

West County Psychological Associates

The WCPA News

12125 Woodcrest Executive Drive, Suite 110 St. Louis, MO 63141
Website: WCPASTL.COM Phone (314) 275-8599 Email: wcpa@sbcglobal.net

Fall, 2015

Understanding Teen Cutting and Self-Harm

Dena Bubrick-Tranen, MSW, LCSW

Discovering that a young person has been cutting or engaging in any kind of self-injurious behavior can be both baffling and disturbing. While this behavior has been glorified by many celebrities, on YouTube and through various memes, it is not a normal part of “teen angst.” Self-harm is a sign of deeply rooted psychological pain that requires a thoughtful and compassionate response.

Research has shown that some people are more vulnerable to using self-harm as a coping strategy than others. These individuals are often seen as hypersensitive or emotional, they may have reactions that seem over the top to those around them and they usually have a difficult time recovering from having hurt feelings or experiencing a stressful event. Various studies estimate that anywhere from 1 in 10 to 1 in 14 adolescents will engage in this behavior at some point during their teenage years and approximately 5-10% will carry it into early adulthood.

It can be very difficult for parents and educators to understand why in the world someone would intentionally hurt him/herself. After all, such adults have probably spent a great deal of time trying to protect the children in their lives from the dangers they might face in the world. So it is especially frightening to find out that one’s child or student may be cutting or engaging in other forms of self-harm. Most of the time, this behavior is the result of a particularly challenging or painful interpersonal interaction. A teen may perceive he/she has been judged, rejected or criticized and as a result feels an overwhelming amount of distress. The event leading up to feeling rejected or abandoned could be anything from a relationship break-up to being left out of a social activity to not receiving an immediate answer to a text message. Cutting is used as a way to regulate one’s emotions. Many teens report, when they feel physical pain on the outside, it dulls the emotional pain they feel on inside. When some adolescents experience a sense of failure or rejection they harm themselves as a punishment; ultimately this serves the same function - to help them re-regulate their emotions. In other words, for teens who lack positive coping skills, cutting is a way to solve the problem of feeling terrible.

(Continued)

In this issue:

Understanding Teen Cutting and Self-Harm
Page 1

**From the Director:
“Ordinary Children”**
Page 3

Fall Seminars from WCPA:
* School Anxiety, School Avoidance and School Refusal
* OCD in the Classroom
Page 4

Forgiveness Versus Reconciliation – And Why It Matters
Page 5

Cyber-Bullying: The New Face of Bullying in the Digital Age
Page 7

“I Am a Caregiver.”
Page 9

Cutting and self-harm are not in and of themselves mental illnesses or disorders. However, the presence of these behaviors often indicate that a teen is suffering from depression, anxiety or another mental health condition. A common question many parents and educators have about cutting is whether or not it should be interpreted as a suicide attempt or gesture. The strong emotions associated with self-harm may also lead a young person to have thoughts about suicide, although it is usually not the case that those who cut themselves are attempting suicide. Cutting is one of many risk factors a therapist or psychiatrist would look for in evaluating if a teen is suicidal.

Identifying when an adolescent is engaging in self-harming behavior is often a joint effort among parents, educators and pediatricians. Below is a list of some of the signs to watch for:

- visible cuts, scratches, burns or other injuries
- unseasonable clothing such long sleeves or long pants during the summer/warm weather
- evidence of an injury that has no explanation; i.e. blood on clothing or in the bathroom
- wounds or injuries that do not appear to be healing
- increased isolation and/or irritability
- avoidance of school, activities or friends
- statements about feeling lost, empty or like people hate him/her

Parents and educators should expect to have all kinds of reactions when they learn their loved one or student has been cutting. Many react initially with disgust, confusion or embarrassment. Some are hurt and angry their teen did not seek them out for help first. Some parents are already feeling burnt out from years of parenting their sensitive child and see this as “just one more thing,” while others blame themselves for not doing enough. Although all of these reactions are normal, it is not helpful to express them in front of an adolescent.

