Transitioning from High School to College with a Psychiatric Diagnosis: Preparation

Graduating from high school and planning for life afterwards is an exciting yet challenging time for many young adults and their families. For teens with psychiatric diagnoses, it is particularly important to plan ahead for a successful "launch" from high school to college.

All colleges are different. It is important to investigate the mental health services and other supports available at each college and university you are considering. Some topics to investigate and consider include:

- The availability of a Counseling Center, Student Health Services, and off-campus mental health resources
- Can the psychiatric condition be successfully managed on campus, or will additional community resources be required? Consider ease of access to off-campus providers
- How are medical and counseling services paid for? Does a student fee cover everything or is your insurance accepted?
- Availability of student advocacy groups and outreach services to support students with special needs

Before applying to college, it is helpful for teens and their parents to talk with their doctor about the following:

- Treatment needs and additional support after high school
- Developing realistic expectations and plans about academic workload
- Organizational skills needed to balance work and social life
- Educational accommodations that can and should continue in college

When choosing a college, think about the following:

- Total number of students and class size
- Housing options: residential (dorms), off-campus living, commuting from home
- Educational environment: classroom, online, or a combination
- Distance from home
- Local friends and family
- Ease of access to specialized treatment
In order to live independently, teens will need a range of life skills, including:

- Good sleep habits
- Healthy nutrition and exercise
- Handling increased social freedom and pressures: drugs and alcohol, dating and sex
- Running errands (grocery, gasoline) and doing chores (laundry, cooking, and cleaning)
- Money management (using ATM’s, credit and debit cards, checkbook, online banking)
- Navigating public transportation and knowing how to get around new areas

Colleges have more work with less structure. Teens need to develop effective study skills such as:

- Organizing study materials and knowing schedules for classes
- Completing homework, essays, and projects without reminders or involvement from parents, teachers, or tutors
- Accepting responsibility and consequences for actions (ex. missing a deadline) and learning how to plan for contingencies
- Attending educational planning meetings (e.g. 504 plan, IEP, etc.)
- Balancing educational and recreational computer use

Parents should encourage independence in healthcare management. Gradually phase in responsibility for:

- Scheduling, canceling, and keeping medical appointments
- Tracking need for and ordering medication refills
- Storing and keeping medications safely
- Knowing and talking about their health history

There are many paths to a college degree. Other options include "gap year" programs, part-time work and school, or a community college.

Graduating from high school is a wonderful milestone. Developing independent life skills and learning to manage your mental health challenges will help ensure a successful transition.

For additional information, visit these related *Facts for Families*:

- #2 Normality
- #95 The Teen Brain
- #58 Normal Adolescent Development – Late High School Years – and Beyond
- #26 Understanding Your Mental Health Insurance
- #66 Helping Teenagers With Stress
If you find Facts for Families® helpful and would like to make good mental health a reality, consider donating to the Campaign for America’s Kids. Your support will help us continue to produce and distribute Facts for Families, as well as other vital mental health information, free of charge.

You may also mail in your contribution. Please make checks payable to the AACAP and send to Campaign for America’s Kids, P.O. Box 96106, Washington, DC 20090.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) represents over 8,700 child and adolescent psychiatrists who are physicians with at least five years of additional training beyond medical school in general (adult) and child and adolescent psychiatry.

Facts for Families® information sheets are developed, owned and distributed by AACAP. Hard copies of Facts sheets may be reproduced for personal or educational use without written permission, but cannot be included in material presented for sale or profit. All Facts can be viewed and printed from the AACAP website (www.aacap.org). Facts sheets may not be reproduced, duplicated or posted on any other website without written consent from AACAP. Organizations are permitted to create links to AACAP’s website and specific Facts sheets. For all questions please contact the AACAP Communications & Marketing Coordinator, ext. 154.

If you need immediate assistance, please dial 911.

Copyright © 2014 by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.