,200 custom "Prairie Bears" for children admitted to PrairieCare's inpatient mental health hospital in Brooklyn Park. Bears are a collaboration between our daughter, family, DEMDACO, and PrairieCare. La Vie Est Belle was fueled by these new partnerships and a collective desire to do something meaningful for youth and families braving mental illness.

Although I may never understand the "why" behind our journey with our daughter, I do believe all things happen for a reason. I am hopeful my family will lend a strong and positive voice for children/adolescents, families, and those serving our communities working to break down barriers, raise awareness, and make a difference in the lives of those braving mental illness. As we advocate for our daughter, we look forward to evolving mental health/well-being thinking and care models for those who journey with us. These individuals and families are some of the most courageous people we know.

La Vie Est Belle (a French expression meaning "life is beautiful") was born out of the desire to tell our story—to be a voice, mindful reminder, and community for others. We are choosing our own path to happiness, and to love life now. We hope to inspire others as much as they inspire us.

I look forward to tomorrow without the fear and uncertainty the past has caused, realizing the blessings and strength that have found us when not looking. Life marches on—it always will. We cannot control the deck we are dealt, but we do get to choose how we play the cards. Remember, we are playing the long game. Life always goes on, and so must we.

Continue living. *RVW*