The most effective first step to helping a teenager who is self-harming is to validate the underlying feelings that drive him/her to cut or self-harm. Cutting is not an acceptable or healthy coping skill, though it may be the only one this teen has for the time being. Keep in mind, one can validate an adolescent’s feelings without validating cutting. Not sure how to validate or what that even means? Think of the way a parent or teacher might react to a young child with an injury from the playground. They might say something like, “Oh, no! I see your skinned knee, I’ll fix it, I’ll make it better.” That’s all there is to it - the most basic validation for an adolescent is similar: “I see you are in pain; I know you are hurting inside. I want to help you.”

It is important to have as calm of a demeanor as possible when raising this issue with an adolescent and anticipate he or she may initially respond with anger. For many teens, cutting is a highly shameful behavior which they will go to great lengths to hide from others. As a result, they may be embarrassed or defensive if they are caught or found out. It can also be frightening for teens to be told they have to give up this behavior, since it has likely proven to be effective in helping them manage their emotions. For some adolescents, cutting may be socially acceptable in their peer group and may be used as either a way to express strong emotions, rebel against authority or try to exert some control and independence.

Many parents and educators say teens cut “just for attention” and therefore the behavior should be ignored. At some point, with the help of a highly skilled and experienced therapist who knows the child very well, ignoring it may be an effective strategy. However, this can be a dangerous approach for a teen and family who have not yet received professional help. An adolescent who is hurting him/herself needs and deserves attention. It is important to seek advice from a mental health professional trained to deal with this behavior and the emotions that accompany it. Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) is currently viewed as one of the most effective treatments for individuals who engage in self-harm. DBT is a skills-based therapy that helps clients identify underlying emotions that lead to self-harm and teaches healthy ways of coping.

While it can be devastating to learn that a young person has been cutting, it is important to understand that this is a treatable condition. Remember, such a teen is not bad, manipulative or a lost cause - he/she needs help and support.



Dena is a graduate of The George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis. She began her career as a clinical social worker at the Harvard-affiliated McLean Hospital in Belmont, MA. While at McLean she received advance training in Dialectical Behavior Therapy, Mentalization Based Treatment and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. She has extensive experience in diagnosing and treating personality disorders and trauma-related disorders. Dena believes in using evidence-based therapies and offers comprehensive assessment and treatment for a wide range of mental health disorders including depression, anxiety, PTSD, eating disorders and substance abuse. She is known for her direct and interactive approach to therapy. She believes change and growth are possible and sees family members and school staff as important allies in this process.



**From the Director
“Ordinary Children”**



Mary Fitzgibbons, Ph.D.

Over the years, I have worked with hundreds of children. As a teacher and then a high school counselor, my expectation was that all children under my watch would do well. This began a life-long career of helping children achieve. But the question arises – what does it mean to do well or achieve? In a recent article in TIME magazine (August 3, 2015), Jeffrey Kluger makes the point that in today’s world the goal for many parents is that their children be exceptional. Modern parents often expect that all of our children will be accepted into those universities that admit only 9% of their applicants. This article contends that today’s parents give children a delusional sense that they will become the 1% top achievers. It is obvious that this is an impossibility. Think of the sense of dejection and hopelessness when these children realize that they are not who they were brought up to think they are.

It is my belief that we are valuing these children for what they can become rather for whom they really are. We create a world for them that says that they are the center of the universe and, as long as they are told they are the best, they believe themselves to be the best. But, being reasonable people, we know that this is not reality. In many cases, the motivation for these children comes from others telling them what they should be and then can be. It doesn’t come from an inner sense of well-being that creates internal motivation that says, “I want to do well because it feels good to do well.” It is not about the drive that stems from an inner sense of wanting to do what we think is important for us. Rather it is about what others want for us.

The other type of children I’ve spent a good amount of my time with, therapeutically, is the low achiever. This child doesn’t believe in himself and neither do most of the adults in his world. Again, there is the lack of internal motivation. The mantra is, “I would rather not try than try and fail.” They are often too well acquainted with failure. As parents, we cajole them, we bribe them and if that doesn’t work, we punish them. I can tell you that there can be a short-term positive effect from punishment of poor academic performance, but it doesn’t last. How do we reach these children? My experience is that we address the high achiever and the low achiever in the same way. We must first value them for who they are and not for the person we think they can be. We teach them to value themselves, again, for who they are and not for what others expect them to be.

