Medical Xpress

Coaches help beat ADHD

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Jeff Wisniowski would jump off roofs. Surf the Web. Flirt.

Anything - anything - but focus on his studies at Northeastern University in Boston.

"I had a cellphone, a computer, people to talk to," he told me the other day. "Procrastination is easy these days."

It's also a sign of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, with which Wisniowski was diagnosed at 18. His mother and brother both have it, and at home in Connecticut, they helped each other stay focused and on task.

Once on his own at college, though, Wisniowski, now 21, struggled. Things that took his classmates an hour to finish would take him four, and at the eleventh hour.

"It wasn't that I wasn't getting my work done," he said. "It was the amount of time I wasted. I'm in the library and everyone is studying and I was goofing off, running around in circles."

He took psychostimulants to help him focus, but wanted to learn to live without them.

So the school's disability services referred him to the Edge Foundation, a Seattle-based nonprofit that matches ADHD students with coaches who, through weekly meetings by phone or Skype, teach them the skills to

make college worth the money and time.

As I write this, high-school seniors are determining where they will be college freshmen next year, while parents are experiencing a mix of pride and panic.

But parents of children with attention-deficit issues have the added worry of sending a kid away from the place where structure and parental prodding have been the backbone of success.

Without it, everything the student and his family have built may very well go to seed.

"College has no structure, so it's like we cut these kids loose in space," said Robert Tudisco, the Edge Foundation's executive director. "The classes are larger, they are thrown into the mix, and midterms and finals are the only feedback they get from teachers.

"These kids are extremely bright, but it's a setup for failure, a recipe for disaster."

A 2010 study by the School of Medicine at the University of California, Davis concluded that students with ADHD are twice as likely to drop out of school than the general population.

In 2008, the Edge Foundation funded a two-year, $2 million study that tracked the progress of 110 university and community-college students with ADHD.

Students who had coaches showed improved executive functioning, and were better able to manage stress and clarify goals than they were without a coach.

For those who have the means, the cost is $400 month for weekly coaching and unlimited contact through text and e-mail. The foundation is seeking corporate sponsors to provide scholarships, will ask coaches to work pro bono or on a sliding scale, and also provide group coaching to lower the price for students.

The partnership is based on the students' goals - not those of the coach or parents.

"Coaches tune into what they (students) are challenged by most, and then keep the student accountable," Tudisco said. "When you take the parent out of the equation, there's less pushback."

Wisniowski's mother, Mary Anne, didn't mind making room for a coach.

"It kept him accountable," she said. "It seemed like Jeff's coach had a unique feeling or rapport with him."

Neil Peterson, the founder of Flexcar, started the Edge Foundation in 2005 after hiring a coach for himself and his daughter. Both have ADHD.

"The focus here is academics, but the reality is that kids are challenged with getting through the day," Peterson said. "Is their laundry done? Where are their books? Is there money in their pocket?

"It's how they get control and get confidence in how they can manage."

Wisniowski's coach reviewed his weekly schedule and helped him plan assignments, and his life, and helped him identify his weaknesses.

"Distraction," he said of his worst problem. "Girls, mostly."

Wisniowski learned how to stay in his chair and focused, when to take breaks, and how to balance schoolwork with the rest of his life.

"My coach brought me outside support with a tool kit," he said. "I never blew it off because it made stuff better for me," he said.

"It is strategies and things that last on the long term."

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