

Chapter 1



Josh's birthday that year was fun and significant for him. It was his sixteenth. I excused him from school for a few hours that day so that he could get his driver's permit. We laughed and joked all the way to the Department of Motor Vehicles. Josh picked on me for my driving and teased me about being such a "rule follower," especially when I exceeded the speed limit. He was really in his element, full of smiles and talking non-stop. I am sure that it was because he was excited to be out of school but, even so, it filled my heart with great joy to share this time with him.

Since he hadn't studied at all for the permit test, we knew that it would be an interesting experience one way or the other. Josh must have seen the worry on my face. "I've got this Mom," he said. I'm not sure either one of us really believed it, but there was no turning back at that point, and into the testing room he went. As I watched, I felt my heart fill with love and gratitude for this boy turning into a man right before my eyes.

When the test was complete, Josh and I stood together at the desk while the proctor checked his answers. "Wow, I've gotten quite a few wrong, Mom," Josh shared quietly under his breath as we watched the results unfold in front of us. His anticipation was palpable and the air felt almost electric. As luck would have it, he passed and as the paperwork

was being processed, we high-fived and hugged right in the middle the lobby; neither of us cared that we were making quite a scene. It made me so happy to see him so excited and positive about his accomplishment and his future. I felt such great pride, proud that he had taken the test and passed it even though he chose to do no preparation. I also felt such relief and gratitude that this experience had been so positive especially since over the past several weeks, Josh's disposition had become dark and depressed.

When we left the DMV, it was snowing, a stark contrast to the sunny cloudless sky we experienced driving there. Josh wasn't comfortable driving, so I drove. Josh never missed an opportunity for a little more time out of school. "You know Mom, since I'm going to miss my lunch hour anyway, wouldn't it be nice to stop and have some lunch together?" he said, smiling smugly. He knew I couldn't pass up an invitation to spend a little more time with him. On the way back to school, we stopped off for lunch and shared more jokes and laughter. That day filled my heart up full.

Those moments of joy and celebration would not last for long. Over the next couple of weeks, Josh's mood continued to spiral downward. When I tried to talk with him about what was going on, his responses were always angry. "Mom, I told you I'm depressed and you don't want to believe me." I did believe him; I was taking his feelings very seriously. I just wasn't sure how to help and, given the angry way Josh was choosing to address it with me, it was obvious that I was not meeting his expectations.

Josh had started to show signs of decline just after the first weeks of school. He had such a great experience over the summer working as a camp counselor and came home full of inspiration and motivation to make that coming school year his best ever. Unfortunately, this excitement quickly turned to disdain, and as the weeks passed his mood continued to worsen.

The downward slide had started to escalate in the weeks before his birthday. It began when Josh announced his desire to begin taking antidepressants. This declaration had taken me by surprise. While his mood had grown darker and more agitated in those weeks, I had not been in favor of him taking medication because I was concerned about the side effects. Still, we sought out the advice of his doctor and agreed to start Josh on a low-dose of Zoloft as a trial. Within days of starting the medication, Josh's agitation turned to anger and then the anger turned to rage. During one incident, he punched the wall so hard that we ended up in the emergency room for x-rays, fearing he'd broken his hand.

Concerned about the side effects, Josh's doctor recommended discontinuation of the Zoloft and provided a referral for a full assessment with an adolescent psychiatric specialist.

With his psychiatrist appointment scheduled for a couple of weeks after his birthday, I remained hopeful that this would be the turning point to get him back on track. In my mind, I kept trying to fit all of the pieces to this difficult puzzle together. I couldn't understand what was happening to Josh and how we could go from having such a joy-filled celebration on his birthday to the place where the angst and dark mood once again was front and center in our lives. With the exception of the brief positive experience on his birthday, it felt like he was sinking into quicksand. I didn't know what else to do to help him. I didn't know how to counteract this slide.

On the afternoon of his first appointment with the psychiatrist, I received a text from Josh. It read, "Don't worry about me. I'll be home later." Panic filled my body. I responded a few times, asking him to let me know what was going on and reminding him that he had an appointment that afternoon, but I received no response. I tried to call his phone, but there was no answer. I continued to text him. "Josh, please tell me what is going on!" and still received no response. As the afternoon grew late and the appointment time approached, I decided to drive to his high school,

since that was the last place he had been, and see if I could find out what was going on. Josh often stayed after school so that he could hang out with his girlfriend, so the fact that he was late wasn't as concerning as the fact that he wasn't responding to my attempts to contact him.