I once had a young teenage girl who was sent to me for therapy by her high school principal because she was failing academically and had some serious behavioral issues. Both the school and her parents had just about given up on her. This girl resisted talking until I found that she had a passion for snakes. When she talked about snakes, she would become animated – really coming alive. She began to make some goals for herself. She either wanted to work in a herpetology department at a university or at the Zoo. She found a part-time research position in a university working with snakes. What was important for me was that it was necessary that I appreciate and care about her passion. From that point on she was able to make other goals that were productive for her. But they were her goals – not mine, not the school’s, not her parents.

We help children find their passions and gifts by allowing them to explore their feelings. What do they like, what do they dislike? We allow them to talk about their honest wants and needs. We ask questions, such as, “What is important to you? What do you want for yourself? How are you going to get there?” Our role is to ask the questions – not to solve the problem for them. In today’s world, we, the good parent, want to insure that they make the right decisions, choose the right course work, make the right friends and achieve at that 1% level. However, in the long run, these are not our decisions. These decisions are made from knowing who we are and what we want. Our work is to help our children find these answers.

-Mary



Fall Seminars Through West County Psychological Associates

School Anxiety, School Avoidance and School Refusal

Understanding and Helping the Student Who Would Rather Do Just About Anything Than Go to School

Friday, October 16th, 2015 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m. \$85

Presented by Amy V. Maus, MSW, LCSW

Most students understand that school is, simply, *what you do*. However, there are other students who refuse to come to school willingly. Some are truly anxious about school in general, wish to avoid the bus, bullies, or bathroom, or don't feel comfortable leaving their mom. Others just want to be left alone to sleep or play video games all day instead of coming to school. In any case, these are students who consume a disproportionate amount of time from the school counselor, social worker, nurse and/or administrator. They often leave their parents bewildered, desperate, and willing to try almost anything to get the morning battles to stop. To address these students, schools need skills that go beyond the truancy officer.

Topics Covered Include:

- School Refusal vs. Truancy
- The Four Types of School Refusers
- Assessing a Student Who Refuses School
- Commonly Involved Psychological Disorders
- Strategies to Use When Doctors Order Homebound Instruction
- Intervening with the Four Types
- Sample Intervention Plan
- Strategies for Test and Academic Anxiety
- Strategies for Separation and Social Anxiety
- Handouts for Parents
- Case Examples and Discussion

To register, go to: <http://conta.cc/1NnT2zb> Payment is expected at time of registration.

OCD in the Classroom: A Seminar for School Professionals

Wednesday, November 4th, 2015 1:00 – 3:00 p.m. \$45

Presented by Diane M. Prost, M.Ed., NCC, LPC

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is a neurobiological disorder characterized by recurrent, unwanted and unpleasant thoughts or images (obsessions) and repetitive, ritualistic behaviors that a person feels driven to perform (compulsions). What happens when you see symptoms of OCD? Knowing the facts about OCD builds empathy, explains unusual behaviors in class and home, and helps school educators identify symptoms. This workshop is geared towards teachers, school counselors and social workers, and school administrators who wish to gain more information about OCD.

Topics Covered Include:

- Familiarization of causes, signs and symptoms of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Discussion of techniques to handle students with obsessions and compulsions
- Explanation of treatment techniques that therapists use and how school personnel can support.

To register, go to: <http://conta.cc/1J7gpJ5> Payment is expected at time of registration.

FORGIVENESS VS. RECONCILIATION – AND WHY IT MATTERS

Cari McKnight, MSW, LCSW

Forgiveness can be a scary concept for a lot of us. When we hear that we “should forgive” someone who has deeply hurt us, many of us find ourselves balking. We start thinking that, if we forgive them, we excuse what they did to us. We think that we are condoning what they did. Maybe the other person isn’t really even sorry for their behavior. Should we let them off the hook that easily? Most of all, we worry that if we let that person back into our lives, that they will hurt us again.

But forgiveness doesn’t necessarily have to mean any of these things. Forgiveness, in its most basic form, can be defined as “to release.” In the psychological community, forgiveness is generally defined as a conscious, deliberate decision to release feelings of anger, resentment, or vengeance toward someone who has harmed us. This is something that we can all do, regardless of whether the offending person has apologized or asked for forgiveness... or not. We can even do this if the person who hurt us is no longer living. Forgiveness can happen whether or not our offender participates, because it is something that happens *within* us.

