

PARENT AWARENESS SERIES:

The immediate crisis is over - Where do we go from here?

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One of the biggest challenges for teens following a suicide attempt, hospitalization or an intensive treatment program is figuring out how to get their lives back. As parents, though, you have your own set of worries. A lot of anxiety can come from the fact that your child is no longer receiving intensive mental health services. There can be lots of confusing and worrisome questions. How protective do you need to be? How much should you push your child? When do you give them space? An equally pressing concern can be what to say about these recent events. As you can imagine, this is usually a concern for your child as well and it's really important for you AND your child to try to have a conversation about this with your mental health provider before the return to school is planned. Because one of the things that gets pretty damaged after a suicide attempt or episode of self-harm is trust, it helps to talk about this with everyone in the room at the same time so the communication is clear.

There are actually some common questions and concerns that treatment providers are frequently asked regarding 'reintegration', which is what the process of returning back to regular life after being gone for a while is called. Here are some of these questions, along with suggested answers.

1. What do you tell people about where your child has been?

This is the most common question. The best answer is "whatever makes you comfortable." There is no reason for you or your child to feel embarrassed about getting help; however, that being said, it's important to recognize that there still is a lot of misinformation about mental health treatment. While it's not necessary to advertise where your child has been, there's also no need to lie. So, how do you strike that balance?

- First of all, most treatment providers recommend that someone in the school, club or activity have some basic information about your child and his/her recent struggle. No one needs to know all the details, but it will be extraordinarily helpful for your child to have an identified adult whom they can trust to be a resource if they are struggling. As one wise teen put it: "You may not want anyone to know, but make sure that someone knows just enough to have your back. You'll be thankful when you need it."
- Secondly, make sure you have your child's back. Academic pressure is often a stress trigger for adolescents, and teens who are struggling with mood shifts, anxiety or adjusting to medication find that these symptoms affect their school performance. Poor focus, concentration, and memory, difficulty with sleep - all of these are common symptoms which can

have a really negative effect on academic performance. For students who have missed some school due to symptoms or treatment, it gets even more challenging. There's the pressure of both catching up and moving ahead at the same time. Although it is your son/daughter's responsibility to complete missing school work, they may need your help in advocating with the school to create a reasonable academic plan. Meet with the appropriate staff at your child's school to find out what work needs to be completed and what kind of flexibility exists. Schools can frequently adjust deadlines or reduce the number of missed assignments in order to assist with reintegration into school. Sometimes it may be necessary to make schedule or class changes to reduce pressure. Is there an elective that can be put off until next year to allow for a study hall? Would a subject matter tutor make catching up easier? Can the school provide or suggest one? What before and after school assistance is available to help your child complete schoolwork and catch up with classes? You may even want to suggest to the care provider that they initiate a conference with the school prior to discharge so that some of this can be ironed out before your child even reenters a classroom. It will make your child's return to school easier and can reduce some potential stressors for them.

2. How can I help my child come up with an explanation for peers about where he's been?

Dealing with other students or peers is a bit trickier than dealing with adults. Some kids tell peers that they have been in treatment, but don't explain the reason why. If your child is the type to get away with it, answering follow up questions with "it's none of your business" or "I only talk with personal things with close friends" are certainly acceptable answers. Other kids have used the explanation that they have been "dealing with family problems." It's a way to acknowledge the question, without giving specific information. It also has the advantage of ending the conversation quickly since most people won't pry about the type of family problems.

Some adolescents can use their sense of humor. If your child tends to be humorous or sarcastic, then this skill can come in handy when answering these questions. An adolescent can tell peers almost anything that comes to mind. Kids have reported that they have used explanations like "trying out a new school on Mars, running a secret government program, catching fish in Alaska" and gotten away with it. Without follow-up questions!

Another common answer is for kids to say they have been out sick dealing with a medical problem. This can work especially well if your child is going to be missing some additional school for follow up appointments- it's a built in excuse for continuing absences. Again, the privacy shield is usually your best option. "I really don't want to talk about it. Thank you for asking" is usually a conversation stopper. Be careful, however, with using specific medical excuses like mono or the flu, as it can be easy to be caught in a lie, which can make things even more difficult for your child.

Another thing to consider is that if your child has been out of school for a while, there are almost certainly rumors circulating about them and where they have been. It's important to recognize that this may happen; don't put your head in the sand and think no one has noticed the absence. If your child has siblings or friends in the school, ask them what the rumors are. You know whatever you hear won't be nice- rumors and gossip rarely are- but at least your child can be realistically prepared for what they'll face. And you can help them create a plan to cope with it! If your child will allow it, make sure that the guidance counselor or trusted adult is involved as well. The good thing about rumor mills is that they tend to move

fast, and your child will only be the topic of conversation until the next interesting event. Reassure your son or daughter that they can deal with it and that they won't have to deal with rumors alone.

