

# Meet Ryan

Ryan was using marijuana on a daily basis, and cocaine and prescription drugs weekly. He expressed no motivation to stop using, and had no desire to be in treatment. Ryan began smoking marijuana when he was 11 years old, and at 12 he began lacing the marijuana with cocaine, when he was enrolled in MDFT, at age 15, he was regularly using marijuana, cocaine and prescription drugs. Procuring drugs, using drugs, and describing the experience became the focus of his life. Not surprisingly, he was also failing in school. When he began MDFT he was two years behind grade level, and well on his way to being three years behind. His relationship with his mother was very tense. She felt like a failure as a mother and doubted herself so much that she could not make any parenting decisions. While Marge reported that she, too, had a history with addiction, it wasn't until several weeks after therapy began that the therapist realized that Marge was currently dependent on alcohol, and her extensive alcohol abuse prevented her from properly supervising Ryan. He made his own decisions, had no guidance or responsibilities, and considered himself an adult.

## Case Themes: Feelings of Failure and Abandonment

In working with Ryan, the therapist was able to identify two major themes that seemed to have negatively influenced his dreams and hopes for a better life: (1) Feelings of failure associated with academics and (2) the conflict and anger he harbored towards his mother. His resentment of Marge was obvious; the adolescent repeatedly told the therapist how his mother "is always drunk" and how "she'll say things and make promises, but she doesn't follow through." A crucial goal in therapy was to help Ryan and Marge improve their relationship to facilitate communication and problem solving about salient issues (i.e., substance abuse, parental neglect, and academic failure).

## Stage 1

During the first session, Ryan was difficult to engage and angry for having been forced to undergo the program by his mother. For the next session the therapist went to Ryan's school, where she met with him for lunch, thus engaging him in his own environment. She observed first-hand the difficulties he was facing. She immediately noticed how being the oldest student in the class bothered him. Ryan reported that he was embarrassed and angry about being in a class with younger teens. Observing something that was so troubling for Ryan and also being in the environment in which Ryan revealed and spoke about this problem was a great advantage. The session at school greatly enhanced the therapeutic alliance and was the foundation from which the therapist was able to broach other sensitive topics, such as his drug use and relationship with his mother.

In individual sessions the therapist facilitated discussions about anger and Ryan was taught new ways to manage and express his emotions. She also prepared him for sessions with his mom. The therapist coached Ryan on how to express his angry feelings in a constructive way, and Marge was asked to understand the reasons (i.e., Ryan's experiences and conclusions about them) for Ryan's angry mode.

In exploring Ryan's relationship with his mother, core relational themes of neglect and abandonment were discussed, as the MDFT therapist helped Ryan process strong feelings of disappointment and frustration. In one poignant exchange, Ryan tearfully shared his disappointment with the lack of

trustworthiness shown by the people in his life (friends and especially his mother). As the therapist continued to gently probe, Ryan expressed how much his mother's drinking bothered him. The therapist instilled hope by stating that they would focus on this together in therapy and that she would help him relay his feelings to his mother.

Reaching this point (i.e., discussion of hopes and dreams, the painful issues of abandonment, and his mother's alcohol and past drug use), involved a multifaceted process. This sequence, a typical one in MDFT, involved several steps whereby the therapist guided Ryan, creating links for him that fostered understanding into the reasons for his drug use and present situation. First, the therapist helped the adolescent to reflect on how having failed the eighth grade twice was a major disappointment for him, but that he suppressed it through drug use. Next, she addressed the subject of drugs, to talk about why he was using and then to connect his drug use to the chaos that his life had become.

## Stage 2

Marge's own substance use and recovery, guilt with regard to neglecting her son, her own stress and burden, the mother-son relationship, and parenting practices were explored in depth. Parents are not maximally effective if their own personal functioning is compromised. Marge was asked to reflect on the reasons for her drinking, and how it affected her and her family. Treatment for alcoholism was discussed, and she was strongly encouraged to seek help. The therapist helped Marge be ready for treatment, and in the second month of MDFT, Marge was enrolled in her own outpatient substance abuse treatment. Her actions were meaningful and demonstrated to Ryan her sincerity and commitment to dealing with their problems. The therapist helped Marge understand that her going to treatment was not only good for her but also for her son: "By going to treatment and not drinking, you are giving him that message that 'Not only do I want to save you and make you stop doing these things, but I'm willing to realize my own part in how you're turning out.' That's powerful, Marge!"

