

Sophia Iovenitti: [00:00:00] Welcome to Shift Happens, a podcast by Newport Healthcare. Each episode we bring you stories of hope and healing, trends in mental healthcare and best practices for lifelong recovery. I'm your host, Sophia Iovenitti, and this week we're talking with Dondi about his Newport experience. Dondi, I am so excited to have you as a podcast guest and I just wanna thank you for your time and that it's just been truly an honor.

For me to be a part of this journey with you and your family over the last several years. And my first question to get us going is, can you share a little bit about what brought you and your family to Newport? What were some of those struggles that you guys were experiencing?

DonDi: Yeah. My daughter at the age of 12 was diagnosed with depression and anxiety. By 13 the events of COVID and social [00:01:00] distancing, played a really big role in escalating, I guess our, our situation. My kiddo became suicidal, with some self-harm tendencies, all of which quickly became beyond anything that we could handle here at home. So we needed help keeping our kiddos safe and alive, and we reached out to Newport.

Sophia Iovenitti: I've known your story very well, and I know that that search for Newport wasn't an easy decision for your family. Um, how, as a parent, how did you know it was time to seek treatment, and what was that process like for you?

DonDi: Yeah, we quickly knew that we were, outside of our depths with this. You know, our daughter had been receiving therapy inside psychiatric care for her depression and, and her anxiety. And one night in October, 2020, Lena had ways of uncontrollable sorrow, which led to her not wanting to be [00:02:00] alive and be here with us. So she had these thoughts of ending in her life. So we brought her to the ER, that was our first trip to the ER actually, where she had suicidal ideation and they quickly recommended a higher level of care for stabilization, which was of course a hospitalization stay for her, where she stayed for about six days.

And, then she was cleared to come home. But then when she came home, she immediately wanted to return back to the hospital because she didn't feel safe anymore. She tried to ingest some bleach that was in our garage. But luckily for us, before my kiddo came home, I reversed the locks on our garage door.

So you technically needed a key to get into the garage instead of a key to get into the house. And she couldn't get into the garage, which, we're glad we [00:03:00] did 'cause that prevented, the tragedy of us possibly losing our kiddo.

At this point, we knew that this was beyond anything that we could, prepare for. None of this was in a parent manual we were given at birth. So, that's when we knew we needed help.

Sophia Iovenitti: I think every parent wishes they were given a manual of some sort. But this, like you said, definitely not in that manual and neither were the instructions of how to find treatment or where to even start looking. When you kind of think back to that process. Other than the recommendation from the inpatient stay, what were some of the factors that you were considering when researching treatment facilities and what made your decision like Newport, is it.

DonDi: It was a lot of, doing our own research, online and just trying to find a program. I mean, we looked at several options and there were [00:04:00] so many, and it wasn't very clear on what separated each program from each other. We probably spoke to maybe 10, 15 different programs, and honestly, they all sounded the same. When I reached out to Newport, there was a kindness and an understanding that wasn't present in any of the other calls. There was knowledge, there was compassion. There was a willingness to try to accommodate our needs, not only as, you know, a client, our kiddo, but a client as parents.

Sophia Iovenitti: Thank you for sharing that. Dondi I, I can't even imagine what it would be like to be searching for help. Find help that you feel confident and secure in, in a very complicated and nerve wracking situation, trusting this team to then provide

support to your family. And residential treatment is [00:05:00] not just an important life changing step in a healing journey, but it is the hardest decision a family can ever make. And I know your story well. And I know that when Lena did come to residential care, something that was really difficult to navigate from a parent perspective was that communication piece between you and Lena and that it was really non-existent. And so you had all of these behind the scenes things happening, and you're trying to work on a relationship with your daughter and support her and, work on those repairs and family therapy, et cetera. What was it like for you to navigate some of those moments all happening at the same time?

DonDi: Yeah, you're absolutely right. Our, our journey is not the typical journey. And it was really difficult. My wife and I in the beginning really felt as though we were kind of on this desert island alone, where no one knew what we were going [00:06:00] through. We couldn't really talk about what we were going through, in both of our cultures, you know, this was like a taboo

conversation to have. You don't really talk about mental health. So none of our friends or families could possibly understand the situation we were in. After being discharged from Newport, for the first time, we were offered to take advantage of all that Newport had to offer, with aftercare. So from there we located the parent support group. My wife and I showed up for the first time in the meeting not knowing, what we were doing or how to keep my kiddo alive. So we immediately found community in this group. Instantly knew that we weren't alone in this journey anymore, so we found like-minded parents who were struggling, who loved and who wanted things to be better. We found parents in all stages of this [00:07:00] process, which gave us hope, because hope was missing in our lives at that point.

Sophia Iovenitti: I, actually very much remember that first meeting because I was also there with you and your wife, Kristen, and, I remember watching. I mean, I watched new parents come into that group every week, and I knew that this was a space where that community is what we were trying to create. It wasn't about doing the hard clinical work with families.

It was about creating a space where other families could realize that other families were going through similar situations and that they weren't alone and that they could lean on each other for true support. And I know that that group is, is still a big part of your weekly agenda and schedule. And, in moments where you were seeking support from others, I know that it is over the years transformed into a place where you can also kind of give back in a way.

