



WHAT TO DO AFTER AN ATTEMPT OR HOSPITALIZATION

Guidelines for Parents and Guardians

One of the biggest challenges for teens and young adults following a suicide attempt hospitalization or an intensive treatment program is figuring out how to get their lives back on track. 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 and you will again feel responsible for their safety. How protective of your child do you need to be? How much should you push your child? When do you give them space? How can you collaborate with them to provide a comfortable degree of support? How do you deal with the impact of their behavior on the rest of the family? How do you explain to outsiders what's been happening in your family?

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

1) HOW DO I DEAL WITH MY OWN FEELINGS?

- The place to start with any parenting challenge, as you've probably learned through the years, is to identify your own feelings about the situation. Having a child who is struggling with mental health issues, especially if it involves suicide, can be overwhelming. First of all, it can be hard to believe that your child is so miserable they are thinking about taking their own life. You had no idea it could ever be that bad! Secondly, you have to confront your own fears that perhaps your parenting is to blame. Finally, you have to accept that the only way to get back in control is to give up some control to a skilled mental health professional who knows how to help your child get back on track.
- Let's talk a minute about your concerns about bad parenting as the cause of your child's distress. Certainly, parenting plays a role in our children's adjustment, but it is only one of many factors and is not the cause of suicide. There is always more than one reason for thinking about suicide- what you may hear referred to as 'risk factors'. That's why you want to involve a mental health professional who can help your child figure out what the risks are for them and collaborate with them to create more effective strategies for coping. Try to understand that the fact that you are taking your child's feelings seriously is a sign of effective parenting.

2) HOW MUCH FREEDOM DO I GIVE MY 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' and the importance of communication. You know your child and the pitfalls they may encounter, so set realistic expectations and be open about what they are. Many therapists suggest putting your agreement in writing to avoid potential misunderstandings. Even though you may meet with some resistance from your child, start out with a slow but gradual increase in privileges, tied to a mutual perception of how well they're doing or input from their therapist. Many parents remove locks from bedroom doors as a safety

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measure and/or ask that the child remain in common areas of the home rather than being isolated in their bedroom. Negotiate but give yourself room to backtrack if you become concerned about your child's safety. Bottom line: it's okay to monitor your kids closely and stay on top of their behavior and interactions as long as they know that's the way it's going to be and is part of what they need to do to earn back trust.

- Monitoring your child's online 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 Instagram, Tik Tok, Snapchat, Facebook 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 another online 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, communicate more with you and as the trust grows, the amount of supervision and monitoring can decrease.
- If your child feels misunderstood, give them the opportunity 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, although you may find yourself frustrated by the process if their logic is hard to follow. Don't give up! Hang in there until you can at least articulate what they seem to be expressing. This is one of the strategies you can use to demonstrate that communication is a two-way street and requires both someone who is speaking and someone who is listening. If you demonstrate you can listen and not simply talk, not only will you get a much better understanding of what's happening in your child's life, but you'll be modeling the respectful communication style you expect from them in return.
- Peer relationships are important and will probably return to the same degree of connection that existed prior to your child receiving mental health services. Circles of friendship may be extended through relationships developed in treatment programs and it's helpful to ask about these new 'friends' so you can stay on top of the quality of these relationships.
- The more challenging question of course, is what about the peers who may have supported your child's unhealthy behaviors, like drinking, doing drugs 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, and your child, need to be patient with the process.
- Finally, no matter what the circumstances are of your child's mental health crisis, make sure to go through your home and take away anything they could use to harm themselves. Get firearms out of the home as long as there are ANY concerns about your child's safety! Also remove both prescription and over the counter medications like Tylenol and put them somewhere even the most clever child cannot find. Knives and scissors should also be considered dangerous so hide them, too. If this seems pretty excessive to you, you can remind both yourself and your child that parenting effectively involves trying to think ahead and prevent bad things from happening. You appreciate that they may disagree, but this is your decision. You clearly communicate the message that you are in control which, although they may protest, can reassure your child that someone is running the show!

3) HOW DO I MANAGE THE DISRUPTION MY CHILD'S ILLNESS HAS CREATED IN THE FAMILY?

