



key

*Unlocking
Solutions
To Everyday
Problems*



Spring 2011

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Building Awareness and Understanding about Mental Illness

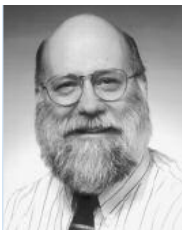
Overcoming the Stigma of Mental Illness

How You can Combat Stigma

Erasing the Stigma of Mental Illness

EAP COORDINATOR'S CORNER

All of us will make time to see our doctor for a physical, our dentist for an oral exam, so why is it so hard to go in to see a professional when we need help for our mental health? It's the stigma, or the fear of being labeled weak or crazy. The "Key" in this case is to realize the irrational self-talk that leads us down the road to this fear.



Robert Lyman, MEd, LICSW
EAP Coordinator,
Substance Abuse Professional

Newsletter Producer: Toni Samskar
Newsletter Editor: Sue Charon



St. Luke's Hillside Center
220 N. 6th Avenue East
Duluth, MN 55805
Phone: 218-249-7077
Toll Free: 888-355-8495

Building Awareness and Understanding about Mental Illness

Mental illness can strike anyone! It knows no age limits, economic status, race, creed or color. During the course of a year, more than 54 million Americans are affected by one or more mental disorders.

Medical science has made incredible progress over the last century in helping us understand, curing and eliminating the causes of many diseases including mental illnesses. However, while doctors continue to solve some of the mysteries of the brain, many of its functions remain a puzzle. Even at the leading research centers, no one fully understands how the brain works or why it malfunctions. However, researchers have determined that many mental illnesses are probably the result of chemical imbalances in the brain. These imbalances may be inherited, or may develop because of excessive stress or substance abuse.

It is sometimes easy to forget that our brain, like all of our other organs, is vulnerable to disease. People with mental illnesses often exhibit many types of behaviors such as extreme sadness and irritability, and in more severe cases, they may also suffer from hallucinations and total withdrawal. Instead of receiving compassion and acceptance, people with mental illnesses may experience hostility, discrimination, and stigma.

Overcoming the Stigma of Mental Illness

Stigma is a very real problem for people who have a mental illness. Based on stereotypes, stigma is a negative judgment based on a personal trait – in this case, having a mental health condition. It was once a common perception that having a mental illness was due to some kind of personal weakness. We now know that mental health disorders have a biological basis and can be treated like any other health condition. Even so, we still have a long way to go to overcome the many misconceptions, fears and biases people have about mental health, and the stigma these attitudes create.

Stigma may be obvious and direct, such as someone making a negative remark about your mental health condition or your treatment. Or it can be subtle, such as someone assuming you could be violent or dangerous because you have a mental health condition. These and other forms of stigma can lead to feelings of anger,



Confidential, professional help with your personal matters.
Provided at no charge to you by your employer.

www.slhduluth.com/hospital/other-services/eap



frustration, shame and low self-esteem – as well as discrimination at work, school and in other areas of your life. For someone with a mental illness, the consequences of stigma can be devastating. Some of the harmful effects of stigma include:

- Trying to pretend nothing is wrong
- Refusal to seek treatment
- Rejection by family and friends
- Work or school problems or discrimination
- Difficulty finding housing
- Being subjected to physical violence or harassment
- Inadequate health insurance coverage of mental illnesses

How You Can Combat Stigma

Learning to accept your condition and recognize what you need to do to treat it, seeking support, and helping educate others can make a big difference. Here are some ways you can cope with stigma:

- **Get treatment.** Don't let the fear of being "labeled" with a mental illness prevent you from seeking diagnosis and treatment. Diagnosis and treatment can provide relief by identifying what's wrong in concrete terms and reducing symptoms that interfere with your work and personal life.
- **Don't let stigma create self-doubt and shame.** One of the most important ways to minimize the stigma of mental illness is to come to terms with your illness. Others' judgments almost always stem from a lack of understanding rather than information based on the facts. Feeling ashamed, embarrassed or humiliated because of something beyond your control can be very destructive. Psychological counseling may help you gain self-esteem and cope with your reaction to others' bias or your own self-judgment.
- **Seek support.** If you have a mental illness, it can be hard to decide who to tell, if anyone, and how much to tell. You may not be comfortable telling anyone anything about your condition. On the other hand, if you tell people you trust, you may find much needed compassion, support and acceptance. Because stigma can lead to social isolation, it's especially important to stay in touch with family and friends who understand. Isolation can make you feel even worse.

- **Don't equate yourself with your illness.** You are not an illness. So instead of saying "I'm bipolar", say "I have bipolar disorder." Instead of calling yourself "a schizophrenic," call yourself "a person with schizophrenia." Don't say you "are depressed." Say you "have depression."
- **Join an advocacy group.** Some local and national groups, such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) have programs that watch for and correct stereotypes, misinformation and disrespectful portrayals of people with mental illnesses. Organizations like NAMI also offer support groups and information to help you cope with your condition.
- **Get help at school.** If you or your child has a mental illness that affects learning, find out what plans and programs might help. Discrimination against students because of a mental health condition is against the law, and educators at primary, secondary and college levels are required to accommodate students as best they can. Talk to teachers, professors or administrators about the best approach and available resources. If a teacher doesn't know about a student's disability it can lead to discrimination, barriers to learning and poor grades.
- **Use your resources.** Stigma can have effects on your education, career, housing and other areas of your life. Take advantage of federal, state and nonprofit resources available to you. A number of agencies and programs support people who have mental health conditions – examples include state agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation, Veterans Affairs (VA), and nonprofit organizations such as NAMI, which have national and local chapters as well as Internet resources.

Erasing the Stigma of Mental Illness

Overall approaches to stigma reduction involve programs of advocacy, public education, and contact with persons with mental illness through schools and other societal institutions...One in five Americans struggles with a mental illness in any given year, fewer than half receive the right kind of treatment. Those who fail to get good care are held back by enduring stigma, a fragmented system of mental health care delivery and financial strains. Mental illness is as real as heart disease; patients can benefit from new treatments and medications and can recover. New drugs and therapies have vastly improved the outlook for the 5 million or so people with the most severe mental illnesses. People should expect to do better than they've ever done in the past.