



Make Mental Health Care a Priority

One morning in 2003, when I lived in Muncie and my oldest daughter was a freshman at Indiana University, the phone rang at exactly 5 a.m. As a parent, I knew that couldn't be good. I was right.

It was a call for help. From her first, quiet, choked words, I could tell she was struggling with a serious depressive episode. She'd been up all night, but fortunately a friend was present and had convinced her to call me. After determining she was not in any imminent danger, that she wasn't alone, and that she knew where to get help on campus, we decided she would skip her morning classes and make getting a counseling appointment her top priority. She sounded exhausted, but promised me she would make the trip to Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS). As we hung up, I assured my daughter (and myself) that things were going to get better.

A few hours later she called back. She'd been to CAPS and she had an appointment. In six weeks.

As someone who suffers from depression, I know how hard it is to crawl out from under its weight. At times, just getting out of bed takes tremendous will. I was proud of my daughter for visiting CAPS. Given the precarious shape she was in, the fact that they told her to suck it up and come back in six weeks was a slap in the face.

In those days, I was teaching at Ball State University. I don't remember if I asked someone to cover my classes or if I simply canceled them before I got in the car and drove to Bloomington. I didn't really have a plan beyond taking my daughter back over to CAPS and making sure she got the help she needed—and soon.

When we got there, I explained the situation to the administrative assistant, who repeated the party line of "six weeks" several times. That's

when I insisted on speaking to her supervisor, who turned out to be the director. I asked him to really look at my daughter—to actually see her as a person in need of help. I suggested that it didn't take a trained professional to comprehend this was a young woman who needed counseling now, not in six weeks.

I don't know if it was my passionate plea or the fact that I just wouldn't leave, but before the day was out, not only did my daughter have an appointment with a counselor, she had one every week until she felt better. Even today, I worry about what might have happened if I hadn't intervened.

It is still exceedingly difficult to get mental health care in this country. This same daughter, now a 34-year-old mother of three girls, suffered from postpartum depression after the birth of daughter number two. It took six weeks to get an appointment with a mental health care provider then, too.

My own experience also tells me things aren't improving. I have a therapist, but she can't prescribe, so I meet with a psychiatric nurse practitioner every six months to get my antidepressants. At my last visit, I was told I would be seeing someone new. That's never fun, but what made it even more uncomfortable was the new practitioner was in Terre Haute. We met on a screen. It was telemedicine. There are just not enough nurse practitioners, let alone psychologists and psychiatrists, to treat everyone who needs to be seen.

It's been 15 years since that 5 a.m. phone call. I know the people at CAPS do their best with the resources they have. The problem is, the resources are insufficient. We need to make mental health care, and how to fund it, a priority in this country. No one should have to wait weeks when they need help.

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