Three sheriff's cars passed me, heading in the same direction as the school. At first I thought nothing of it, but as I turned into the parking lot of the school and saw the officers' cars, I knew something was wrong. My heart sank and panic rose in my body. I turned into the front lot where the police were parked and got out of my car. A man I didn't recognize began yelling at me over the wind and sleeting rain. I could tell by his face that he was angry, but I could not hear his words. A sheriff approached me as I stood outside my car, shaking partially from the cold, wet weather but mostly because I couldn't understand what was happening. I feared the worst.

The man in the parking lot turned out to be Josh's girlfriend's guardian. We were at the school for the same reason, and the story began to unfold: the sheriff informed me that Josh and his girlfriend had run away. Since it was the beginning of winter, they had made it several miles away to a local mall and had stopped to figure out their next move. Josh had contacted his older brother, Aaron, for help and, ultimately, his father had gotten involved to bring the kids home.

One of the officers pulled me aside to try to help me understand what had happened. Standing inside the entryway of my son's high school, this stern but kind-looking officer began to explain that Josh was running away because he could no longer take the turmoil and fighting in our home. As Officer Martinez relayed the facts as he knew them, I could feel the blood drain my face. He asked me, "Do you know why they ran away? Has there been on-going trouble in your household?" In disbelief, I shook my head no. The officer seemed visibly surprised by my answers. The look on his face softened as he realized that the stories were not lining up. He said, "Josh had made it very clear to the officer

in charge that the fighting between the two of you was unbearable.” He went on to explain that Josh felt that he could not rely on me, which, he explained, was why he called his brother for support.

I was shocked. In my mind, there was no constant fighting or turmoil between us. We had a very close relationship and, with the exception of addressing some recreational drug use during the prior year, there had been no real issues between us. I knew that when I had addressed Josh’s drug use with a surprise intervention that included his brother, father and stepmother, our relationship had changed. Josh felt betrayed by me, even though I was doing what I thought was best for him. After that experience, though, things were not bad between us. Josh had become a bit more distant with me, but it was only in the weeks prior to his birthday that there had been any real challenges in our relationship.

My mind was exploding. I was completely in shock. I could not understand how this was happening. In my mind, there had been no clear indications that my son felt so much anger towards me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Josh was there at the school, sitting on the floor in the corner on the other side of the entry hallway. He must have arrived through a different doorway while I was speaking with the officer. Josh’s sandy-brown hair was matted to his head and he looked much smaller than his six foot, athletic build. His deep brown eyes looked almost black in the florescent overhead lighting. He looked scared. I wanted to run to him and cradle him in my arms, but his father and brother encircled him. Given this new information, I wasn’t sure how to act. Officer Martinez approached Josh, saying that he needed to ask him a few questions. Through my confusion, I tried to listen to the exchange between Josh and the officer. My mind was having a tough time comprehending the whole situation. As I listened to Josh’s answers, I began to realize that he was feeling unwell. “I have been feeling very depressed lately. No, I’m not sleeping well. The constant fighting makes things worse,” he shared. The turmoil he felt existed

at home was only acting to aggravate his feelings of despair. I wasn't prepared for the next revelation. There, on the floor of his high school, Josh said, "I feel like I should be hospitalized because I'm afraid I might hurt myself." I heard my heart thumping in my ears and thought for a moment I might physically fall to my knees.

Scared that he would be admitted to the hospital and would not be home for Christmas - just two days away - he wasn't sure that he wanted to go to the hospital that night. My heart was torn. I understood how important the holiday was for Josh but, as I watched him there on the floor, still cowering in the corner, vacillating between anger and tears, there was no way that I was going to leave him unchecked. I asked him again if he felt that he was safe. He maintained that he truly felt unsafe and unwell. I decided to take him to the emergency department of our local hospital after a stop home for some dry clothes.

About the Author



Amy White is an International Best-selling author, Caregiver Champion and Intuitive Life Coach who transitioned out of Corporate America to pursue her passion advocating and championing for caregivers after her personal experience supporting her teenage son through a terrifying mental health crisis.

Amy writes the blog ***Far From Paradise***; sharing the lessons, challenges, insights and heartache, as well as her own personal healing journey, following her son's breakdown. She hopes that her story about fighting stigma, navigating the mental health services maze and focusing on her own emotional healing will provide a beacon of hope and light for those who are working to support a loved one or themselves on the path to health and wellness.

In 2014, Amy co-authored the International Best Seller, *Bold is Beautiful Breakthrough to Business Strategies* sharing her story of leaving her career to pursue her dream of coaching and advocating for parents, caregivers and those transitioning through life's challenges and crises.

Amy is also a mental wellness advocate and speaker who works with parents and caregivers helping them to find the best path through the confusing and challenging maze of mental health care.

Amy lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband Peter and dog Quinn and recently her son Josh has come for an extended stay. The journey continues...

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