3. How much freedom do we give our child?

Phone, Computer, Friends - What do we let them do? These questions are challenging for parents of all adolescents but they become even more significant when you're worried about your child's safety and the possibility of self-harm. The best strategy addresses the issue of 'trust' we've talked about before and the importance of communication. You know your child and the pitfalls he/she may encounter so set realistic expectations and be open with your teenager about what they are. It is okay to monitor your kids closely and stay on top of their behavior and interactions with peers as long as they know that it's happening and is part of what they need to do to earn back trust. Daily or even weekly check in meetings (they don't need to be long -they can be as short as five minutes,) can be helpful in terms of clarifying rules for the week and also giving back privileges as they are earned. Make it clear to your child that you expect them to communicate with you. Explain that the more information you have about how they are doing and what they are feeling, the more helpful you can be as a parent. If they feel misunderstood, give them the opportunity to talk to you to help you understand their side of things. And be open to their perceptions! You don't have to agree with them to understand their point of view. Communication is a two way street, and has often been disrupted in families dealing with serious mental health issues. If you work on listening and not simply talking, you'll get a much better understanding of what's happening in your child's life.

An often contentious subject of conversation in any family relates to the use of the phone and computer. Here's your starting point: If your child is struggling with mental health issues and is in treatment, it is good to have the therapist involved in these discussions as they often raise a lot of conflict. The bottom line is, of course, it that it is your right as a parent to set limits and boundaries when it comes to the phone and computer use. Monitoring your child's interactions may be necessary until they are more stable and able to make better choices. Many suicide attempts have been precipitated by negative interactions on Facebook, instagram, or text messages so knowing what your child is being exposed to may be necessary to help keep them safe. Let your child know that you may look at their phone and if they have a Facebook account, you require having access to it. Yes, they can create another account and erase phone texts, but you are still sending a clear message of expectations that your child needs to hear. As they get healthier, as they communicate more with you and as the trust grows, the amount of supervision and monitoring can decrease.

Hanging out with friends is another area of your child's life that is important to consider. Friendships are vitally important to adolescent development, but when your child is struggling, conflict with peers is also a potential stress trigger. The best advice is to reintegrate friendships slowly. Allow your child to have friends come over the house. Be sure to check in after these interactions to get a sense of how it went. Is your child feeling less stressed and supported? Or more stressed and tearful? These responses will be clues as to which friends are the healthiest for them to be around. The best ways to interact with peers is usually in more structured situations like groups at school or church, clubs, activities, sports. They provide the opportunity for peer interaction but with adult supervision and with an identified area of focus. The more challenging question of course, is what about the peers who may have supported your child's unhealthy behaviors, like drinking or drugging or self-injury. How do you handle those relationships? Hopefully, during the period of intensive treatment, the peers who were involved in your child's poor choices will have been identified and some type of plan developed to address these relationships. If that didn't

happen, you will need to make your concerns about these friendships clear to your child, and keep your eyes open for behaviors that worry you. Also remember that changing circles of friends doesn't happen overnight and you need to be patient with the process.

4. What do I tell my friends and family about where my child has been?

Telling family and friends is another area where the best answer is “do what makes you most comfortable.” You know the people in your life who will be understanding and supportive listeners. You also know the people who will be less than kind in their responses. Pick and choose. Everyone doesn't need to get the whole story but just as it's important for your child to have a trusted adult as a confidant, you also need someone you trust to support you. You can't feel like you have to hide what you are thinking and feeling from everyone, and having that outlet of support is important for your own self-care.

For your other children, especially those that live in the home, including them in a conversation about what's going on is important. Siblings know and understand more than we think, and not giving them information tends to confuse them. Just like most adults, children tend to jump to conclusions when given limited information, and those conclusions usually include the worst possible scenarios. Giving siblings an opportunity to ask questions and share their fears is helpful. Again, make educated choices about just how much information to give based on the ages of the siblings and discuss it with professionals

When it comes to extended family, giving some broad information is usually helpful but not everyone needs to know what you and your child are going through. Make your choices wisely and make sure everyone in the family understands what information will be shared with whom. When it comes to family events, craft a plan ahead of time. Help your child anticipate what part of the event might be overwhelming and then problem-solve some strategies to deal with the potential stressors. Can they go for a walk? Can they bring some books or video games to distract them? Even with a plan, recognize that groups of people may be tough for your child to handle right now and some additional support- or abrupt change in plans- might be necessary.

5. Where do I get support for myself?

Parenting is a tough job, even when things are going well. When you're confronted with serious concerns about a child, however, there's no way you can bear that burden alone! But just as you found help and support for your child, you can find it for yourself. First of all, you can get your own individual therapist if needed. Having someone to talk to about your feelings can be one of the best ways to take care of yourself.

There are also wonderful resources available to assist parents who are dealing with mental health issues in their children. NAMI.org is a great website that provides education and support about the variety of mental health issues that families can face. Another recommended website is the Depression and Bipolar support group site, which can be reached at dbsaalliance.org. In New Jersey, they have a local site as well, dbsanewjersey.org. Each of these websites has helpful information as well as links to free support groups.

6. What's the take-away?

The most important thing to remember is that what happened with your child isn't simply an 'event' but an ongoing process that will require you to continue to make decisions about your child's welfare. If you are struggling with making good choices for your child due to concerns about their safety and their mood, then get a professional to help you. A therapist is going to be able to assist you in making the best decisions

get a professional to help you. A therapist is going to be able to assist you in making the best decisions and can be a sounding board for your concerns.

Even though your child may seem better after this initial period of intensive treatment, what happened isn't something that can be fixed quickly. Your child will need to continue to see a mental health professional to work through the issues that resulted in the situation you're dealing with now. Be patient with the process and work to help your child with patience as well.

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