

Meet Joy

Joy, 18 years, was brought to MDFT for drug and alcohol abuse by her biological mother, Miri, and her stepfather, Mark. She was an attractive, insightful, verbal, and personable young woman, yet she had just flunked out of her first year of college. Joy admitted to regular, heavy use of alcohol and marijuana and occasional cocaine use since middle school. She had a history of serious emotional problems and instability, including two suicide attempts in high school. Following her second suicide attempt, Joy was hospitalized for two months in a psychiatric unit. At that time, Joy felt betrayed and alienated from her mother and close friends, and gravitated more to drug using peers. She was especially hurt by her mother's reaction to her suicide attempts, which she felt conveyed frustration and anger, rather than compassion. From the very first therapy sessions, Joy expressed the need for more visible and outward expressions of her mother's love.

Mother Miri, Stepfather Mark, and Parenting Style

Joy's mother, Miri, a soft-spoken woman, acknowledged that she had been generally unexpressive and unaffectionate with Joy growing up. Miri attributed this to the fact that she had not received affection from her own parents, but had understood they loved her, and she thus expected Joy to accept minimal displays of affection based on her own experiences. From the outset of therapy, then, Joy and her mother expressed very different needs and expectations of each other. Joy explained that she was an affectionate and expressive person and needed that in return. Her mother, on the other hand, was reserved in her manners and emotional style.

Joy's stepfather, Mark, had become part of the family approximately ten years previously, marrying Miri when Joy was 8 years old. While Mark clearly loved Joy and worried about her, he had limited interaction with her due to working long hours. He had a somewhat distant relationship with Joy. Mark believed that Miri kept information from him because she thought he might lose his temper with Joy.

Miri and Mark had struggled individually and as a parenting team to deal with Joy's drug use and other problems. When they became upset with her or tried to set limits, Joy threatened to run away, and they backed down. Miri had generally not wanted to bring Mark into her problems with Joy, and Mark also readily admitted that he had stayed on the sidelines.

Case Themes: Emotional Expression and Transition from Adolescence to Adulthood

Confusion around expression of emotions seemed fundamental in this case. Joy and Miri tended not to express their emotions to each other in direct ways. This had kept Miri from acknowledging and confronting some of the most difficult and painful issues with Joy. A related theme that emerged in therapy was Joy's desire to look perfect on the outside and maintain this front to others, which was inconsistent and often contradictory to how she was actually feeling. Therapy helped her to see that these patterns needed to change if she were to feel comfortable with herself and accept herself as having both strengths and weaknesses, as well as to connect with others in authentic ways.

An underlying theme that guided the therapy was Joy's developmental transition into young adulthood and the need for changes in her parents' expectations and responses to her actions, her own behavior, and in the parent-adolescent relationship. Joy's emerging and maturing sense of

herself as a young woman related in important ways to her ability to make better decisions regarding friendships and relationships and not to sacrifice her own values to keep people close. Thus the theme of the nature of Miri's involvement in Joy's life became important, with the subtext of disagreements over Joy's decisions about relationships, school, and friends.

Stage 1

Early therapy sessions involved spending time alone with Joy to build a foundation for their work together, asking Joy to share her own perceptions of her life, where things had gotten off track, how she felt she would like her life to change, and how she saw her parents being able to help her in that process. Consistent with MDFT "Adolescent Engagement Interventions," the therapist encouraged her by presenting himself as her ally in this process, asserting that he would be part of this journey with her for the next several months and would be helping her parents to assist her in the transitions she was facing. Joy responded well to these interventions, and soon a strong therapeutic alliance was formed.

In addition to individual sessions with Joy, the therapist spent time with Miri and Mark alone and as a couple, assessing the marital dyad by asking each parent about their perceptions of parenting. Their very different responses made it clear not only that Mark and Miri disagreed about their basic parenting approach, but also reflected the basic conflict they had as a couple. The therapist responded by allowing them to be honest about their hurts and disappointments, and working out what approach they would like to take as a parenting team.