Can you share a little bit about what the [00:08:00] support groups in that process has been like?

DonDi: Yeah, you're absolutely right. In the beginning it was us needing so much support. We leaned on everyone in the meeting to help get us through, you know, I'm sure you remember us watching the process of people succeeding and getting better. And through our long process of trying to get our kiddo to feel better about themselves. It was a long, long, long journey. And we've often cried and showed tears because we never knew when it was gonna be our turn. There was a level of frustration, when is it gonna be our turn? But it eventually turned around and now we find ourselves as those giving the support. I still continue to go 'cause I'm still learning as well. So, I mean, this community has just been the world. I mean, we wouldn't be where we're at now if it wasn't for [00:09:00] this community. So it was all you in the beginning, and it was your support and your care that really pulled us through the beginning.

So thank you so much.

Sophia Iovenitti: The best part of my job, Dondi, is showing up and creating spaces that allow others to know that they're not alone going through this journey, and we've talked a lot about that. I remember those early moments when you would share that question with a deep desire to know when is the end of the tunnel going to come for us?

When is that light going to start peaking through? When is it going to be our turn to say this is working. Because it really does not feel like it's working right now. And I've also seen the transition over time of the moments when you have come in and said it's working. And I have hope to share and I have good news to give to this group.

There's this cliché saying that we say a [00:10:00] lot of times healing is not linear. There's ups and downs and all sorts of things that come in between this journey. It's like a rollercoaster at times, and we're all on it. I know that you've come into those groups or called the alumni team and said, yeah, things were great last week, but we need support this week

please help. And I just have also always appreciated that you have leaned into those resources. It's been truly an honor to be a part of this journey with you. At Newport we like to say Shift Happens, and it's the title of this podcast, so it seems pretty fitting for us to ask.

When did you really start to see some positive changes happening? Was there a moment that you really said this is working or that you saw it in Lena or in your family dynamics?

DonDi: You know, I, I know this question really revolves around Lena and what I've noticed is that the shift happened for us really late. [00:11:00] And a lot of it was because we kept seeing this as Lena's problem. She was the one who was depressed. She was the one who had anxiety. She was the one with the suicidal ideation and the self harm. We didn't see it as we had a problem. And it wasn't until I shifted my perspective and worked on my communication styles and added validation skills, to my vocabulary that this shift happened for my kiddo. Because I did this for myself and my kiddo. She saw that we were doing the work. She saw a difference in how we communicated with her and learned how to validate her true feelings about what was going on and making this change in effort. She was able to shift in a way to seeing things differently. [00:12:00] So, I think for her, when she saw that we were trying really hard, could understand, look, my parents are trying. I'm gonna go ahead and try as well.

Sophia Iovenitti: A parallel process, a book we talk about often. I love that. But truly it is, it, it's not a, a one identified patient concern or problem. And I think that's often a mis uh, misunderstanding about mental and behavioral healthcare is a lot of times we talk or we hear from families. Exactly what you experienced, right?

They need the help, not we need the help. And then there's the shift in perspective and learning that happens and, and then the family starts to heal. And that's why Newport takes the stance that this is a family program. We want families, not just the kid who is struggling to be a part of this process.

What did the [00:13:00] role of family therapy play in strengthening your relationship?

DonDi: Oh, family therapy was everything. as I mentioned, it shifted perspective away from just Lena, but, a problem that was with the family. I really changed my communication style and learned to validate, and I'm gonna tell you as a old Marine, you know, it was something that was very difficult for me to do. It was, you know, "Hey kiddo, I tell you to do something, you do it without question." 'Cause that's the way I understood things to be. So for me to learn through family therapy, that that was not going to work for all situations and that I had to change the way that I communicated with my kiddo, really helped our situation and really gave us the tools and the voice to speak about things that we would normally avoid to just to keep the peace around the house. [00:14:00] But in doing so, it would make like one party like feel neglected and unheard because they were bottling stuff up. So, hiding our true feelings was what was really tearing the fabric of our family apart, and the family therapy was able to point this out. So it was a very important part of our healing structure for, for our family dynamics.

Sophia Iovenitti: I know that your family therapy has also continued, not just at Newport, but when you moved into other parts of the healing journey. Do you wanna share anything about what it looked like to not have Newport be the end of your story? That there's been con continued kind of ups and downs in the healing process?

DonDi: No, I'm glad you are giving me the platform to really share outside of Newport, because you're right. Newport wasn't [00:15:00] the end all for us. My kiddo did have to go to a long-term residential, where they spent 23 months. And it was a very tough decision for us to make, to send our kiddo away out of state for any length of time. But our journey continued and, we originally were like, these guys are no Newport. They don't cater to us parents the way that

Newport catered to us. We quickly wanted to pull our kiddo out of the program 'cause we felt we just weren't getting the same level of, of help that we were receiving from Newport. But we had to realize that, there was a process and this was a new program and we had to, give it a try and stick it out. She was ready to do the work, the family therapy, the individual therapy, the monthly visits was all worth it.

