

# TO COPE



counselors with OnTrackNY, talk at Mercy Medical Center.

mental health office. Private insurance and Medicaid also help pay for services. There are similar programs in other states.

## Having a voice

OnTrackNY allows participants to help design their treatment. They can meet counselors at a Starbuck's instead of at OnTrackNY offices, if they feel more comfortable there. They decide whether family members can participate in counseling. They choose whether to take medications, after the benefits

and side effects are explained.

People with a say in their treatment are more likely to follow that treatment than those whose mental health professionals will not work with them, said Jennifer Rothman, senior manager of youth and young adult initiatives for NAMI.

"Even for someone who might not have a mental-health condition, we all participate more if we feel like we have a say, if we feel like we're part of the conversation and that our opinions and what we feel is best are considered," she said.



Sean Zagorski, who has bipolar disorder, dreams of becoming a soccer coach in Europe.

## Finding a path to 'a normal life'

BY DAVID OLSON

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Less than two years ago, Sean Zagorski was in treatment for 11 days in an Amityville psychiatric hospital. The Huntington Station man has bipolar disorder, and after taking medication for his condition for months, he felt so good he thought he no longer needed it.

He later realized he was wrong.

Today, Zagorski, 20, coaches youth soccer and is preparing to go to college to become a social worker. He no longer experiences the intense alternating mania and depression that are hallmarks of bipolar disorder.

"I can live a normal life now," he said.

Zagorski illustrates how medication, therapy and other assistance can help many people diagnosed with bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and other mental illnesses work, attend college and aspire to the same types of careers that those without mental illnesses do.

Mental illnesses are on a severity spectrum, so medication and therapy help people in individualized ways, said Jaclene Jason, a clinical psychologist at South Oaks Hospital, where Zagorski went three times for treatment while in high school.

Jason also is the team leader of the South Oaks site of OnTrackNY, an early intervention program for young people with schizophrenia and related psy-

chotic disorders.

As with schizophrenia and other mental illnesses, the earlier bipolar disorder is identified and treated, the greater the chance those with the condition can live meaningful lives, she said.

An estimated 4.4 percent of U.S. adults experience bipolar disorder at some point in their lives, and about 2.8 percent had bipolar disorder in a one-year period, according to data from the early 2000s cited by the National Institute of Mental Health.

Zagorski remembers feeling regularly depressed starting in the eighth grade. He thought it was just part of puberty. By his senior year at Walt Whitman High School, he began experiencing mania, the other trait of bipolar disorder.

He told friends, "I'm going to conquer world peace, I'm like Superman, no one's going to stop me." Friends were worried but didn't know what to say.

In his sophomore year, he told a guidance counselor he wanted to commit suicide. She called his mother, and a week later he entered South Oaks, where he stayed three days.

In a second stay at South Oaks, in late 2016, he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. He recalled feeling paranoid, as if the employees of South Oaks "were all out to get me."

He was prescribed medications that made him feel "I was in the clear and didn't need

medication anymore. So I went off. That was a big mistake. I'm glad I learned from it."

Since an 11-day stay in South Oaks in June 2017, he has "been taking them religiously." His psychiatrist lowered the dosage to the point that the medication eliminated his depression and mania without negative side effects, which at higher dosages made him feel robotic at times.

Zagorski has had several jobs since, including as a summer camp counselor for kids with autism, a paraprofessional for special-needs students at Walt Whitman and a pizza deliveryman.

Zagorski played varsity soccer at Walt Whitman, including on the 2015 state Class AA championship team, and he was a top player.

Soccer is his passion, and his dream is to become a coach in Europe. He knows that is a long shot, so in the fall he plans to return to Suffolk Community College, which he attended last year, on the path to a four-year university to study social work. He currently works as a soccer coach for a youth soccer club and is looking for another job so he can save more money for college.

Last year, Zagorski trained to become a "peer-to-peer mentor" for the National Alliance on Mental Illness. At NAMI meetings in Huntington, he helps others. He's happy he has put his difficult teenage years behind.

"I just love life," he said. "It's great to feel great."

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