

A Message to Parents and Teens

Mental Health Awareness

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As a teen or a parent of a teen, many of us reach a point where we encounter some emotional struggles that are not resolved by a guidance counselor at school or by our parish priest. We tend to feel comfortable reaching out to resources at school or at our church, but we struggle to make the decision to seek help outside of those places, especially when it comes to a professional counselor, therapist, or a psychologist. The reasons for this difficulty and hesitation that is displayed by teens and parents are many. For some there is the not wanting to believe that somehow things reached the point where we need “professional” help. For some there is a fear that somehow seeking professional counseling or therapy will undermine chances of getting into college or obtaining employment. Some teens even worry that it means they are “crazy” if they go to talk to someone who is professionally trained in counseling. Still yet, some parents delay and procrastinate getting their teens the help they need because of some deeper meaning they assign to the reality that they need help. They might even worry that it is some failure on their part that their child or teen needs help. While these concerns are normal they are truly unfounded. Everyone needs some extra help at one time or another in their life. In this day and age few speak about their problems to others, as a result many are left to feel that they alone struggle or that their family alone has someone who is struggling. The truth is that all families have their struggles, none are perfect, and those that do present as perfect are often faking it.

A good number of people who seek professional counseling are doing so for problems that are often temporary and quite common. Many seek counseling in a spirit of being proactive, wanting to resolve the problem before it gets worse or harder to resolve. Many even pursue counseling because they want to push themselves to overcome emotional roadblocks so they can grow both spiritually and emotionally and achieve their peak potential. Some, just tired of struggling all of the time, reach that point where it is time to act and seek help. When reflecting on these various reasons people seek help, it can be clearly seen that counseling is pursued not out of “craziness”, nor out of weakness, nor out of crisis, nor out of a failure, but rather it is born out of the strength, courage, and responsibility that comes with wanting to be responsible, proactive, and achieve our potential. It is known that emotional struggles and roadblocks can hinder our spiritual growth in so many ways. By getting past emotional struggles and roadblocks, we are able to have a healthier relationship with God and with others. Indeed, from this perspective it is the “sane” people who seek help, while it is quite irrational and even prideful to not seek help. C.S. Lewis stated, “that which remains undisclosed is that which has the most power over us”. Many

studies have shown that talking about or verbalizing our negative feelings adjusts the neurotransmitters in our body that play a role in anxiety and depression.

Where does one begin? When a teen or parent reaches that point where they realize they need some extra help, a good starting point is to see if their parish priest has any counselors they recommend. If they do not, there is nothing wrong with calling counselors in the area and having one appointment to interview them to see if they are a good fit and to gauge whether or not they are open to, sensitive to, and respectful of our Orthodox Christian spirituality. Once that good match is found, it does not take very long to realize that the decision to get some extra help was a wise one. It is important that parents hear their teen's cry for help and respond accordingly. Many, when reflecting on their decision to seek extra help, will state that it was one of the best decisions they made in their life. Always remember to periodically gauge whether the extra help is actually helping. At times, after weeks or even months, it might be necessary to switch to another professional if the present help is not helping or if there are compatibility issues between the teen and the counselor. Also, remember to make sure the counselor has genuine experience and training in the area in which we are seeking help.