All of this may sound simplistic, but this does not mean that forgiveness is easy. Very few people can naturally and easily forgive. People tend to fall into one extreme or the other – either we cannot allow ourselves to truly feel the anger about the injustice done OR we feel it so strongly that we cannot let go of the resentment. In the first extreme scenario, we may have been taught as children that anger is not an acceptable emotion and so we never learned how to express it. We feel, perhaps unconsciously, that anger is bad, so we try to avoid getting angry at all costs. But most experts will share that before we can genuinely forgive, we need to be able to be angry, to feel the anger, and to express it. We need to know that expressing anger is not only ok, but necessary, so that we don’t inadvertently rush into a superficial peace that does not really last.

In the other extreme scenario, others of us cannot let go of our anger or ever move past it. This can happen for a variety of reasons, but it is important to address why we tend to hold onto resentment. Have we grown comfortable in the role of the victim? Do we have some childhood attachment issues that interfere with our ability to feel secure and trustful in the world? Or are we scared that we are not honoring ourselves if we stop being angry? It is important not to blame ourselves for being unable to let go, but instead to do some self-examination to understand our struggle so that we can learn how to let go of future resentments.

In going through this process, it is imperative that we not only understand what forgiveness is, but also what it is not. It is not condoning or excusing what the offender did. Nor is it forgetting their behavior. It doesn’t even mean that we have to “hug it out and make up” and let that person into our world again. Though forgiveness can help repair a relationship that has been damaged, it is critical to understand the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness is simply releasing the negative emotions toward another person. It is making a choice to no longer hate, resent, seek revenge, or let the offender have any negative power over us. Forgiving empowers us to acknowledge the pain we suffered, without letting that pain define us any longer.

For many, a common obstacle to forgiving is that we believe that we will always remember what the person did to hurt us. And it is true, forgiving does not erase the painful past. Just because we forgive, does not mean that we forget. Instead, in forgiving, we create a new way to remember and a new way to think about what happened. Perhaps we have more understanding about why someone was the way that they were, or we are able to look at something from different perspective. Again, it’s not excusing or justifying the hurtful behavior, but it is looking at it with a deeper, fuller understanding. Ultimately, it is learning to find a way to get rid of the weight that has been burdening our spirit so that we can finally move on with our life.



Cari McKnight,
MSW, LCSW

received her Master of Social Work degree from the University of Iowa and is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. She specializes in private therapy for couples, individuals, and families dealing with relationship/ interpersonal difficulties, and is passionate about helping others create balance and happiness in their lives.

If we do choose to reconcile and let someone back in, that is something related, but different. Reconciliation is choosing not only to forgive, but to take a step further and begin to trust someone again – to trust that they will not harm us again, to trust that they are capable of keeping their word. This is oftentimes a difficult decision. Though we always benefit from forgiving another person, we need to be more selective about with whom we reconcile. It only takes one person to forgive, but it takes two active participants to reconcile. And sadly, it is not necessarily wise to let everyone back in. Sometimes in life, we learn that certain people are toxic to us. Whether they are abusive, repeatedly dishonest, unable to keep their promises, manipulative, or simply not capable of loving as we deserve to be loved, sometimes it is best to put up a strong boundary with another person to protect ourselves.

Even if, however, we have the painful realization that we cannot open ourselves up to someone again, at the very least, we can forgive. Because forgiveness isn't just for them, it is for us. It is necessary to forgive, even if we don't choose to reconcile, if we want to be happy again. Until we make the decision to fully forgive and let go, the other person has power over us, power over our thoughts and emotions. They have us in chains, and only we can make the choice to get out and break free. The renowned ethicist Lewis B. Smedes said it perfectly. *“To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you.”*

Here are 4 basic steps that are critical in the forgiveness process:

