

5/20 Miriam

Ask Miriam...

Individuals and families in the community are faced with challenging issues and concerns regarding their social, emotional and psychological health. Through the cooperation of The Jewish World, Jewish Family Services will offer responses.

Q. Dear Miriam,

My daughter suffers from a bipolar disorder. She is seeing a new counselor. When I called to let the counselor know some important things about my daughter, I was told that she could not speak with me without permission from my daughter. I don't understand why this counselor would tell me that. I have always been involved in my daughter's treatment. I am not sure that my daughter will tell her new counselor everything she needs to know. Is there anything I can do?

Troubled Mother

A. Dear Troubled Mother,

I can understand your concern, but there are two issues here. First, there is the issue of protecting client/patient confidentiality. Since your daughter has been involved in treatment for a long time, permission for you to speak with her counselor might have evolved over the years and been given in a more informal way. With a new counselor and new strict regulations regarding confidentiality, permission to speak with her will need to be given in writing by your daughter.

The second issue involves the need for you to allow your daughter to be in charge of her life. A new counselor is a new start for her. It is your daughter's choice to include you or not. She may stumble or even fall, but the goal is to have a relationship in which your daughter feels comfortable in asking for your help and continued involvement in her life.

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Q. Dear Miriam,

I am physically disabled and have been so my whole life. My mother and father have been my caregivers, but especially my mother. Five years ago my father died and my mother now close to 80 is in failing health.

I am receiving help on a daily basis from a home care agency.

The problem is that my mother seems to resent having anyone in the house and acts in a rude manner to the aides.

It is an uncomfortable situation. What can I do to help lessen the tension?

Concerned Son

A. Dear Concerned Son,

If your mother has been a caregiver for you your entire life, it is not easy for her to relinquish that role. She is dealing with her own failing health, loss of her role, her own independence, and probably fear about the future. It would be a good time for you to learn about the aging process so you can understand your mother better. In addition, her having cared for you well into adulthood has created a special relationship between the two of you. It is difficult for your mother to see herself as having any other identity except as your caregiver. Even if she had established a social life outside the home, many of her peers may have died.

You can help lessen tensions by understanding how she feels and not trying to change that. At the same time, you need to be consistent in asking her to be respectful of the people coming into the home. Are there ways for her to still be involved in some aspect of care? You might think it's good to relieve her of all of her responsibilities, but she might not share that feeling.

Talk with her about this, and above all don't avoid talking about the future. Make sure there is a plan in place for your care and hers should it become necessary.

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Miriam Adler, A.C.S.W., C.S.W., is assistant director of J.F.S. She answers most frequently asked questions. please send questions to "Ask Miriam," c/o Jewish Family Services of NENY, 877 Madison Ave., Albany, NY 12208 or e-mail jfsneny@banet.net or call 518-482-8856.

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Q. Dear Miriam,

We have somewhat of an opposite situation to one which you recently wrote about. Our son left the house when he was 16.

His mom and I were divorced when he was 12 and we each established a new family.

He never seemed to want to be in either household and started getting into trouble at school and in the community.

Now, seven years later, he has been calling and coming by to visit. I don't know quite how to handle this.

I am happy that he wants to re-establish contact, but I am worried that he will leave again if I don't do the right things.

I admit that I am also still angry that he left and I have never understood why he did.

Help!

Parents on a Tightrope

A. Dear Parents on a Tightrope,

You are dealing with some tough issues. I suggest that you arrange to talk with a professional to clarify all of the issues and get some guidance on how to handle the current situation.

I will address your question of what to do with his visits and calls.

Don't recall the past with an attitude of, "So you've learned your lesson. You found out it's hard on your own."

Let him know you are happy he is in touch. Do a lot of listening. Don't offer more than he is asking of you. He needs to know that you will not overwhelm him with your feelings or offers to help.

Once you have established some comfort and regularity in the relationship, you can start more serious discussions. But, again, follow his lead. You can't make up for lost time, but there is the hope of a new and healthy relationship for you both.

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Q. Dear Miriam,

We had been foster parents and ultimately adopted the child who had been placed with us when he was five years old.

He is now 16 and we are having a lot of problems.

For the past year in particular, our son has expressed his unhappiness and has been telling us that we aren't his real parents. This escalated into his recently running away and ending up in the court system. He seems ready to be at home now, but we are almost waiting for the next incident.

We love him and want to help him, but sometimes we feel like we'll never be ok for him.

What can we do?

Adoptive Parents

A. Dear Adoptive Parents,

If it is any consolation, your experience is not unique. The ages of 15-16 are vulnerable ones for many kids and can be especially so for children who have been adopted.

You didn't mention if he had knowledge and/or contact with his biological parents. I will assume that you might have been able to share some information, but he did not have contact with them. Not knowing more about his past puts him at a disadvantage and allows for some fantasy of what was. Children at his age are in the process of resolving their own identities based on who their parents are, their experiences, and how they perceive

themselves in relation to others. For him, a piece is missing. He is not necessarily rejecting you as parents, but at this time he is feeling like a stranger.

Be patient. Try not to take his struggle as a criticism of you as parents. Encourage him to express his concerns and issues, but maintain your standards and expectations for his behaviors.

If you are not already in touch with other adoptive families, try to be. Other families who have adopted may be able to offer some support and suggestions.

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