

Online Resources, Community Resources and You

If your child is in distress or having difficulties there's a lot that you can learn that might prove of help to him or her. Where might you do this learning? You can learn this valuable information and access resources that might be useful to you in three ways, via books, on-line and in-person.

As to online resources, consider Krista MacKinnon's offerings. Krista was diagnosed with bipolar in her formative years, never accepted the story or the drugs the system prescribed, and chose her own path to meaning, personal growth, and healing. Upon graduating from college, Krista began searching for work and found a job posting that said: "Psychiatric survivors encouraged to apply." That serendipitous event eventually led to her founding Families Healing Together, an organization that provides online classes for families who are struggling with mental health issues. Krista explained to me:

"Families Healing Together helps families to understand and cope with the complicated experience of extreme distress, psychosis and psychiatric labeling. Traditionally, when someone in a family is given a psychiatric diagnosis, families are educated to understand the experience from a brain disease/medical perspective. They often aren't given much else in terms of tools on how to heal and move forward as a family.

"The philosophy of Families Healing Together is to consider all information with a critical perspective. Instead of focusing on causes, symptoms, and explanations, we propose to instead focus on deeply connected interpersonal relating, healing, and hope. We do this by sharing a curriculum filled with powerful recovery stories, helpful communication tools, and informative theories and articles about human nature. People in the class give and get support from one another as they share their personal responses to the content, and they find solace in knowing that they aren't alone in the journey.

“Our online classes are great for a number of reasons.

“1) As long as you have an Internet connection, the support is open and available to you at all hours.

“2) You can be completely anonymous if you choose to be, which can be incredibly liberating for many people.

“3) You don't have to reorganize your life to ‘attend’ class because you engage with the materials as needed, at your own convenience.

“4) If you are struggling emotionally, communicating in person can sometimes feel like a challenging barrier. Communicating complex emotional concepts and epiphanies in bed in your pajamas at two a.m. in the moment you feel inspired and compelled to reach out is a real gift.

“5) It is unifying. People from all over the world take the class, so inevitably there is great diversity in the class, which translates to very rich and multi-faceted discussions.”

Or consider Dan Stradford’s offerings. Dan Stradford founded the mental health nonprofit Safe Harbor in 1998 and serves as its president. He is the lead author of a guide for physicians, *Complementary and Alternative Medicine Treatments in Psychiatry*, and he has published more than 250 articles and technical papers. Dan explained to me:

“Safe Harbor is a nonprofit founded in 1998 by myself. Our mission is to educate the public, medical field, and government agencies on safe, non-drug treatments in mental health. Our organization coined the term ‘alternative mental health’ because, in 1998, there was alternative medicine but no equivalent in the mental health field.

“Our web site – www.AlternativeMentalHealth.com – was created in 2000 to provide the web’s first online directory of physicians and practitioners who offered safe, nondrug mental health treatments. Our

site grew rapidly and has now had more than 6 million visitors internationally.

“We offer many articles, a bookstore, access to a self-help listserv, and a listserv for health professionals called Integrative Psychiatry. Daily we review journal articles to find recent advances in alternative mental health treatments and post the information to our listservs.”

There are a wide variety of online and community-based organizations and services available that provide life skills training and parenting education, one-to-one mentoring to youth, parent peer support, education about alternatives to chemical solutions, education about safely coming off prescribed chemicals, education about alternative approaches to handling troublesome behaviors and difficult children (for example, physically abusive children), hotlines and trained helpers with whom you can speak, and workshops, classes and often a drop-in location where you, your child, or both of you can receive help and support.

Consider Michael Gilbert’s organization. Michael worked in human services for more than twenty-five years, including in foster care, group homes, and hospital settings, and has worked for the past nineteen years as a school psychologist within the Syracuse, New York school system. In 2000 he founded "It's About Childhood & Family, Inc.," a not-for-profit resource center that provides families with an alternative to the traditional mental health system. He has advocated for and conducted research evaluating non-medication and non-labeling approaches for families with children exhibiting challenging behaviors. Dr. Gilbert received the Friend of Children Award in 2011, the New York State Psychologist of the Year Award in 2014, and the Spirit of Huntington Award in 2014. Michael explained to me:

“Our mission at It’s About Childhood & Family Inc. is to empower families to develop independence in handling life's struggles. We utilize a collaborative and trauma informed framework that is not reliant upon a

label or a diagnosis. Instead we focus on strengths, resources, resiliencies, and potential for growth. We strive to more accurately inform parents, schools, and the larger community about issues related to mental health: for example, misuse of diagnostic labels, lack of efficacy with prescription drugs, and factors that contribute to social-emotional distress.

“Throughout the year we offer workshops and trainings for professionals and parents. In addition, we organize one or two conferences per year on a variety of topics such as trauma informed care, concerns with labels and psychotropic drugs, and approaches to improve the social, emotional and behavioral wellbeing of children. We have brought in national and international experts in the field. Our goal is to provide a more accurate perspective and to have a dialogue about why and how to change the current mental health system, particularly for children.

“We believe that families should ultimately be in charge of the care they receive and that youth need to have choices in the types of supports they are willing to explore. Therefore we encourage and provide access to a variety of approaches - such as mindfulness (e.g., meditation, yoga, etc.), physical activity (e.g., running, martial arts, boxing, etc.), expressive arts (e.g., painting, pottery, photography, writing, music, dance), and relationship building (e.g., Nurtured Heart Approach, Peace Circles, Service Learning, mentoring, volunteering, etc.). In addition, we ask families to rule out potential factors that might be contributing to the problem in question and examine sleep patterns, nutrition, exercise, computer and television screen time, potential traumatic events, family dynamics, peer groups, educational demands, and other factors.”

It's possible that there are some great resources in your community that you can easily access. Even if there aren't any in your community, you can still access a wide variety of online resources. If you have a child in distress or difficulty or if your family is experiencing problems, make sure to include canvassing local and online resources in addition to, or before,

reaching out for a traditional mental health service solution. And if you learn about some great resource, please let us know!

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Eric Maisel is the author of more than fifty books, among them *Overcoming Your Difficult Family*, *The Future of Mental Health*, *Rethinking Depression*, *The Van Gogh Blues* and *Mastering Creative Anxiety*. He writes the “Rethinking Mental Health” blog for *Psychology Today* and lectures nationally and internationally. To learn more about Eric Maisel and his books, services, keynotes, trainings and workshops please visit <http://www.ericmaisel.com>

You can reach Dr. Maisel at emaisel@madinamerica.com to let him know about a resource for the Parent Resource Section, to make a comment, to ask a question, or to share your story. Dr. Maisel is however unable to provide individualized advice or to make specific recommendations regarding your family’s situation.