In early sessions, the therapist also brought the family together and asked each family member to share their perceptions of the family's strengths, as well as things they liked about each other. He asked the parents to share positive memories of Joy as a way of resuscitating her parents' feelings of love and commitment as well as highlighting Joy's many attractive characteristics and building her feelings of competence and self-worth. As therapy progressed and Joy continued to make strides, the therapist addressed the theme of expected perfection during a family session and facilitated a conversation about Joy's perception that she had to do well at all times in all aspects of her life. Miri clearly indicated that she did not expect that. This conversation paved the way for Joy to begin talking about the areas in which she had begun to improve, specifically in the areas of interviewing for a job and keeping a better schedule. In the past, Joy had difficulty admitting when she was not doing well, yet once it was established that she did not have to be perfect, Joy then was free to talk about improving. This helped move her into the next stage of therapy, in which theme development and exploration intensified and the therapist made requests of each family member to change.

Stage 2

The focus during the middle stage of therapy became Joy's ability to become more responsible, internally motivated, and taking concrete steps in terms of re-enrolling in college and looking for a job. During an important family session, Miri told the therapist she was beginning to trust Joy more. He re-directed her to say that directly to Joy, and she expressed this to her daughter. The therapist then deepened the interaction by asking Joy to let her mother know how this trust helped her. Joy stated that she was happy to have done some things her own way and find that her mother approved. The therapist allowed mother and daughter time to have a new kind of conversation about trust, being more responsible, and belief that Joy would be able to accomplish her goals. Joy also described

her new experience of being less interested in associating with people who would not accept her, including drug using friends. Marking a significant change from the beginning of therapy, Joy made a number of statements reinforcing her self-worth.

Also during the mid-phase of therapy, the therapist met with Mark and Joy to examine what changes were occurring in their relationship. Mark related having felt hurt recently when Joy did not introduce him to her date, and Joy responded that she was frequently concerned that Mark was upset with her. However, they both indicated that more recently their relationship had become less tense and Mark also expressed interest in redefining his stepfather role with Joy to be more “utilized.” This genuine interest on Mark’s part appeared to be one of the first times that he had directly expressed himself to Joy. The therapist then helped Mark and Joy to define topics on she might seek Mark’s help or advice, such as discussing “guy problems.”

Although Joy was doing much better overall, Miri continued to be negative and take extreme stances with her daughter. From earlier sessions, the therapist had hypothesized that when Miri became tense or stressed in another area of her life, she often took it out on Joy by becoming over-focused and over-involved. Through continued empathy and exploration of what was going on in Miri’s life apart from her role as mother to Joy, the therapist discovered that Miri was experiencing stress from her parents, and that she continued to experience emotional and physical isolation in her marriage. Miri defended the difficult bind she found herself in, and the therapist met Miri with deep empathy and support for her in her difficult situation. He encouraged her to consider a different way of being involved in Joy’s life rather than trying to control her relationships. The therapist also met with Joy during this time, reiterating that her job was not to take care of her parents, but rather to stay focused on all of the positive things she was doing, and described the situation as “riding out the storm.”

Stage 3

In the final family session of the case, the therapist asked the family to discuss the changes they had seen over the course of therapy and how they were adjusting to this new family situation. Miri and Joy both eloquently expressed the positive changes they saw with each other and within themselves since the start of therapy. Joy also described how tension in the house diminished, and she no longer feels caught between her mother and step-father, and responsible for their arguing. Her relationship with Mark had improved as they began to enjoy their time together more and there was much less conflict and tension between them.

The therapist then engaged Joy and Miri in a dialogue about how their relationship had changed. Joy voiced that she now perceived her mother as able to make her expectations of her behavior clear, yet pressured her less. Miri responded that Joy had changed in so many positive ways that she no longer had to push her. She respected her, and she felt very happy and contented to see her daughter doing so well. The therapist expanded on this by pointing out how treating Joy as a competent young woman would help her in the future.

Conclusion of Treatment

The journey with Joy and her parents over the course of six months of therapy, although challenging in many ways, was a success story. Joy’s therapy is illustrative of the many themes that develop

during the transition from adolescence into young adulthood, and describes the MDFT therapist's role in helping teenagers and parents work through these issues and make the many changes necessary for successful preparation for this new life stage.