



RNBC online

Our monthly e-newsletter featuring the latest on our programs, services, events and mission: Building on the strengths of children, teens and young adults.

Sharing Stories: Not Another Word About College!

By Meryl Lipton, M.D., Ph.D. Assistant Professor, Medical Director at RNBC

I saw Janine about two weeks before the beginning of school. Sixteen, with brown hair in a pixie cut, and wearing a baggy T shirt and short shorts, she slouched comfortably, one leg thrown over the arm of the chair in my office. I had treated Janine for anxiety for more than two years, and was impressed by her maturity and self knowledge.

“So how’s it going?” I asked her.

She let out a tremendous sigh. “I’m sleeping so well. Really well,” she said. “But I keep thinking about what it will be like when summer is over. How I’ll wake up in the middle of the night because I’m overwhelmed by having six assignments and not enough time to do all of them. Right now I get up every morning and think, ‘Wait, I’m not back in school yet!’ and feel so relieved.”

Janine was being treated with cognitive behavioral therapy and with medication, and had improved substantially over the past two years. Initially she had cared so much about doing every assignment perfectly that she got stuck, going over and over what she had written, throwing out drafts and starting over, working for hours on work sheets and essays she couldn’t finish to her own satisfaction and wouldn’t turn in. She had real strengths—she loved science and had the math skills to support her interest—but her grades didn’t really reflect her abilities. At the end of her freshman year, Janine’s grade point average was 2.3.

I remember her saying, when we discussed her report card, “I’ve been learning a lot, but I can’t get organized enough to do everything. My mom says I’ll never get into a decent school. She says I’ve already blown it.”

She looked at me anxiously, hoping that I could persuade her that that wasn’t true. “She and daddy both went to Amherst.” Janine slumped in her chair. “The son of a friend of hers had 800’s on his SATS and was captain of his soccer team and this math whiz and he got turned down at Columbia and Cal Tech and Yale because he had a D in ceramics his freshman year. He hated ceramics and thought it was stupid, but that wrecked everything. All his other grades were As. So for me—“she sat a moment, overwhelmed, and then finished, “Nothing is really possible.”

“The current admissions process has something profoundly wrong with it,” I said to her. “And because these are difficult times, economically your parents – in fact most parents—worry more about the difference the right kind of education can make. But you can relax. Not going to an Ivy League school is really okay. You can do well and learn what you need to be successful at a lot of schools.”

I pointed out to Janine’s mom that her daughter was so stressed out that she couldn’t possibly do her best. Janine was in therapy and on medication. She was doing what she needed to do, but I also recommended three additional things her mom could do:

1. I urged her to talk to Janine so that together they could set a realistic long term goal for the next school year. They agreed that Janine should aim once more for a 3.0 grade point average... *continue to page 2.*



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2. I asked Janine's mom to do some things to help herself master her own college anxieties. I told her it would be best if she would stop telling her daughter horror stories about the difficulty of getting into favored schools and stop weighing every effort Janine made in terms of eventual college acceptance.

If Janine's mom wanted to collect information, she should start making a mental list of successful people she knew who went to schools with a modest reputation. Janine's mom soon discovered that her boss, her best friend's husband, and the couple she and her husband played golf with, all professionally successful, had gone to—and in one case dropped out of—colleges she had never heard of.

3. I suggested that Janine's parents create an atmosphere designed to minimize anxiety prior to the return to school in the fall by talking about all the things that Janine did well, and all the ways her performance had improved.

Janine's sophomore year saw an increase in self-confidence that had benefits beyond academics. She was more relaxed, decided to play a team sport, and widened her circle of friends. She didn't achieve a 3.0 grade point average, but she improved substantially to earn a 2.8. She still had some anxiety about school—hence the talk about how she'd wake up worrying about whether she could complete her assignments. But her reaction to seeing her scores, which a few years before would have overwhelmed her with worry and guilt, was wonderful. "Not where I want to be," she said.

"Maybe next year you'll get a 3.0," I suggested.

She nodded, completely comfortable with the new effort toward that goal. "I bet I will."