



KAREN'S EXPERIENCE: COMMUNICATING DURING HIGH STRESS MOMENTS

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Sonia's downward spiral into the depths of her eating disorder continued.

Although she was seeing a therapist weekly, we did not know anything about what they discussed. As parents, we were floundering, having no idea how best to support her. Should we be preparing each meal for her, and then supervising her when she ate? Should we try to interrupt the binge/purge cycle by distracting her after a meal? These were techniques that are used in hospital-based treatment programs, so I thought that perhaps we could implement a similar regimen at home.

One evening, I prepared a meal that I thought she would like.

“Let's sit down and eat like a family for once,” I said, “Then right after the meal we can go for a drive...that'll help to break the eating disorder cycle.”

But Sonia turned to me, anger edging her voice.

“You are not my therapist, Mom. You don’t understand what is going on inside my head. This eating disorder is way more complex than you think. If I could suddenly stop these behaviours, of course I would!”

“OK, yes, I get it – it’s complex. But we’ve got to do something! The waiting list for the treatment program is still months away. You could die from this illness!”

“I don’t want to discuss this anymore,” Sonia said, stalking out of the room.



Her symptoms continued.

She was bingeing and purging four or five times a day and exercising obsessively. Gradually her whole life was being taken over by the rituals of the eating disorder. She looked exhausted all the time, and she was becoming increasingly socially isolated, avoiding contact with friends.

Tension escalated in our family. My husband Pradeep, usually so calm, was struggling with anxiety. He woke repeatedly in the night, sweating, unable to sleep. Strangely, my predominant emotion was anger - an emotion that I rarely experience. Usually, I am slow to anger and am often the mediator in conflict situations. But now, Sonia’s behaviour would trigger a flood of white-hot rage within me. I dimly realized that the anger was stemming from a deeper emotion – an agonizing fear that she would die of her illness. But that fear manifested as anger, triggering bitter conflict between us.

On one level, I know that the eating disorder was not her fault, and that she desperately wanted to get well. Yet as intense feelings of frustration overwhelmed me, I would lose my temper and fire angry questions at her: You don't seem to be following your therapist's advice! Can't you do more to help yourself? Is this how you're going to spend your life?

After these ugly conflicts I felt agonizing pain, realizing that these arguments were only making things worse. I tried to talk to her when she and I were both feeling calm. But I inevitably slipped into giving unwanted advice. Sonia resented my suggestions, and soon we would be locked in yet another argument.



On rare occasions, Sonia and I managed to spend some happy times together.

It might be a shopping trip, a drive in the country, or watching a Netflix show together. When summer came that year, I kept looking longingly at the Parks Canada website, imagining the two of us going on a little camping trip together. When I first suggested this to Sonia, she was appalled by the idea. But she finally agreed, after much hesitation.

A few days later, we set off on our mother and daughter trip to the Pinery, a provincial park situated on the shores of Lake Huron. Stands of pine trees shelter the campsites, and the beach is dotted with undulating sand dunes.

Sonia had hardly been out of the house all summer. She seemed tense and edgy, and spent most of the trip reclining in the passenger seat, her eyes closed. "The sun bothers my eyes," she muttered.

We reached the park in the late afternoon. I'd bought a new tent for the occasion, and we worked together to set it up at the campsite. Figuring out how to erect a tent can be a challenge, and we had a few false starts. At one point the

tent collapsed on us, and we both began to giggle. What a lovely feeling, to be able to share a moment of fun with my daughter!

Late that afternoon, we found a sheltered spot in the curve of a sand dune where we spread out our beach towels. We stretched out, enjoying the feel of the warm sand beneath us. A comfortable silence descended.

After some time, I reached out my hand to take hers.

“I’m sorry that I keep getting angry with you...it’s really because I’m so afraid,” I murmured. “And because I just don’t understand.”

“Yes, I get it. It must be scary,” she whispered.

A cool breeze sprang up. Sonia sat up and brushed the sand off her clothes. Then she sat, hugging her knees and gazing across the lake. We watched the sun gradually set, flooding the sky with pink, orange and mauve.

“You know what, Mom? This is the first time I’ve noticed beauty, in so many years,” she whispered.

I squeezed her hand, thrilled by her words. I hoped that this trip might represent a turning point for her. Nature has such healing powers!

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After the weekend was over, we packed up our gear and set off for home.

On the return journey, Sonia talked a little about her experience of the eating disorder, and the ways it was causing devastation in her life. I just listened, resisting the temptation to offer commentary or advice. I felt a comforting sense

of peace between us.

'If only we can manage to keep this delicate thread of communication going,' I thought.

When we reached home Pradeep was waiting to meet us, and I hoped that Sonia would share something about the trip with him. But instead, she headed straight up the stairs to her room. When she reached the landing, she turned to me and said, "Just remember, Mom, I don't want you to talk about my eating disorder with anybody."

At that moment, I realized that Sonia's secret was also my secret.

~Dr. Karen Trollope-Kumar

