

Zachary Sampson

Jacksonville, Florida, teen hopes his story will help break stigmas of mental health conditions.

Jennifer Sampson has talked countless parents through how to get their children emergency mental health help. As a former crisis response counselor, Sampson knew the warning signs.

"But when it came to my own son, Zachary, I just didn't see it," she said.

Pandemic problem?

Sampson said Zachary excelled throughout elementary and middle school, both academically and socially. During his freshman year in high school, Zachary's grades started slipping. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Sampson noticed her son becoming more irritable, withdrawn and isolated. Zachary also started putting less effort into his appearance.

"This is a kid who would match his shoes to his shirt, and suddenly he's not putting any effort into how he looks," Sampson recalled. "But at that time, no one really was, and everyone was isolated because of the pandemic. We didn't think too much of it."

It wasn't until an afternoon in August 2020 that Sampson realized the extent of Zachary's struggles. She arrived home to find officers with the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office on her front porch.

"Zachary had told a friend of his that he was suicidal, and she called the police," Sampson remembered. "I couldn't believe it. I looked at him and asked, 'Are you suicidal?' And he said he was. It was heartbreaking."

Even more devastating is the fact that Zachary is not an outlier. Since the pandemic began, Wolfson Children's Hospital of Jacksonville has seen a 300% increase in emergency behavioral health admissions. While alarming, the pandemic only worsened an already-existing mental health crisis.

"We realized Zachary was struggling during COVID-19,



but I think this would have surfaced no matter what," Sampson explained.

Lifetime of care

Zachary was immediately admitted to Wolfson Children's Hospital, where he was diagnosed with a major depressive disorder and ADHD. During this hospitalization, he was evaluated by a team of psychiatrists, as well as a psychologist. After he was discharged, he also received extensive outpatient psychological testing, but was admitted again in March 2021 following a second major depressive episode. His conditions are now being managed through medication and outpatient counseling.



"Everyone at Wolfson Children's who has interacted with him has been compassionate and caring," Sampson said. "There's nothing I would have changed for such a difficult situation."

The Sampson family is familiar with the expert care Wolfson Children's provides because Zachary has been a patient throughout his entire life. He was born with a port-wine stain birthmark, a type of vascular malformation resulting from a collection of abnormal tiny blood vessels (capillaries) directly under the skin, resulting in red or purple discoloration. Because of this, Zachary has undergone more than 20 procedures throughout his life.

Steven Andreoli, MD, a pediatric otolaryngologist (ENT) and vascular malformation expert with Wolfson Children's and Nemours Children's Specialty Care, Jacksonville, performed a laser procedure on Zachary in 2018 and again in 2020.

"The typical treatment for capillary malformations is a special laser known as the pulsed dye laser," Dr. Andreoli explained. "The wavelength of the laser is very specific for red pigments, so it's used for different types of birthmarks made up of blood vessels, like the port-wine stain. These treatments are pretty quick and outpatient."

Stopping stigmas

Zachary, now a 16-year-old sophomore, will likely receive mental health care for the rest of his life, but neither he nor his mother is allowing his diagnoses to define him. They hope sharing his story will help break stigmas about children's mental health conditions.

"If we can inspire just one parent, child or teen to reach out and seek help, it will be worth it," Sampson said.

"Wolfson Children's and Nemours have been there for us from the very beginning of Zachary's life, so we knew we could trust them to provide excellent care when he needed it most," she added.