

PATHWAYS COMICS

Study Guide for Vol. 3, “Some Afternoons”

What’s the point?

When a young person makes, or is considering making, a risky or concerning decision, it can be difficult to know how best to respond. Providers naturally want the best outcomes for the youth they support, and hearing that a youth is considering something that seems counter to this – dropping out of school or treatment, for instance – can cause alarm bells to sound. It is tempting, and fairly normal, to view these situations as problems that require solving, and the urge to intervene and change the young person’s mind or somehow motivate them to act differently can be strong. Giving in to these urges, however, comes with its own set of risks. For example, the young person may feel misunderstood or judged by their provider. They may feel belittled, as though the provider thinks they are incapable of making decisions regarding their own life. Young people, especially those who have been system involved, are generally wary of being manipulated, and to arouse these suspicions in an already sensitive situation can seriously damage any trust that has been built between the young person and their provider. In addition, anyone who has worked with young people knows that they are unlikely to change their mind based on anything they perceive as “lecturing,” and worse, this sort of response will make them less likely to trust their provider with sensitive information or decisions in the future. On the other hand, if the provider is able to manage their reaction, listen with an open mind,



and explore the young person’s needs and feelings nonjudgmentally, a situation of concern or risk can become an opportunity to grow trust and build self-determination skills.

In issue 3 of the Pathways comic series we reconnect with James, who has been absent from school since an uncomfortable meeting with his counselor and seems to have no intentions of returning. James, in planning to drop out of high school, has made the type of decision that can cause providers to jump into crisis mode. Of possible further concern, he seems disinterested in his previous goal of getting a job, as in part one of this issue he blows off his neighbor Mike’s offer of assistance in doing so. Though Mike is not a mental health provider, his response to hearing that James is not interested in attending school at the moment is instructive. While Jarvis, James’ dog,

silently urges Mike to tell James “how smart he is” and instruct him that he “has to go to school,” Mike refrains from reacting with judgment and merely reflects on what James has said, asking “Not going so well, huh?” And when James declines Mike’s offer to work on job applications, Mike doesn’t push the issue, saying “Sure, buddy, some other time,” signalling to James that he’ll be willing and available to help when James is ready.

It can be difficult not to overreact, make suggestions, or offer advice when a young person seems to be headed down a worrisome path. Upon hearing a young person has stopped attending school, our initial thoughts and impulses might more closely resemble Jarvis’ inner monologue than they do Mike’s measured response. By managing those initial impulses to instruct or lecture, however, we give young people the space to determine their own next steps, a move which expresses respect in addition to preserving trust. A professional provider, in contrast to a friend or neighbor like Mike, might want to further explore the situation with James and see whether he were interested in formulating some next steps around his choice to disengage from school. If James were not, however, Mike’s response of letting things go until another day would still be appropriate. When

James leaves Mike’s house to go to the park, he bumps into a classmate who floats the idea of going to a local community space together to work on their resumes, and this time, despite his initial reluctance, James accepts. It wasn’t that he was no longer interested in his previous goal of getting a job – it was just that he didn’t “want to deal with people today.” Maybe he just needed some time to unwind before getting down to business, or maybe the prospect of having a peer ally made the task feel less daunting. Indeed, an invitation that might come off as condescending or pushy from an adult is much less likely to when coming from someone in a young person’s peer group. Regardless, we see that James has not lost interest in his goals at all – he just needed some time to get started on them on his own terms.

These comics were developed by young people with lived experience in the youth mental health system. As you read this volume and work through this study guide, our hope is that you reflect on your own work with young people. Are you working to remain true to youth-driven principles, even in situations that carry risk or concern? How are the young people you work with impacted by the way you manage, or don’t manage, your impulses to make suggestions or give advice?

Things to keep in mind

- * Controlling the urge to tell young people what to do is particularly difficult in situations of concern or perceived risk, but young people will likely be particularly sensitive to being judged or manipulated in these situations, so it is of increased importance that providers notice and manage these urges.
- * By listening to the young person and refraining from judgment or jumping into problem-solving mode, you will increase the likelihood that they will come to you in the future with sensitive issues and decisions they are weighing.
- * Considering the pros and cons of a decision, even one that might be considered “controversial,” is a great time to help a young person build self-determination skills.
- * Sometimes, an offer or invitation can be more meaningful or persuasive when coming from a peer. Peer-to-peer contact is one of the best ways to engage young people in community resources such as drop-in centers.

Discussion questions

1
What are some other ways Mike might have responded to James' statement that "school just isn't the right place for me?" How might these responses have shifted the conversation and/or the relationship between Mike and James?



Scene from Vol 3, "Some Afternoons," Issue 1

2
Had Mike followed Jarvis' cues and told James that "he's smart and needs to go to school," how do you think James would have responded? Have you ever reacted to a young person's choice in a similar manner? How did it go?



Scene from Vol 3, "Some Afternoons," Issue 1

3
Why might James have declined Mike's offer to work on job applications, but later have been open to his peer's offer to accompany her to the drop-in center and work on his resume there?



Scene from Vol 3, "Some Afternoons," Issue 3

Reflections

- * Have you ever worked with a young person that lost interest in pursuing a previously identified goal? How did you proceed?
- * What are some strategies you use when a young person is planning to do something that concerns you? What are some ways of supporting the young person without either lecturing them or endorsing their plan?
- * What does the phrase “meet the youth where they’re at” mean to you? Can you think of an example of when you’ve applied this to your work?

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Read comics at:

www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/comics



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