- 1) Let ourselves truly feel all of the emotions that the offense caused, and allow ourselves to express them. Don't shortcut this process – make sure to cry, talk it out, yell, or do whatever it takes to voice all of the feelings involved. If we can do this with the person who offended us, that's best. If not, any trusted confidant will suffice, such as a friend, family member, pastor, or professional therapist.
- 2) Try to understand why it happened. Our brains have a hard time resting until we have created some sort of schema, or rationale, for why or how an event occurred. Even if we never have the chance to ask for or receive a reasonable answer, we need to go through this process in our minds and create a way of explaining the event to ourselves that is helpful for us.
- 3) Allow for the goal of personal safety. We need to feel reasonably safe that the hurtful behavior will not happen again. Whether this comes by a sincere apology and reconciliation, by putting up stronger boundaries to protect ourselves, or even if it is by completely removing the offender from our lives, we cannot fully let go until we feel an overall safety that we will not be injured in that way again.
- 4) And lastly, make the choice to let go. Letting go is a decision; it is a promise to ourselves that we will stop ruminating about and dwelling on what happened. (However, it is important not to confuse the act of letting go of our ruminations with the idea that the injury doesn't matter.) If we do choose to take the extra step and proceed with reconciliation in a relationship, this step includes not bringing up the incident again and holding it over the other's head in the future. It is truly letting it all go. This final step is often harder than it sounds: if we have not gone through the prior steps properly, we might find ourselves stuck at this final step and simply *unable* to let go.

No matter how difficult it might be, we are simply better off if we can dig deep and find a way to do the work so that we can truly forgive. Empirical research has repeatedly shown that people who are able to forgive are both happier and healthier. In numerous studies, it has been found that people who learn how to forgive perform better over the long-term both mentally (they report fewer anger issues, less mental anguish/pain, have more compassion, improved moods) and physically (they experience fewer immune system problems, fewer cardiovascular problems, reduced risk of cancer, and overall improved vitality). In fact, the health benefits of forgiveness are so clear and proven by multiple studies, it is becoming increasingly apparent that holding onto a long-term grudge can actually be physically self-destructive.

Forgiving can take a long time, and can be difficult to truly accomplish, but it is one of the best things we can do for ourselves – even if we choose not to reconcile. If you find yourself resistant or unsure, if you are stuck on one of the steps, if you are unclear if you should forgive and/or reconcile, or if you want help facilitating a reconciliation, seek the help of a professional therapist. Forgiving can be one of the most challenging things we ever do, but doing so authentically can be a life-changing, freeing experience.

Cyber-bullying: The New Face of Bullying in the Digital Age

Tony Tramelli, M.A.

The term “bullying” has become very popular in our society over the last few years. We use the word to describe a wide variety of unkind acts by individuals or groups. Some researchers say that the term has been misused and abused in the last few years, too casually labeled about every painful or hurtful act, and too frequently used in place of teasing or fighting. The concern is that, when everything is labeled as bullying, it waters down the term, and takes away from the seriousness of the issue. And bullying is a very serious issue.

Bullying is intentional, repetitive, hurtful behavior committed by one or more individuals against another. An imbalance in real or perceived power must exist between the bully and the victim for such acts to be considered bullying. This real or perceived power can come from many characteristics of the individuals involved; size or strength is an obvious example. It is the stronger, more powerful student who is doing the bullying. Some other sources of power can come from money, looks, popularity, community status, or abilities like athletic prowess, intelligence, and social skills.

One form of bullying that has become particularly sinister and pervasive over the past few years is cyber-bullying. Almost half of all middle school aged children have either been bullied online, or have themselves bullied someone online. Cyber-bullying includes using any type of modern communication technology to embarrass, humiliate, threaten, or intimidate another person. This often occurs over social media platforms, but it can also occur via text messages, emails, chat rooms, etc. Through perceived anonymity, online communications makes it is easier for people to say or do certain things than it would be in the real world. We may know who we are talking to and we may be conscious of the fact that our identity is known to others, but there is a disconnect caused by the screen through which we are communicating. This disconnect allows us to feel much less empathy for others, and, as a result, we are more likely to say things to or about another person than we would if that individual were standing right in front of us.

Social media is capable of creating as much detachment as connection. Because we are talking to everyone, it feels like we are talking to no one; it feels like it’s just us and the screen. This can be very dangerous, especially when considering the issue of cyber-bullying. Because there is a feeling of detachment when communicating online, even individuals who we would not consider mistreating others “in the real world” may take part in cyber-bullying.

