

JKH

January 21, 2021 (/blog/montana-academy)

An Honest Montana Academy (Embark Behavioral Health in Marion, Montana) Review (/blog/montana-academy)



It has been nearly twenty years since I have driven down Lost Prairie Road, sat in the commons of the main lodge, or ran on the trails behind the girls' dorm during cross-country practice.

I am no longer a teenager on the brink of adulthood, but a woman in her mid-thirties who can look back at her time at Montana Academy

(https://drive.google.com/file/d/1cFJvxQr_ws2zIgObJCnZdYs_efKupIcw/view?usp=sharing) with a clearer mind and give a truthful review that I could not give five or ten years ago.

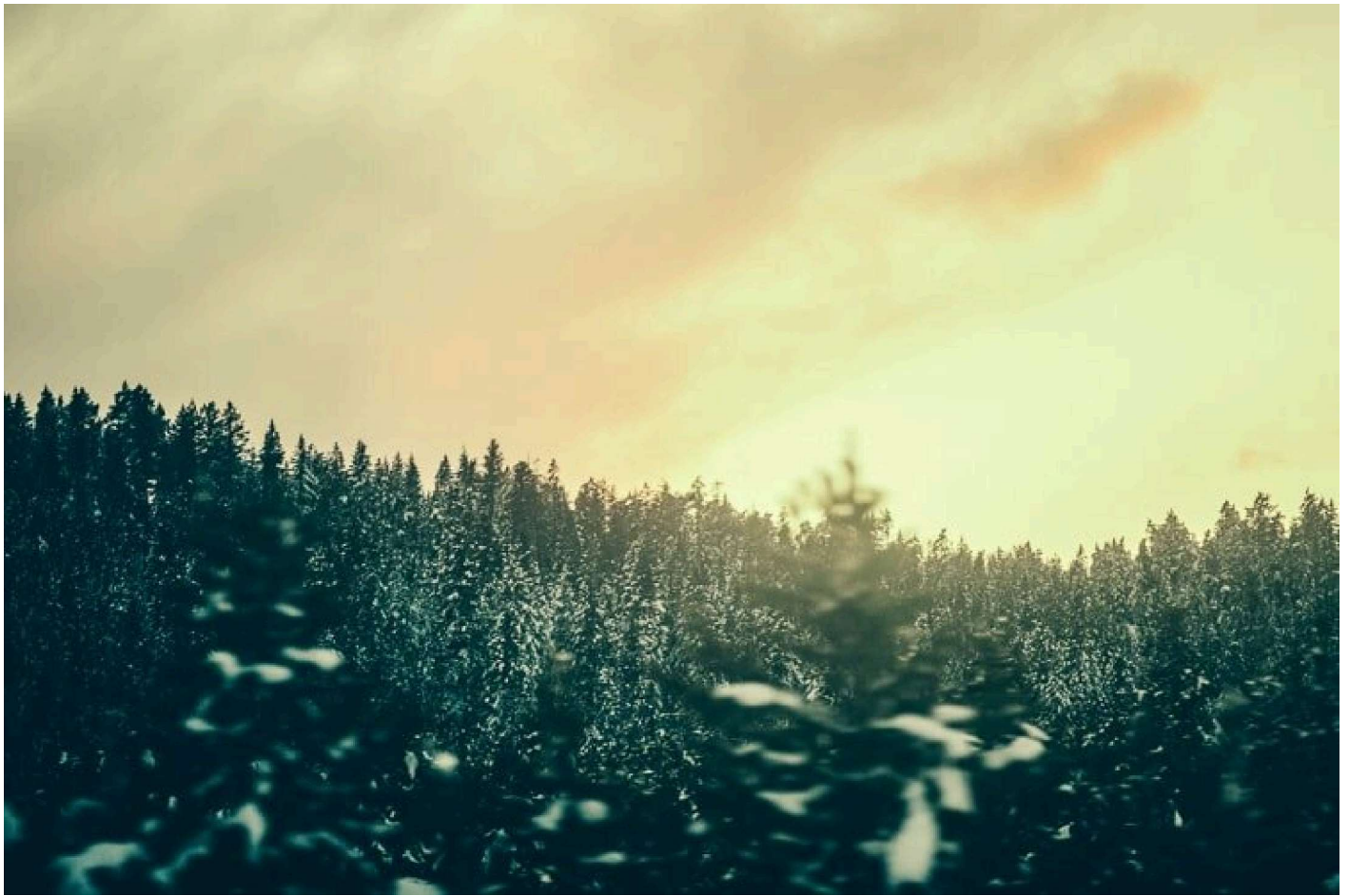
Up until a few years ago, I had pushed down the damaging effects of Montana Academy as a way of coping with the abuse. It was not until I turned thirty, that I began to write about my experience and realized that there was a lot of trauma leftover.

