

Dear MST Family,

I am writing this letter because our family has been where you are now, and I wanted to reach out to you, as I know how valuable that would have been for us.

We have been through 5 months of MST, the therapy is now finished, and we have the perspective of before, during and after (although the after is still quite new).

Firstly, you are not alone. Many families have been, are and will be where you are now. The good news is that this therapy has been proven to empower families to deal with any and all the behaviours you are currently experiencing.

Let me summarise my state of mind five months ago, as best I can, although it's hard to explain, as sometimes words aren't enough to get across the turmoil and pain. I will try—there was an overwhelming feeling of hopelessness that there was nothing more I could do, there was exhaustion and fear that this was never ending and was going to get even worse. I felt a failure and I had nothing left to give. I was often tearful and overwhelmed. The latest episode of violence and threatening behaviour felt like a line had been crossed, and our family could not recover and my heart was breaking. Worse than all this for me was being more afraid when he was in the house than when he was out, even though we did not know who he was with or what he was doing. The stomach churning when I heard his key in the door, the feeling of relief when he left the house—this, in my eyes, was the biggest failure of my entire life.

My first piece of advice is trust your therapist and be honest with them and be honest with yourself. The first few weeks will be information gathering and this is purely so your therapist can understand how your family works, it is not to judge you. You are probably exhausted from speaking to lots of different professionals. For us it was various teachers, doctors, psychologists, counsellors, social workers etc. All of these people willing to help, but I had to keep repeating myself, and trying to explain different aspects of our problems with no-one having a complete picture. With appointments being very irregular, it was difficult to get our son to attend. My relief when our therapist came and was one person who would help us liaise with all the other professionals, who could speak to them with me and have the whole picture, was the start of frustration lessening and hope returning.

My second piece of advice is when your therapist says "...before your son/daughter can change, you have to change..." don't take this as criticism. If I remember correctly, my reaction was something like "I have done everything I can for him, I have revolved my world around his needs and tried to be a good parent and I am the one that has to change?!" But read this next statement I have to make—our son did not engage with our therapist AT ALL. Every behaviour we listed at the beginning of the intervention has changed—because we have changed!

You are no longer alone, you have 24-hour support and your therapist will work with you—session by session, week by week, month by month. It is hard going at times, 3 times per week (with homework!).

We knew that this was our only chance to keep our family together. We took a day at a time learning to reflect on our own actions, which helped us to understand a little more why we react as we do and how this influences the outcome of a situation.

A tip: We decided to keep a note pad and wrote down the sequence of events of the different situations in details while it was still fresh in our mind. We could then relate this to our therapist and this helped him understand better what had happened. It was also quite therapeutic to get it all down on paper as we were often feeling very frustrated and angry while we were writing it but once it was down on paper we could let it go more easily. Also, incidents happened almost every day and so we would forget the important detail of what exactly was said if we didn't write it down as soon as possible. I strongly recommend doing this.

Please take heart in this letter from one parent to another and know that by agreeing to this help you have already started to move towards the possibility of a happier family life.

We are now flying solo, without our therapist and we need to continually review what we have learned and continue to reflect and discuss new situations as they arise. Although there are still challenges to deal with, the power has been tipped back to parent/child and my confidence is high. I don't doubt myself so much or seek to take the easy way out.

We have just celebrated our sons 16th birthday and had a family party. The first time in quite a few years that my son participated in a family gathering and I really can't believe how far we've come.

Take a day at a time and believe in yourself.