Cyber-bullying can be never-ending. In previous generations, when a student was bullied at school, that bullying ended with the school day. The child could find solace and safety at home. Now, with cyber-bullying, that student gets home from school, signs onto his or her social media accounts, and the bullying can continue into the night. There is also a real “gang-mentality” when it comes to cyber-bullying. When youth see that a certain individual is being bullied online, they are more likely to join in than if they were in the real world. One comment is made on a young person’s Instagram account and before you know it there is an entire feed dedicated to their torment. This can lead to serious and tragic consequences – school refusal, friendships ending, physical fights, and in extreme cases suicide due to cyber-bullying.

Bullying in all forms has very real and lasting consequences. In the short term, victims of bullying may feel afraid and lonely and often avoid situations in which they may be bullied. That is why we see so many children who are being bullied staying home from school – national estimates routinely suggest that roughly 200,000 students avoid school each day due to the fear of their bully. Victims may also be less likely to join school clubs or sports teams. In the long term, children who are bullied may begin to see themselves as unworthy or inferior; as with victims of domestic violence, they sometimes come to believe that they somehow deserve the abuse. Consistently bullied over time, it is easy to develop a victim mentality, which can become a permanent part of the psyche. Victims of bullying are also at a greater risk for depression and suicide than their non-bullied peers. In a recent study conducted at Oxford University, researchers concluded that individuals who reported

Students who report being bullied frequently at age 12 are about twice as likely to suffer from depression at age 18 compared with peers who did not experience bullying.

being bullied frequently at age 12 were about twice as likely to suffer from depression at age 18 compared with peers who do not experience bullying.

Bullying of all sorts has been around for a very long time. And, although in recent years the term has become overused and often sensationalized, it is a very serious issue that needs to be addressed both in schools and at home. Schools need to have very clear policies on bullying and to consistently and fairly enforce these policies. This is certainly a challenge, especially when considering cyber-bullying. Schools often ask where their responsibilities lie when it comes to cyberbullying. One answer is that the same policies that exist for physical bullying need to be enforced for cyber-bullying. Often schools become aware of cyber-bullying through reports from students and parents. Students and parents who report cyber-bullying need to know that their concerns will be taken seriously and that the school will not tolerate cyber-bullying. Online behavior that happens off campus and out of school hours can still be addressed by the school, if students or the learning environment has been affected.

Parents also need to be involved. One thing parents can do to help their child who is being bullied is to build that child's inner strength, as strong and confident children are rarely the victims of bullying. Emotional support, time spent in activities and conversation together, and unconditional positive regard from parents build resiliency in children. Children also need to hear that their parents feel strongly that they never mistreat another student, whether in "real life" or online. Parents can feel confident that they are doing the right thing as they check their children's social media profiles and online communications, with the clear understanding that technology will be temporarily lost if the child has participated in unkind behavior or other irresponsible online choices. Parents should be aware that cyber-bullying often occurs on social media sites that allow for anonymity amongst their users. Sites like ask.fm and Whisper have become popular among young people for acts of cyberbullying.

Cyber-bullying often occurs on social media sites that allow for anonymity amongst their users. Sites like ask.fm and Whisper have become popular among young people for acts of cyberbullying.

Teachers and parents can also talk to students about what to do if they see someone else being bullied online. Bystanders are the silent majority of people involved in bullying. Most youth are opposed to bullying and tend to be supportive of the victim, but only about half report trying to help. Children often justify their inaction by deciding that the victim deserved it or that it will "toughen them up." Studies show that almost one-third of adolescents surveyed said they could understand why the bully chose their particular victim. Like many adults, children believe that bad things don't happen to good people, so the victim must have done something to deserve the abuse. Children who witness cyber-bullying and do nothing to intervene may also be fearful that if they do there could be some sort of backlash; that they may become the next victim. While these rationalizations and fears are understandable, they do nothing to put an end to bullying. Parents and teachers can educate students to choose to show support to the victim, refuse to join in, tell the bully to stop, report harassment to site administrators, and/or inform an adult immediately.

