



Hold on Tight!

By Jan Stewart

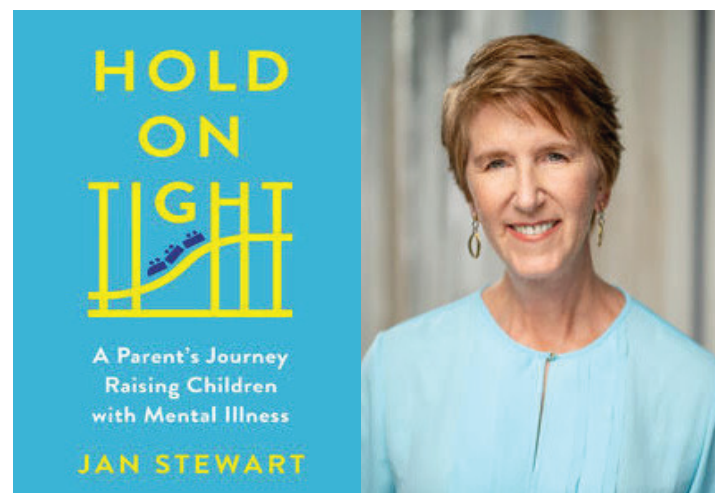
I never played bridge growing up in New York. Although I went to school with some of the Stayman boys and met a few of the top players, I thought the game was for old people – boy, was I wrong! Years later, when my children started high school, my husband and I decided to take up a new activity together. He thought of bridge or cooking. I quickly chose bridge, having no interest in cooking.

Once I started learning bridge, I became addicted. As we all know, bridge involves continuous learning, problem solving, partnership, and judgment. I was hooked after my first lesson with Barbara Seagram. I loved my early partnerships with rising stars like Sondra Blank, and benefited from fantastic mentors like Mark Liberman, Steve Mackay, and Lewis Richardson.

And bridge became much more than a game to me. I had a high-pressure career on Bay Street with the global executive search firm Egon Zehnder. Companies hired the firm to recruit and/or assess their CEOs, key executives, and Board members. I travelled internationally and seemed to live on a plane. And my home life was even more of a pressure cooker: both my children have multiple mental health disorders, including autism, Tourette Syndrome, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Attention Deficit Disorder, and learning disabilities. My husband and I have experienced paralyzing fear and despair, as well as hope, pride and awe. It's been quite a journey – and continues to be – to find the right psychiatrists, psychologists, medications, schools, housing, and employment. The children helped me find my purpose in life, and I have become a mental

health governance expert and advocate, serving on numerous Boards, ranging from Vice Chair at CAMH to currently chairing Kerry's Place Autism Services, Canada's largest autism services provider. While the children have faced heartbreaking adversity, their grit, determination, and perseverance are breathtaking and have helped them find their niches in life.

Why do I tell you this? Because bridge became my refuge. I could get away from all the stresses in my professional and personal life and spend 3+ hours at the table focusing 200% on bridge, and not on anything else. Bridge demands that focus. As I climbed the stairs up to the Toronto Bridge Club, I was reminded of the lyrics to *At the Ballet* from the musical *A Chorus Line*: "Up a steep and very narrow stairway, it wasn't paradise, but it was home." And the players at all the Toronto clubs that I frequented became my second family. They embraced me and gave me respite, and I loved them for that.



My wonderful regular bridge partners like Bruce Amos, Mark Liberman, Andy Risman, Paul Selick, Susan Wain and Gary Zlot helped me to advance quickly. I became a Life Master in less than three years and progressed to Diamond Life Master. I loved learning new systems like Precision. I started teaching 1:1 and giving back to the game. I couldn't envision a future without bridge.

But then the pandemic hit, and two events changed my bridge life: I started to play online and increasingly found it to be a grind. The fact that certain players also exhibited rude behaviour, especially to novice and intermediate players, didn't help. And then I was on a hike with my daughter and her dog on a beautiful sunny day when I tripped over a tree stump and went flying like a gazelle, fracturing my wrist in multiple places. The fracture was complicated by the fact that I have lymphedema, a condition that causes the tissues in my left arm and hand to swell due to my compromised lymphatic system from previous cancer surgery. It was difficult for the doctors to treat, and once the cast was off, the swelling surrounded my wrist and impeded my progress. What should have normally taken 6-12 weeks to rehabilitate took 6-12 months.

This led me to take a break from bridge. At first, I felt like I was in the Twilight Zone and wasn't sure what to do with my time. But it quickly occurred to me that with my mental health governance expertise and my lived experiences as a parent of not one, but two children with serious mental health disorders, this was an opportune time to give back and pay it forward. I have just finished writing *Hold on Tight: A Parent's Journey Raising Children with Mental Illness*, published by Barlow Books! The memoir is brutally honest and holds nothing back, detailing the non-stop, emotional roller coaster lives of my children, from birth to the present. I also gift parents with key insights to help them optimize their own lives, as well as the lives of their children. I'm on a mission to inspire and empower parents to persevere, have hope and not give up, as

well as to better educate families, friends, health care professionals, educators, and employers.

While I am deeply involved with promoting the book on my website at www.janstewartauthor.com and on social media (I post every day about mental health at *janstewartauthor* on Instagram and Facebook), as well as appearing on podcasts and making speeches across Canada and the US, it is time to return to bridge. I find myself refreshed, with a new perspective. I can laugh off what used to irritate me about players' behaviour. I don't take them as seriously and have more of a balanced perspective. Of course, I have to climb the learning curve again to become as sharp as I was before I took my hiatus, which will take some time, but I look at the game again with passion and fun. Bridge is, indeed, my second family.