I arrived in Montana as an anxious and mildly depressed teen that was struggling with her family environment and left two years later with additional issues that still haunt me to this day.

A few years ago, I joined a private Facebook group accessible to only Montana Academy alumni. Survivors' posts that mentioned experiencing a distrust of authority figures, and constant self-doubt resonated with me deeply and made me realize that I was not alone and I should not feel ashamed.

I wrote this post for families who are considering such a life-changing decision as sending their teenager away to a therapeutic boarding school (<https://juliakitlinskihong.com/blog/therapeutic-boarding-schools>) like Montana Academy. They need to know how this choice will affect their teen in the future. Not just the immediate future, but a lifetime afterward.

Here is my honest Montana Academy review from the two years that I spent there.



MONTANA ACADEMY (EMBARK BEHAVIORAL HEALTH IN MARION, MA)

***Update:** Montana Academy has permanently closed and in its place is Embark Behavioral Health in Marion, MA. The current staff at Embark are some of the former MA staff, including David Chiarito as the executive director of both schools. This “re-branding” is very common in the TTI*
(https://www.reddit.com/r/troubledteens/comments/tmsyac/montana_academy_quietly_rebrands_a_s_embark_at/)*where bad media causes a school to change ownership, but still maintain the same staff and upper management who are responsible for traumatizing teens.*

THERAPEUTIC APPROACH

Shame-based therapy is the main approach used both within individual and group sessions.

Students are pitted against one another in group therapy and encouraged to break down their peers in order to progress in the program using attack therapy methods similar to those derived from CEDU schools

(https://docs.google.com/document/d/1hCUAJayMq_WW9TgZYAkDXXAFTHhiKeyEUpbjyO6spk/edit?usp=sharing), which got it from Synanon, a drug rehab-turned-cult in the 1970s.

Students are gaslit to think that they are at fault for whatever sent them to Montana Academy, including anxiety, depression, sexual orientation, emotional neglect, and sexual abuse to name a few reasons.

Instead of being treated with compassion, students are blamed for their shortcomings and it only creates more emotional trauma long after the student graduates.

One long-term effect of shame-based therapy for me is that I have a hard time validating my right to anything, whether it's professional or personal. I am constantly questioning my worth and feel that there are shameful parts of me that I need to hide.

Related to the shame-based therapy, the entire program is built on the idea of students being "immature," and this approach is applied to every student who comes in, regardless of whether they are suffering from crippling depression or abuse/neglect back at home.

It is in fact the key marketing tactic on the school's website and the subject of one of the founder's books.

This is a one-size-fits-all approach for students who need highly personalized treatment plans.

Lastly, I had terribly unprofessional boundaries with my therapist and I felt she often punished me because I did not like her personally.

There was definite favoritism on my team and on the other teams as well. Unsurprisingly, if students are not a good fit with their assigned team therapist, they cannot change.

After finding the courage to go back to trauma-informed therapy after nearly two decades, I finally understand what a healthy relationship with a therapist should be like and it is not like that.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE

Students are stripped of their identities (music, jewelry, make-up, contact with the outside world) the moment they step onto campus in order to be built back up by the narrow confines of the program. They only get monitored communication with immediate family.

If a student is in danger they cannot relay this to their parents or guardians without the fear of being censored by their therapist and being accused of being manipulative.

