

AN INTRO TO PARENT COACHING & PARENT SUPPORT





What is Parent Coaching?

As parents we are positioned to have an enormous impact on the lives of our children. Even though it doesn't always feel true, the power and influence we hold is extraordinary! Everything we do, and don't do, everything we say, or don't say, every subtlety in our tone of voice, body language, and more, it all matters and always has. Yet as the parent of an adolescent or young adult who is struggling with mental health or substance abuse issues, it can feel as though just the opposite is true. It's as though you have no power and that nothing you say or do makes any difference at all. Overwhelmed, scared, unsure of where to turn or whose advice to take, it's not uncommon for parents of children who struggle with their mental health to be left feeling helpless - at times even hopeless.

As a mental health professional who has worked with parents and young adults for decades the biggest mistake(s) I see parents making time and again is the direct result of the deep love, care, and concern they have for their child.

These mistakes happen because the natural instincts we experience as parents to protect to fix, direct, shield, nurture and support can result in things said and done that contribute to our child's problem becoming bigger, rather than smaller.



Parenting adolescents and young adults who struggle with mental illness can at times defy our basic instincts as loving, supportive, and nurturing caregivers. This is why it is not uncommon for parents to find themselves feeling powerless. Without realizing it - and right under their very noses - the ways in which they have been parenting can be contributing to and even perpetuating a cycle of symptoms - the unhelpful thoughts, emotions, and behaviors - that as parents, we would do almost anything to see our kids overcome.

There is however, very good news!

Although it is the case that every child has a unique personality and perspective - with differing needs and ways of experiencing the world around them - the behavior, thoughts, and emotional reactions of those diagnosed with a mental illness are inherently predictable.

Why would this be?

It is this inherent predictability, the consistent form, fashion, progression and course, regardless of individual differences, that defines an illness and what qualifies someone as having a "mental illness".

It is precisely this predictable nature that affords us, as professionals, the ability to guide parents (and of course our clients) towards tangible strategies and solutions that can bring about positive changes. Parent coaching is very much about learning how to not only identify what it is you can do to support ongoing recovery and to positively contribute to your child's health, wellness and success, but to also become aware of the ways in which you may be unknowingly contributing to the outcomes you don't want, rather than the ones that you do.

THE KEY TARGET OBJECTIVES FOR PARENT COACHING AND PARENT SUPPORT



- Develop concrete tools, strategies, and solutions that support your child’s ongoing recovery, and prosocial and adaptive behaviors.
- Develop a greater understanding of the symptoms and internal experience/perspective of your child’s inner world.
- Learn positive de-escalation tools for you and for your loved one.
- Identify the unhelpful patterns that contribute to the “same old” unhelpful cycle.
- Develop coping skills to better prepare you for your child’s provocations, distressing events, emotional outbursts, and “tantrum” like behavior.
- Learn to shift from a “crisis management” mindset to one of deliberate focus and intention (from a short-term to long-term focus).
- Learn how to set, hold, and maintain loving, supportive, healthy and positive corrective boundaries, AND importantly, how to stick to them.
- Learn to take ownership of emotional reactions and to model corrective behaviors.
- Improve overall relationship(s) with loved ones.

A FEW IMPORTANT THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

First, in no way are we implying that your child's mental health struggles are your fault.



It's important for families to understand the mind does not develop in a vacuum. Mental development is a complex interplay of nature and nurture and it would be far too simplistic to suggest that mental illness occurs as the result of any one event, gene, person, place, or thing.

It would also be equally false to say your child's emotional and psychological struggles have absolutely nothing to do with you. The truth is a family is a system that is very influential. The point here though is human development is remarkably complex and harboring guilt, shame or blame regarding your child's mental health is counterproductive, at best.

It is also worth noting that the influence of environmental factors always lies in the eyes of the beholder. The meaning we assign to our experiences are largely dependent on our individual perception and not on any objective or "factual" bits of information. Most parents are incredibly well intended and simply want the best for their children. Our intentions, however, may not always matter. It is our child's perception that they are responding to, not the "facts of the case". Which, at times, may seem to you to be illogical.





Acknowledging The Challenges Of The Adolescent & Young Adult Brain

Lastly, it is also helpful to keep in mind one important distinction easily overlooked regarding adolescence and young adulthood. It truly is a unique and challenging time for human brain development.

With the brain not fully mature until at least age 25, it is our executive function, the part of our brain responsible for logical reasoning, rationality, good decision making, impulse control, and emotion regulation that is the very last to come "online". Neuroscientist and professor of neurological sciences at Stanford University Robert Sapolsky describes adolescence and young adulthood in the following ways:



"Adolescence limbic, autonomic, and endocrine systems are going full blast while the frontal cortex is still working out the assembly instructions.... This explains why adolescents are so frustrating, great, asinine, impulsive, inspiring, destructive, self-destructive, selfless, selfish, impossible, and world changing. Think about this, adolescence and early adulthood are the times when someone is most likely to kill, be killed, leave home forever, invent an art form, help overthrow a dictator, ethnically cleanse a village, devote themselves to the needy, become addicted, marry outside their group, transform physics, have hideous fashion taste, break their neck recreationally, commit their life to God, mug an old lady, or be convinced that all of history has converged to make this moment the most consequential, the most fraught with peril and promise, the most demanding that they get involved and make a difference. In other words, it's the time of life of maximal risk taking, novelty seeking, and affiliation with peers. All because of that immature frontal cortex" (Sapolsky, 2017).