Of course, this is going to differ in degrees from family to family but here are a few suggestions to try even while your child is still away for treatment:

- Sit the members of your family down together and be honest. Admit the challenges you all may have been experiencing and give everyone a chance to express their feelings about the possible disruptions that have taken place in family life. Again, this is where that skill of simply listening comes in. You can't change what happened or how family members feel about it but you can establish some guidelines for the way your family will operate in the future.
- Explain what you can about the treatment that their sibling is receiving. Unfortunately, they may not notice a lot of changes when their sibling first gets home, but be as encouraging as you can about the mental health services that will be in place to gradually help their sibling feel better.
- Let them know that they can do their part in helping the family work better together by coming to you anytime with questions or concerns.
- Involve your child's therapist in discussions about a structured way you can refocus all members of the family on the recovery.

4) WHAT DO I TELL MY FRIENDS AND FAMILY ABOUT WHERE MY CHILD HAS BEEN?

- Telling family and friends is an area where the best answer is to follow your own judgment. 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.
- 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) WHAT DO I TELL OTHER PEOPLE ABOUT WHAT'S GOING ON?

This is one of the most common questions parents raise. The best answer is "whatever makes you comfortable." And, if your child is a young adult who has been living away from home, it may not even be a question you have to deal with. 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 there's no need to lie about where your child has been, it's also not necessary to advertise it. So, how do you strike that balance?

- First of all, recognize that your feelings, and those of your child, are going to drive your explanation. If you are struggling to accept your child's mental health crisis and are having trouble explaining it, even to yourself, a vague statement like: "They needed a time out for some rest and recovery" may be enough. Explain that you'd rather not get into it if you're asked for further clarification. Check it out with your child, however, to make sure you're both on the same page.
- Your child may choose to be more self-disclosing, especially to their close friends. It's certainly helpful to their recovery if they can be honest, but remind them that they are entitled to some privacy, especially if you're concerned they might 'overshare'. If your child has been the target of bullying, encourage them to think twice about sharing information that could be ammunition for the students who have been bullying them. "Taking some time for myself" is a vague enough answer to questions about where

they've been and may effectively stop the conversation. If they're asked for more details, a response like 'Thanks for asking but I keep my life to myself' can be a good way to change the subject.

6) HOW DO I HANDLE DEALING WITH THE SCHOOL

It can be helpful to alert someone in the school, usually a counselor, to what's been going on with your child. The school doesn't need to know the details about their treatment, but it will be helpful for your child to have an identified adult in the school whom they can trust to be a resource. You might even ask if the school is willing to work with your child's outside therapist to create what's called a 'safety plan' for school hours. At its most basic, a safety plan asks your child to identify the specific situations that create distress for them, then list techniques they can use to cope and people they can go to for help.

- 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. They- siblings and friends- may also need your help in creating a nondefensive, vague response. The rumors and gossip will probably be dramatic- they usually are- but at least you and your child can be realistically prepared for what they'll face when they return. 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 on quickly, and your child will only be the topic of conversation until the next interesting event. Reassure your child that they can deal with it and that they won't have to deal with rumors alone.
- If your child is struggling with mood shifts, anxiety or adjusting to medication, they may find that these symptoms affect their school performance. Poor focus, concentration, memory, and difficulty with sleep – all of these are common symptoms which can have a really negative effect on academic performance. This is another reason it's helpful to have someone in the school who can be an advocate for your child if their academic requirements need to be temporarily adjusted.
- For students who have missed more than a week of school due to symptoms or treatment, it may be more challenging. There's the pressure of catching up and moving ahead at the same time. Although it is your child's responsibility to complete missing schoolwork, they may need help in advocating with the school to create a reasonable academic plan. Again, that's where that school counselor or resource person comes in!

7) 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! 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. The [Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health](#) is a National organization with state and local chapters. They provide a broad array of services including parent advocates and advisors, support groups and some chapters provide respite services and teen support groups.
- [NAMI.org](#) is a great website that provides education and support about a variety of mental health issues that families can face. They also provide educational support groups for families dealing with serious mental illness. <https://www.nami.org/Find-Support>

- Finally, <http://childmind.org> provides well-written, easy to understand information on a range of issues that parents address from their children's infancy to young adulthood.
- 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. You will probably get discouraged from time to time which is why getting some support for yourself will be so important. If you are struggling with making good choices for your child due to concerns about their safety and their mood, 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. You don't need to feel like you're alone!