Instead of creating a community built on trust, the program instills fear in students with a constant barrage of blame and guilt.

The five-level “clan system” is completely arbitrary and is just another way to get students to submit to the program with certain privileges gifted at the different levels.

During my time, there were students who breezed by the different levels and graduated within a year, whereas other students with similar issues stayed two years or longer for no definitive reason.

USE OF PUNISHMENT

Social isolation (SI) was used excessively in Montana Academy while I was there. Students were punished for various things from breaking boundaries with other students to self-harm. During this time students were not allowed to talk to anyone for weeks, sometimes even a month.

Similar to the generalized program approach, punishments were usually random and unrelated. Sometimes entire teams were put on Team Isolation (TI) due to a few members acting out, but the whole team had to suffer the consequences.

Students were also punished for self-harm by having to wear neon yellow (close watch) or the more restrictive orange (sight-and-sound) t-shirts that announced to the whole school that they were struggling.

ACADEMICS

My classes were taught by highly competent teachers, some of whom I have kept in touch with long after I graduated. The curriculum back then was pretty limited, but now looking at the website I see it has grown significantly with a variety of options in different subjects.

Regarding college counseling, there was little to no guidance. There was no designated college counselor and students had to figure out the entire application process on their own. Hopefully, they have changed that.

MONTANA ACADEMY STAFF

Staff not involved directly in the therapeutic process such as the teachers, transition home (Sky House) staff, some weekend staff, and some team leaders made a lasting impact on me.

I was lucky to have such a caring team leader who was invested in my personal growth, but that has not always been the case with students on other teams.

Unfortunately, there was some staff that were under qualified to be in their positions, including therapists. There was also a high turnover rate (<https://www.glassdoor.com/Reviews/Montana-Academy-Reviews-E898091.htm>) in staff due to low salaries, long hours, little training, and disorganized upper management.

SCHOOL PRESTIGE

Montana Academy is often marketed as the “Harvard of therapeutic boarding schools,” since its founders have degrees from Ivy League universities, have written several books, and are the co-founders of The National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs (another highly problematic issue-check out the articles in the reference section below).

Behind all the gloss that seems to come along with Montana Academy, it is mostly smoke and mirrors. The facilities were often run-down, the food quality questionable at best, and the therapeutic program deeply damaging.

POST-PROGRAM SUPPORT

What the well-polished Montana Academy website omits is that there is barely any post-program support for students once they graduate. I was not given a solid plan (no structure) when I left and was just placed back into the toxic family environment that was the reason I was sent to Montana Academy in the first place.

I was lucky enough to have a team leader who continues to support me from afar, but I know that not everyone was as lucky. I have had friends and peers who passed away far too young from substance abuse and suicide and sadly this is all too common for Montana Academy alumni.

Now the question is what are the alternatives to therapeutic boarding schools like Montana Academy?

Please consider other resources listed below. Do not give up on your teen. They deserve better.

Do not send them away to any school that:

- limits communication and visitation (parents should be able to contact/visit their kid whenever they want)
- restricts food/uses food as an award for good behavior
- uses chores/excessive cleaning as a means of punishment

- bans privacy in dorms including bathrooms and bedrooms (if students are actively suicidal they should definitely not be in a therapeutic boarding school)
- doesn't allow students to get a full night's rest (sleep deprivation from waking up early to do chores)
- uses seclusion as a punishment

ALTERNATIVE RESOURCES

Websites

Alliance for the Safe, Therapeutic and Appropriate use of Residential Treatment (Astart) (<http://astartforteens.org/home>) - an older website, but the information is still relevant today, especially advocating for effective community-based care.

Troubled Teen Industry.net (<https://www.troubledteenindustry.net>)

(<https://www.troubledteenindustry.net>)- a website that explains why the TTI industry is deeply damaging, including its connection to modern cults and how related trauma affects the body.

Troubled Teens subreddit (<https://www.reddit.com/r/troubledteens/>)- lots of firsthand accounts from TTI programs. Type "Montana Academy" in the search bar to find previous students' experiences from MA. Also, an accurate write-up

(<https://www.reddit.com/r/troubledteens/wiki/index/montanaaca>) on the school.

