

# PATHWAYS COMICS

## Study Guide for Vol. 2, “Not So Good...”

### What’s the point?

It is an unfortunate reality that most youth and young adults who are involved in the mental health system will, at one point or another, have a less than ideal encounter with a provider. There are a variety of reasons mental health providers might fail to successfully engage young people, but many of these reasons share a common theme. For instance, a provider might read the young person’s file or case notes before meeting with them for the first time and make assumptions that cloud their ability to get to know the young person on an individual basis, or that color the questions they ask. Similarly, a provider might impose an intervention that does not meet the young person’s needs, either taking a “one-size-fits-all” approach based off the youth’s symptoms or diagnosis or simply failing to ask the young person what they think might work best for them. Indeed, providers often fail to make space for, elicit, and prioritize the young person’s perspective at every point in the treatment process, which can leave young people feeling like mental health treatment is something that is happening to them rather than something in which they are an active participant. This failure frequently occurs in the first few meetings with a young person and can result in the young person “disengaging” from services.



In Issue 2 of the Pathways Comic Series, James is called from class to meet with a school-based mental health provider, an encounter which, we can infer, leaves him feeling disempowered, not to mention embarrassed, confused and overwhelmed. Hearing your name called over the loudspeaker in high school can be a uniquely uncomfortable experience in and of itself, and James might additionally be worried about what his peers think regarding why he is being pulled from the classroom. When the counselor opens the conversation by telling James she has heard that he is not participating in class, it is easy to see how James could view this meeting as punitive in nature, and why he has already begun to shut down and tune out by the time the counselor raises the topic of his mental health. Even here, the unseen counselor does not ask for James’ perspective on the issue of

why his participation has been lacking, launching instead into a review of his file and listing her own strategies as to how his mental health and challenges in class could be addressed. Indeed, James does not speak at all during their time together, and he leaves the counselor's office looking alarmed at the prospect of having to attend more meetings like this one.

It is no surprise that James feels unable to return to class after his encounter with the school counselor; there are several reasons a young person in his situation might feel despondent and exhausted. Instead, James skips the rest of the school day and heads home, meeting his canine companion, Jarvis, at the door. Jarvis, in the way animals often can, is able to sense James' distress, and drags him back out the door for a walk, which turns out to be exactly what James needs to lift his spirits.

These comics were developed by people with lived experience in the youth mental health system. Juxtaposed together, issues 1 and 2 of Volume 2 of the Pathways comic provide the reader with an additional insight into the lives of young adults who experience mental health challenges. The "experts" in James' life – that is, teachers, school administrators, and school-

based mental health providers- are unsuccessful in addressing James' challenges with mental health and in school, and their attempts to do so backfire, driving James to further disengage from school and the "system". In contrast, when given space to do so, James is able to mitigate his own mental health symptoms quite successfully on his own, simply by stepping away, taking a break, and going for a walk with his dog, who we have already seen is a significant natural support to him. Perhaps if the school counselor had paused to ask James what sort of things he finds helpful in combating his depression and anxiety, rather than launching into the array of services and supports the school was prepared to provide him, he might have told her that getting outdoors or walking his dog helps to pull him out of a slump. And by taking the time to have a conversation like this, the counselor may have helped James to feel more engaged, respected and open to the prospect of continued meetings with her. As you read this comic and work through this study guide, alone or with your team, it is our hope that you consider how your own initial engagement and continued work with young people can honor their perspective, prior experiences, and ultimately their expertise on their own lives.

## Things to keep in mind

- \* Young people with mental health challenges often fear feeling singled out or stigmatized by their peers and may not want to disclose their mental health status or diagnosis. In school settings in particular, it is important to be sensitive and apply a trauma-informed lens when working to engage young people in services and supports.
- \* It is uncomfortable to know others have been reading or talking about you without your knowledge. Consider how best to bring up things you have learned about a young adult from their file or from another provider – if at all.
- \* Young people are their own best experts on what works, and what doesn't, in supporting their own mental health and recovery. It's always good to begin a provider-client relationship by talking about what the youth's experiences with systems have been like in the past, and what they are already doing on their own to cope.

## Discussion questions

1  
What could school staff have done differently in pulling James from class for counseling? How might they approach engaging a young person in this type of support in a trauma-informed manner?



Scene from Vol 2, "Not So Good..." Issue 1

2  
What are some ways the school counselor could have begun her meeting with James so that he felt more engaged in the meeting? When might have been some good times for her to ask a question, or offer space for James' input?



Scene from Vol 2, "Not So Good..." Issue 1

3  
Why do you think James chooses not to return to class after his meeting with the school counselor? Is there anything the counselor could have done to address these reasons?



Scene from Vol 2, "Not So Good..." Issue 2

## Reflections

- \* What are some strategies for building rapport with a young person the first time you meet them?
- \* How do you bring up something you have learned about a young person outside of your time together while remaining youth driven?
- \* If you had to raise the issue of a young person not participating in class, how might you do so without making them feel like they were being punished, or judged?

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## Suggested citation

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Read comics at:

[www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/comics](http://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/comics)



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