In the [00:16:00] end, my kiddos alive. So yes, our journey did continue. We were not the typical, as I like to say, one and done, at Newport. But Newport gave us the foundation. Newport was the initial life saving part of our process, and I'm forever grateful for all that you guys have done.

Sophia Iovenitti: I know that it was, like you said, it was a long process and she was gone for a long time, and something that I really appreciated was that you stayed so connected. To us through that process that you felt that you could lean into those support groups still, that you could lean into the resources and our teams and say, we're having good days, we're having bad days.

We're trying, we're sticking it out. It's not Newport. I remember all of those moments and [00:17:00] those calls and you know, I've said it now a couple times, but truly it is always an honor to be able to walk alongside families no matter what the clinical recommendation at the end of treatment is and what the next steps look like.

There is a community of families and a team that is dedicated to being there to support and be reachable for as long as a family is willing to connect with us for, which is, I mean, I'm proud of those teams every day and that Newport offers that.

DonDi: Yeah, me too. So much so.

Sophia Iovenitti: When you think about what a process this has been, what are some of the wins or the things that you have recognized in Lena and your family dynamics that have changed that you're proud of?

DonDi: Um, I think as family we are much stronger than we were before. Just the fact that we're able to have conversations. [00:18:00] Again, it's not perfect by any stretch of the word, but we try, we work really hard. I think my kiddo is farther along than most kids her own age because of the knowledge she's gained through going through what she went through, therapy that she's gone through. She's so much brighter than, I'm telling you, most of the kids that she hangs out with, she has a self-knowledge about herself that most kids her age do not have.

Sophia Iovenitti: I am so proud of her too. I know how much work it took from not just the family side, but from her side too.

DonDi: Yes.

Sophia Iovenitti: Doing the work, and though the family had to do work, Lena had to make those decisions. Lena had to actually start taking steps forward and believing in herself that she was capable of doing that work.

And, I'm so proud of her too. I love [00:19:00] hearing your story. It's, one that is filled with. All of those ups and downs, but so much hope and so much beauty in what a family can do when every little piece starts working and then starts working together. It's awesome. What message do you want to share with other parents who are maybe considering treatment for their teens, and why would you recommend Newport?

DonDi: I know the guilt and shame that you're going through that comes along having to make this kind of decision. The reason why is 'cause I lived that guilt and shame, and this was a decision we had to make to save my kiddo's life.

The discomfort I felt was a fraction of the emotions I would've felt if I couldn't keep my kids safe or alive I can say without a doubt that Newport has been the most professional, the most whole family program that we've attended. We feel that Newport [00:20:00] was and is always the best choice for us because of the professionalism that they had. It was just kind of hard to go through the process and see different programs that just didn't live up

to Newport.

Sophia Iovenitti: I commend every parent who has to not just make these hard decisions, but work on all of those extra pieces that have to fall in line to get your kid the support and care that they need and that your family is seeking.

Because like you said, there's already a lot of shame and guilt and anxiety and stress. Your kids are struggling and it's human nature for us as parents to want to fix it and to help them feel better. That's all we're looking for. And when there's all these roadblocks in front of us, it makes it really daunting and scary and frustrating too.

DonDi: You're absolutely right, Sophia. I mean, I told you before I can fix [00:21:00] anything. I'm a fixer. That's what I do. But I couldn't fix my kid and it took Newport and a team of people to help fix my kiddo. And you know, my

kiddo wasn't broken in the first place. She just needed to be pointed in the right direction. But yeah, it's such a tough road for us parents to just want your kid to feel better about themselves and knowing that there's nothing you can say or do to change what's going on in their mind is difficult.

Sophia Iovenitti: It's also, and we've talked about this before, but I think worth sharing here. You know it's really easy when your kid has a runny nose or if they happen to break their arm, they get a cast on it. You can see the runny nose, you can see the cast, you can see what the [00:22:00] hurt is. And when our kids are struggling with mental and behavioral healthcare, a lot of times we can't see it.

We're just trying to understand it and it's hard for them to describe it and it's hard for us to understand sometimes. Which adds an extra layer here of just. You want, you're trying to fix something that we can't always see and can't always grasp. But they're feeling it and the feelings are very intense and real.

So our last question is, what would you say to the Newport staff about your experience?

DonDi: You know, as simple as it is, I just wanna say thank you. You saved our family. You really, really did. I could say so much more, but none of it would do any justice other than. Thank you so much for saving my family.

Sophia Iovenitti: Thank you, Dondi. Thank you [00:23:00] for trusting Newport with your family and our teams to support you, not just while Lena was in care with us. But, throughout the process, we've been a part of your journey for so many years and it has truly been a gift. I know I've said that a couple times now, but.

I mean it with my whole heart. And I know that our teams feel the same way. It's an honor every day to support families in healing journey. It's an honor to be here today to hear you share your story, and I just, I could not thank you enough for being a part of this podcast and being a part of our community and, I truly, truly thank you.

Thank you so much for listening. If you found today's episode impactful, please share it and leave a review. If you or someone you know is struggling with mental health issues, Newport Healthcare is here to help. Visit newporthealthcare.com to learn more. [00:24:00]