Joe Vs Elan School (<https://elan.school>)- a brilliant graphic novel about one guy's harrowing experience at the Elan School in Maine.

Articles

'Fox guards henhouse' in Montana programs for troubled teens

(<https://drive.google.com/file/d/19WIR1h2bzV1uRFztNUQ13mhBNL4YbqGr/view?usp=sharing>) (Missoulain) - a look into problematic therapeutic boarding schools like Montana Academy being self-regulated by the NATSAP (which was co-founded by MA founder John Santa).

Montana isn't alone in failure to beef up regulations of programs for troubled teens (Missoulain) (https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZYdZh5GS_TU01qiiyv7ETUE26nPQTOJK/view?usp=sharing) - an informative article about why schools like Montana Academy are underregulated in states like Montana.

Troubled US teens left traumatized by tough love camps (BBC) (https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57442175?fbclid=IwAR2l-VMu9gCR2pGqqOICVbIFFcKA4BweU2lR8T_avq_aaAZ-Ayjok_-J07Y) - a revealing article about how the TTI causes long-lasting trauma for former students.

A Case Study in the Suppression of Emerging Consciousness: The “Troubled Teen Industry” (https://imaginal-cell.org/blog/a-case-study-in-the-suppression-of-emerging-consciousness?fbclid=IwAR3b_9nQscQQHm0KF-rm_BG5TadrWjT6ekQhqv4e9ab_JTCAVuRl9bBgkuQ) - a detailed account of how MA is deeply damaging (from a former student).

Books

Help at Any Cost: How the Troubled-Teen Industry Cons Parents and Hurts Kids (https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1181511.Help_at_Any_Cost) - an in-depth investigation into the TTI Industry and how it hurts more than it heals.

Institutionalized Persuasion: The Technology of Reformation in Straight Incorporated and the Residential Teen Treatment Industry (<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/25388318>) - a revealing look into why the use of coercion is widely used in residential teen treatment environments.

The Body Keeps The Score (<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/18693771-the-body-keeps-the-score>)- an excellent book on how trauma affects people and ways to heal beyond traditional solutions.

Hollywood Park (<https://www.npr.org/2020/05/28/863460131/hollywood-park-compassionately-depicts-the-suffering-and-struggles-of-addiction>) - not about the TTI, but this memoir explains the author’s disassociation from the world after he left Synanon (the cult where the TTI originated from).

Films/Clips

This Is Paris (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOg0TY1jG3w>)-a documentary that focuses on Paris Hilton’s time in various TTI programs and the damage that it has left on her over two decades later.

Here's What Survivors of a 'Troubled Teen' Program Say Went On Inside (VICE News) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Av0jhwRLOAc>) -a detailed look at Cross Creek (one of the “nicer” schools) and survivors’ reactions years later.

Podcasts

The Cult of The Troubled Teen Industry (Sounds Like A Cult)

(<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-cult-of-the-troubled-teen-industry/id1566917047?i=1000575502277>) - the connection between Synanon and the TTI and why the whole industry is highly problematic.

Sent Away (APM Reports, KUER and The Salt Lake Tribune)

(<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/sent-away/id1612081678>) - an investigative podcast series on the TTI in Utah.

The Trouble With The 'Troubled Teen' Industry (1A NPR) (<https://the1a.org/segments/troubled-teen-industry-paris-hilton/>) - exploring how effective these programs really are.

Lastly, if you are reading this blog post and can relate to it (whether you went to MA or a similar program) I see you and you are not alone.

♥ 46 Likes

Newer Post

What Are Therapeutic Boarding Schools?

(</blog/therapeutic-boarding-schools>)

Powered by [Squarespace \(http://www.squarespace.com?](http://www.squarespace.com?)

[channel=word_of_mouth&subchannel=customer&source=footer&campaign=4fd1028ee4b02be53c65](http://www.squarespace.com?channel=word_of_mouth&subchannel=customer&source=footer&campaign=4fd1028ee4b02be53c65)

dfb3)