How Your Child Can Maintain Mental Health Treatment When Moving to Campus

Here's what parents and new college students can do to ensure continuity of care.

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It's important for parents and children to sufficiently prepare for a child's move to campus, and that includes making sure new college students continue receiving effective treatment for any physical or mental health conditions.

MANY COLLEGE STUDENTS come to campus with mental health conditions for which they are receiving treatment. For these students, maintaining continuity of care is vital.

While it may seem overwhelming, scary and disruptive to change mental health providers or start treatment in a new place, college is an important next step in an emerging adult's life. You and your child can minimize stress and maximize your kid's chance for success on campus by making clear, manageable plans for treatment in advance of your child's departure.

Have your child talk to the current treatment provider about moving. Many of us who work privately with college-bound students have relationships either with on-campus resources or with providers close to campus. The current treatment provider will have vital knowledge about your child's needs and will be able to guide him toward effective and accessible help. At least for the first year, your kid should continue treatment with someone recommended or vetted by his current therapist.

[Read: Depression-Proofing Your College Kid.]
**Continue with current treatment.** Moving to campus changes everything. Your child might be more likely to miss medication or to skip behavioral homework, like mindfulness meditation or exposure exercises for social anxiety, around the time she moves to campus. Take reasonable steps to make sure that medications are not missed and that she takes them as directed, even if this means stopping on the drive to campus to have a meal, for medication that should be taken with food. Also make sure that she has copies of her prescriptions and knows how to reach her current treatment providers.

**Know what medical and mental health services are available on and near campus.** Most colleges have some form of mental health services or counseling available, though those vary widely depending on the campus. Even if he has arranged treatment with an off-campus provider, make sure he knows what is available on campus and how to contact those services should an immediate need arise.

**Know what mental health services cost and if there are limits or waitlists.** Many campuses have seen an overwhelming increase in demand for mental health services. College students face new pressure for which they are unprepared and often seek help. A portion of students who begin their college careers without mental health concerns will develop diagnosable conditions during college. In response to increased demand, some campuses charge for services, put limits on the number of sessions or place students on waitlists for treatment. Keep these things in mind when making decisions about where to seek help.

[Read: *7 Signs of Campus Homesickness.*]

**Reach out to on-campus mental health services.** Do this whether your child plans on receiving on-campus treatment or not. Reaching out to on-campus services can be uncomfortable. Many students with mental health issues want a fresh start on campus and not to be defined by their mental health condition. Others fear the stigma that is often associated with mental illness. Many kids believe that disclosing a condition will bring them negative attention. While all those concerns are valid, your kid's college will be better prepared to help if the appropriate campus professionals are aware of her condition ahead of time.

Some campuses ask for that information as part of routine health screening. In those cases, be sure to be open and honest about pre-existing conditions. There are strict privacy rules in place protecting health information. If you have concerns about your child disclosing her condition to appropriate on-campus professionals, she should discuss those concerns with campus administrators and – in certain cases – may wish to reconsider her choice to attend that school.

**Have a contingency plan.** Students with a workable plan for maintaining treatment are likely to make it through the semester without incident. Any effective plan will include steps to take in the event of unexpected obstacles. The most important feature of any mental health contingency plan is quick and easy access to help. Both you and your kid should have the phone numbers and other contact information for campus mental health, campus health and local emergency services saved to your mobile devices. While it's unlikely he
will need them, emergencies are a bad time to be looking for vital information. You and your child should also know the campus policies and procedures for voluntary or mandatory leaves of absence during health and mental health emergencies.

**Know how to recognize trouble.** Moving to campus comes with its own set of difficulties, many of which your kid will manage well on her own. To stay on a healthy course, both you and your child must be aware of signs of trouble. Changes in thoughts, feelings and behaviors are to be expected, but anything truly out of the ordinary – or anything that has been a sign of danger in the past – should be addressed quickly.

[See: How College Students Can Avoid Getting Sick.]

Maintaining effective treatment is an important part of college success. It is as important as knowing where your classes are and the dining hall hours. In many cases, it is as lifesaving as an EpiPen or an asthma inhaler, and can be as unobtrusive if done well.