

Thriving During the Teenage Years – Leading Teens to Counseling

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Q: How do I get my unwilling teenager to talk to someone, such as a therapist?

Sign me, Concerned Mom

A: The pivotal challenge in creating getting your teen to meet with a counselor is getting them to willingly attend the initial session. Who wouldn't be uncomfortable with the prospect of sharing personal information with a complete stranger? Particularly when you know you're "not crazy," don't particularly like the idea and are other-referred (aka, dragged in by your parent). Luckily, there are steps that you can take that will greatly increase your chances of success:

Do your homework. A common mistake is to pick a random therapist, have it not work out, and have your teen more resistant than ever to see "another shrink." Make sure that the therapist you go to is licensed and experienced. You can check a psychotherapist's license status online at: www.doradls.state.co.us/alison.php. Next, try to make sure that he/she has experience working successfully with adolescents. You can accomplish this by getting recommendations from friends, coworkers or community professionals (your pediatrician, school personnel-guidance counselors, school interventionists, etc.). In addition, don't be reluctant to first interview the therapist over the phone or in person. Ask about their experience working with adolescents and how they would approach treating someone with symptoms like your child is exhibiting. Does this seem like someone your teen could relate to?

Empower your teen. It is important to give your teen a voice in the decision making whenever possible. After explaining why you feel that talking to someone is important, consider sharing the decision making with him or her. For example, say: "While you need to go to this initial appointment, we can talk together afterward to decide together if continuing would be a good idea." Any effort to respect his voice in the decision-making process will increase his investment and eventual benefit.

Provide him with an out. One reason that teens (and others) resist the idea of counseling is that there is a concern that it may go on forever. During the initial meeting, I suggest to parents that they make an agreement with their teen to attend four to six additional sessions. If he doesn't feel that it's worth his time and (his parents') money, he can rethink it at that point. That doesn't necessarily mean stop altogether, but reevaluate it.

Reinforce his efforts. Along the way, make sure to let your teen know that you're proud of his efforts. This would ideally start with that initial session and continue throughout treatment.