Parenting a Teen With a Mental Health Issue or Substance Use Disorder

Reviewed Apr 5, 2016

Staying positive can be hard if your teen has a mental health or substance use issue. You want to help. But deep down, you know that you can’t control the issue or the choices your child makes. You may find the mental health system to be confusing. This can make you feel helpless and without choices. And self-doubt and self-blame may make you doubt your skills as a parent.

Parenting a teen with a mental health or drug issue is a huge task. But the love you have for your child will give you the strength you need. Read on to learn steps you can take to help your teen and yourself.

**Find a mental health provider**

There are two things to keep in mind when looking for the “right” care for your teen. First, an assessment and recovery course should only come after a full evaluation. This can take many office visits. Second, whomever your child sees must welcome and respect your opinion and treat you as a partner in your child’s care.

If you are unhappy with the provider, or don't feel good about the assessment or care, get a second opinion. Ask your family doctor to suggest a mental health expert who works with teens and families.

**Make sure care aligns with best practice**

When a family is in crisis, parents are often willing to try anything. This is one more reason to find a skilled mental health worker, who is more likely to know best practices in helping teens. Keep in mind that some care that works for adults may not work or be best for teens. For example, group programs for drug problems, which are sometimes court-ordered, can undermine healing and even backfire by connecting teens with peers who glorify drugs and support use.

**Reach out to parents who have walked in your shoes**

Being a parent of a child with a mental health or drug issue can be isolating. Some people will feel for you, but that’s not the same as knowing what you are going through. Plus, the stigma and judgment of others can wear away your self-esteem.

This is why finding a support group is key. Parents who know what you are going through can give aid that is hard to find elsewhere. Support groups can also help you learn how to:
cope with crisis and challenges
learn the mental health system and get help
advocate for your child
take care of your family needs
cope with stress

Al-Anon has groups for people who have family members with a drug issue.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) has groups for families of people living with mental illness. NAMI also has Family-to-Family, a free program taught by trained caregivers of people with mental illness. People who have taken this course say they feel more empowered, less anxious, and better able to solve issues that can come up when parenting a child with mental illness.

Learn how to advocate for your child

Find out what services are on hand, and what your child can get. Become allies with teachers, social workers, doctors, and others. Expect timely replies and be assertive if needed.

Take time to care for yourself

The wish to put your teen’s needs before your own may always be there. But you will be a better parent if you look after your own health and well-being. Take a few minutes each day to do something that you enjoy or helps you relax. Now and then, make time to be with people you love and care about.

If you find that too much worry or the burden is too much to bear, seek help. Talk therapy can help you to work through any pull on your marriage or family life. This strain can happen when so much energy is aimed at parenting one child.

Believe that your caring actions matter

Dr. Craig LeCroy, an expert in children’s mental health, writes in his book Parenting Mentally Ill Children, “For many parents who do find hope, that outcome emerges from their efforts geared toward reaching out and focusing on caring actions—it becomes a personal strength. It is difficult, but when parents do focus on being in the service of something larger than themselves, they may find their lives become more meaningful.”

Resources

National Alliance on Mental Illness
www.nami.org

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry
www.aacap.org

National Institute on Drug Abuse