



SUMMER PROGRAMS: What Teens with Mental Health Challenges Should Know

BY ERIC ENDLICH, PH.D.

Anxiety and other mental health challenges seem to be increasingly common in teens these days. Fortunately, summer programs have the potential to make a real difference.

HOW SUMMER PROGRAMS CAN HELP

“Summer programs represent a great opportunity for teens to continue working toward their readiness for college,” notes Kevin Trimble, director of Beyond Akeela.

"They are a chance to meet and build relationships with new peers. Summer programs also provide opportunities to practice managing their mental health outside of their high school environment. Often this results in a confidence boost."

"Teens with mental health challenges may feel a respite from the day-to-day difficulties and meet other individuals with common goals and values," says Alexander Morris-Wood, Associate Vice President of Transitions and Student Experience at Beacon College. "I have seen individuals leave summer programs rejuvenated because they accomplished a significant goal over a short period."

SELECTING A PROGRAM

For teens with significant mental health issues, the search process involves more than just finding a program that matches their interests. Here are some additional factors to consider:

- **Distance from home.** Staying close to home may limit the selection, but will allow continued access to existing supports such as therapists or family.

- **Remote vs. in-person.** While some students don't care for remote learning, teens with social anxiety may actually prefer virtual summer programs which allow them to remain in the comfort of their own homes.

- **Size of the program.** Smaller groups may be less stressful for those with social anxiety or noise sensitivity.

- **Focus of the program.** Does the program teach coping, social or life skills? If so, it may be especially beneficial.

"Families should evaluate how much is scheduled for the teen and how much built-in support is provided to support a teen's social-emotional skill development," Morris-Wood advises. "Secondly, the length of the program should be considered, especially if this is the teen's first time away from home or engaging in a more intensive social environment since the COVID pandemic."

"I encourage students to understand their own unique needs and work to find a program that will be able to accommodate those needs," says Marci Schwartz, Ph.D., founder of Thrive Counseling. "For example, if a student feels it would be beneficial to continue to meet with a »



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therapist while away, check with the program to ensure there will be access to a private location to take a telehealth meeting.”

Therapist Alisha Uppal recommends that families “determine if the summer program provides a supportive environment for learning and personal development. Summer programs should not only be for academic development, but also for learning how to thrive in an independent environment.”

HOW TO PREPARE

“Prior to the summer program the student should be completely independent in taking and managing medications as well as be a good self-advocate in knowing when to reach out for support,” Schwartz says. “Prepare, plan and practice,” psychologist Sharon Saline, Psy.D. advises. “Talk about any concerns in advance and create some practical strategies that you can access. Then practice these options in your current life so they become more familiar.”

Likewise, Trimble points out, “We all do best when we know what to expect walking into any situation. We suggest that teens review the websites so they can get an understanding of what they’ll be doing. Attend any and all orientations or pre-summer gatherings! Create a plan for how teens will access mental health support while they’re in a summer program.”

It may seem like a lot to consider, but with the right selection and preparation, a summer program can be a truly transformative experience.

Dr. Eric Endlich is a clinical psychologist and founder of Top College Consultants®. He helps teens worldwide—especially those with learning differences or emotional challenges—apply and transition to college. A professional member of the Independent Educational Consultants Association (IECA), he serves on the association’s Learning Differences/Neurodiversity and Diversity/Equity/Inclusion Committees, and was honored by IECA with a “Making a Difference” award. Dr. Endlich writes and presents widely on neurodiversity, mental health and college admissions.



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