Helping Marge implement effective house rules and parenting practices was essential given the inappropriate manner in which her parents parented her and her extreme lack of self-confidence as a parent. The therapist explored ways for Marge to improve existing parenting skills and adopt new parenting behaviors. With the therapists help, Marge began to implement and follow-through on basic house rules such as curfew, family dinners, and respect. She also began to monitor her son's whereabouts: questioning him about his comings and goings, calling his teachers daily to check on his attendance, and visiting the school on several occasions to meet with his teachers. The changes in Marge had a tremendous impact on Ryan. During a family session he told his mother, "You know, I can't believe you're going to the school, that you're doing all that."

Improving the relationship between Ryan and his mother was a key goal of MDFT. This change in the family interaction was accomplished via enactment (wherein the adolescent and his mother, facilitated by the therapist, were able to talk about past hurts and recommit to their relationship), and the work done in individual sessions with Ryan and Marge. Ryan and his mother were coached on how to express their feelings to one another so they could communicate how they wanted things to be different. With the therapist's help, Marge was able to tell her son that she would do anything to help make things better for him and them as a family. She also shared with him the reasons she was so adamant that he not use drugs (i.e., because of her love for him and because of the destructive force drugs had been in her life). Similarly, Ryan was coached in talking to his mom about difficult

subjects: Ryan's reasons for using drugs and associating with drug-using friends, and his mother's drinking. Once Marge opened up to Ryan, the therapist was able to coach her in tackling even more delicate issues (feelings of guilt and neglect of her son). The therapist worked with the mother to prepare her for the apology—a powerful moment in therapy in which Marge expressed her remorse for actions in the past and all the pain she had caused her son. With the therapist's guidance she was able to reaffirm her love, investment, and commitment to her son, and effectively communicate her strong desire to consistently be there for him.

### **Stage 3**

At the midway point of treatment, the therapist conducted an appraisal of what they had accomplished thus far and the work that still needed to be done. It was noted that the mother-son relationship had begun to show positive change. Marge and Ryan were starting to communicate in new ways, and their experience of the other had changed as well. Marge recounted an incident where they had both initially responded in their typical hostile way, but then decided, together and quite deliberately, to utilize the new methods of communication they had learned. The result was that mother and son apologized to each other. Later they told the therapist, individually and then in a joint session, how each had felt encouraged by this event and its new kind of outcome.

Although Marge had entered her own substance abuse treatment, Ryan began attending school and improving his grades, and their relationship had improved tremendously, Ryan continued to test positive for drug use on his urinalysis screens. The therapist continued to focus on the drug use both individually with Ryan and in family sessions. Finally, the therapist coached Marge to have a conversation with Ryan in which she once again in a loving but firm way told Ryan that he must stop using the drugs, and the now empowered Marge said: “I don’t want to do this but if you cannot stop yourself and you continue to have dirty tests, you leave me no choice but to put you in detox. I know you don’t want this but I will do it. You know I will.”

### **Conclusion of Treatment**

This time Ryan believed Marge, and Ryan, Marge and the therapist developed a plan for how they could help Ryan stop using drugs and alcohol. By the end of treatment, both Marge and Ryan had stopped using alcohol and drugs. During the final session, therapist facilitated communication to help them recognize and express the many positive changes they had both made during the course of treatment. Marge told her son how proud she was of him regarding his improved performance in school (he earned his first "A"), and his staying clean and not wanting to use anymore. Ryan expressed to his mother that he noticed how proud she was of him, of the choices he had been making, and acknowledged her abstinence and its positive affect him. Mother and son were learning to appreciate one another and committed themselves to building upon the positive changes they had made.