In the age of cyber-crime, identity theft, and multinational cyber-attacks, online bullying among youth can seem simple, a less important issue that will pass and doesn't require adult intervention. But the statistics about the victim impact tells another story. Cyber-bullying requires and deserves parental and school attention and intervention.



***Tony Tramelli, M.A.** provides therapy to children and adolescents from kindergarten through high school on a number of issues including depression, anxiety, bullying, grief, behavioral issues, academic problems and family challenges and transitions. He takes a systems approach to counseling, working closely with parents and educators to effectively create positive change. Tony regularly provides presentations to parents, teachers, and students on safe and responsible social media and technology use.*

“I Am a Caregiver”

We all struggle to make sense of who we are. Typically, we identify ourselves by our relationships to others (i.e. “I am a wife, a mother, a sister”) and what we do (i.e. “I am a teacher”). Our identities change along with our life events, some of which are more definitive than others. Yet, despite regularly performing caregiving duties for our aging or ill loved ones, we often do not identify ourselves as “caregivers.”

“Caregiver” is an obscure identity, as there is no single description for what it entails. It, like many other identities, expresses a significant change in one’s life. However, unlike the welcome identity shifts throughout life, this change is often painful and isolating. It challenges us at every level: emotionally, physically, mentally, and financially. Caregiving wears away our patience and increases feelings of depression and anxiety. We become frustrated with our loved ones and then feel guilty about our aggravation. As a result, we often feel overwhelmed, lonely, and as though we cannot keep up. We feel unsteady in a chaotic situation and question our ability to regain our balance. Due to these challenges, all caregivers need support in order to continue to function effectively.

Generally, these feelings are common but rarely discussed with our family and friends. We worry about what people would think of us if they knew how we really felt; we chastise ourselves for being “too emotional;” we convince ourselves to push our feelings to the backburner and deal with them when we are not so busy. In the long run, these emotions will catch up to us and they cause us to burn out. If we continue to deny our emotions and place ourselves last, then our ability to care for our loved ones will diminish. We cannot keep running.

When we feel overwhelmed, angry, or depressed as caregivers, these emotions are signs to us that there is probably an issue that needs to be addressed. First, we need to acknowledge our identity as a caregiver. Once we are able to say, “I am a caregiver,” we can then begin to understand and address the issues that accompany this role. It is essential to accept the role changes in our lives, and be compassionate and patient with ourselves in the process. When we continue to ignore or deny these role changes, then we subject ourselves to increased stress and declining overall health.

Next, we can work to regain “order” in our lives. A good place to start is to take steps to resolve all legal decisions regarding our loved ones, which will alleviate unnecessary stress and ideally help us in the future. Tasks such as ensuring that wills are up-to-date, naming a Power of Attorney, and establishing Medical Directives are concrete duties that help caregivers feel like they are more capable of managing the situation once completed.

It is also necessary to learn to let go, especially in areas where it is either not our job or where we have no control. Look at the situation realistically and determine what you are able to do and what you are not able to do. Learning to set limits and boundaries is a vital part of self-care. In order to develop healthy boundaries, we need to start learning how to be emotionally honest with ourselves, start owning our feelings, and communicate in a direct and honest manner. Once we are able to hear our own voices, our decisions will generally be what is best for our loved one and best for us in the long run.

All of these things are easier said than done. During these difficult times, it is important for caregivers to practice good self-care and focus on the bottom line – planning for our loved ones’ care and future. Therapy is a wonderful way to process the events and emotions that caregivers experience. A skilled therapist can help caregivers work through feelings of anxiety, frustration, uncertainty, and fear that we often experience as our loved ones age and decline.

Mediation is another means to relieve the stress in this difficult situation. Mediators act as a neutral third party and can assist families in developing and agreeing upon a plan of care for their loved one. Therapists and mediators can provide support and guidance on how to navigate end-of-life tasks that caregivers face such as handling the demands of providing daily care, establishing and enforcing boundaries, exploring new responsibilities and roles within the family, and planning for the future.

Caring for a loved one is a demanding and often lonely experience. It is imperative for caregivers to reach out and accept support in order to continue providing quality care for the duration.

Written by
Amy Neu,
MSW, LCSW



Amy Neu provides private therapy for adults, families and seniors. She has significant experience counseling seniors, caregivers and families within medical systems and during transitional periods.