AS YOU CONSIDER WORKING WITH A PARENT COACH HERE ARE A FEW TIPS TO GET YOU STARTED

1. Stop and Listen. Really Listen.

For parents and children alike, words - what you say - does not matter nearly as much as how you act. When we are being 100 percent honest with ourselves, and despite our best effort and good intentions, we may not be present with our kids enough. Can you challenge yourself to give your child your full, present, and undivided attention one time each week? That is, without multitasking - no cooking, cleaning, working, and, most importantly, without a cell phone, TV, iPad, or laptop nearby. Additionally, maybe, try not to say much, but rather focus on showing them with your body language, eye contact, and uninterrupted attention how much you care and are trying your best to understand them on a deeper level.

Remember what they are after most is validation and understanding. Validation means acknowledging their thoughts, feelings, and sense of self while being careful not to dismiss, interrupt, or give advice.



2. Resist the Urge To Give Advice



As parents we are natural fixers. We kiss boo-boos, clean up messes, dry away tears, and do all we can to take away any hurt, pain, and suffering as quickly as possible. We are programmed to fix their problems, and to help our kids succeed at all costs! The needs of adolescents and young adults, however, are quite different from that of younger children. This is precisely the time where we want to hand over the "fixing" to them in preparation for the trials and tribulations of adult life. That is largely what emerging adulthood is all about. It is what the time in between childhood and adulthood is for - trial and error while still within the relative confines and safety of our parents and family.

Advice giving, however, is particularly dangerous territory. There may be no faster way to push your child away and in the opposite direction of what it is you would want for them than by telling them what you think they should do. Persistent lecturing, repeating oneself, nagging, or other attempts to "get through" to them or to make sure they "understand" are rarely effective strategies for change. Remember our words are not as important as how they are being experienced. In other words, it's not what you say, it's how you are delivering the message.

Maybe the biggest challenge facing parents during this time is their own fear - their struggle to let go and to allow their children to learn important life lessons for themselves. Unfortunately words just don't teach the way life does.

It may also be worth noting that the vast majority of YOUR value system was passed along to your child by the age of 7. This means, regardless of what your child might be saying or doing, deep down they already know what your advice would be. In fact, in all likelihood, it is your voice they have adopted as their own inner critic.

This is a time of great sensitivity. Underneath substance abuse and mental illness is a deep insecurity. A sense of "not being good enoughness". When parents repeat themselves, nag, threaten, or try and intellectually reason with their children over and over, it is likely to exacerbate the underlying insecurity.



If asked directly for advice, the correct response is something to the effect of, "Why don't you tell me what you're thinking is on this?" or "Well, let's talk about it. I want to hear what is in your head". Again, words do not matter as much as your actions do. Show them with your focus you are listening, and that you have faith in them.

Do not be fooled by their false bravado, regardless of how confident you think they seem. Regardless of how often they tell you "they don't care what you or anyone else thinks", adolescence and young adulthood is marked by just the opposite. We are genetically programmed to care deeply about fitting in, being accepted, being liked, and seeking the approval of others (Sapolsky. 2017).

PRACTICE

Try observing your next exchange as though it is on mute. Focus on the body language, the subtleties being exchanged. What is really being said, without being said?



3. Know the End Game

Our first order of business in parent work is helping you to begin to see clearly what it takes to recover from symptoms of mental illness. In an effort to develop this understanding see if you can't use your next interaction to identify and distinguish the difference between what we refer to as "content" vs. "process". "Content" refers to the details of what is being discussed in a conversation, or of what is playing out in one's life experience. It is a reference to the people, places, and things: the "who", "what", "where", "why", and "when", the "he said, she said", the details of the story/conversation. This should be really easy to spot as it is what most people mistakenly give the majority of their attention to, day in and day out. This is the "who did what to whom", and "where, when and why" it happened.

Conversely, "process" refers to the way in which we are thinking, feeling, being, and behaving. It is the how! How we approach the people, places, and things in our lives. The very way in which we have learned to perceive our world and to see ourselves within it.

This distinction between "process" and "content" is a very important one. When we talk about recovery from mental illness or substance use disorders what we are really talking about is making changes to one's process. Changing how we think, how we feel, how we act, and how we react to the content, to the people, places, and situations in our day to day lives.

Changes to the "content" of our lives inevitably occurs as the result of changes to our process. We want to be mindful, however, that changing the content without making changes to one's process rarely has long term therapeutic value. Change only happens by building new wiring in the brain and body that stands up under stress and over time. It does not happen by changing boyfriends, schools, or jobs. If we don't change how we think, feel, and experience our lives, even with major changes to our circumstances, it is unlikely we will see real, meaningful change and recovery.

4. Manage Your Fear First



In a funny way, much of parent coaching comes down to turning your focus away from your child. By focusing on them you unknowingly have given away much of your power to effectively help. There you have no control. Modeling corrective behaviors - managing your emotional and psychological life in healthier ways - is the most powerful tool you have for dozens of reasons. First, and most importantly, it works! If positive change is what you are after, turning your attention to you and your health and wellness is the first step in that direction.

This is a powerful approach that will palpably change the well established dynamics of your relationship. Although it may require a leap of faith, the helpfulness of turning your attention to your emotional well being cannot be overstated.



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