

TIME TO WIPE OUT THE STIGMA OF MENTAL ILLNESS

April, 2013

“Mental Health / Mental Illness” have been in the media and on the lips of more Americans in the past four months than likely at any other time in our history. Unfortunately, the tragic Newtown school shooting has focused attention on violence and mental illness and stirred up the stigma that comes when people are misinformed and fearful.

Along with the discussion of gun control and mental illness has come a spate of stigmatizing comments about what effect mental illness has on the ability of individuals to run for public office and stigmatizing commercials like Nabisco’s implying that the appetite for Wheat Thins would cause someone to be a psychiatric hospital patient and to require physical restraints.

Here are the facts:

- At least one-fourth of us will experience a behavioral health issue (mental illness or substance use disorder) in a given year.

The U.S. Surgeon General in a landmark study (1999) verified that statistic and described the range of mental health issues, from mild and episodic to the more serious and persistent mental illnesses (SMI), to those that involve substance use and are referred to as co-occurring disorders. We know that women are two to three times more likely to experience depression than are men, and victims of abuse are significantly more likely to develop mental health problems.

- The more serious and persistent mental illnesses (schizophrenia, bipolar disease, major depression) are brain diseases.
- Individuals with mental illness are many times more likely to be victims – and not perpetrators – of violent acts.

More than one fourth of individuals with severe mental illness (SMI) were victims of violent crime in the past year, eleven times the rate in the general population. However, the misinformation and resulting stigma persist, adding to the lack of treatment and isolation of those diagnosed with a brain disease.

- Treatment for mental illness works and recovery is possible... particularly with more effective medications and new treatment approaches.

Despite the hope of effective treatment and recovery, fewer than 30% of those with mental health issues seek treatment – largely because of stigma.

That may explain the oft-repeated finding that 60% of visits to physicians are for symptoms which are actually caused by psychological factors. And that 80% of psychotropic drugs in the U.S. are prescribed by non-psychiatric providers (internists, OB/GYNs, etc). Unfortunately, it is seen as much less stigmatizing to go to a (physical) health provider or facility than to a provider of mental health services.

- Depression is rated as the #1 cause of disability in this country, and is a leading cause of absenteeism and decreased productivity in the work force.

In assessing the factors that contribute to rising employee health coverage, depression accounts for 70 percent of increased health costs for employers. Other contributing factors such as stress (46%) and obesity (21%) are linked to depression as well.

- There are growing numbers of individuals needing mental health services.

At a time when many of our veterans are returning from battle with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other significant mental health issues, we need to become more aware and prepared to serve those veterans whose scars are perhaps not visible, but are debilitating.

- Some of those who suffer from depression and/or anxiety self-medicate with alcohol or other drugs to try to get relief from their symptoms.

This masking of symptoms often delays the individual from seeking appropriate treatment for depression or anxiety and complicates the recovery process.

- Other significant and chronic illnesses are not the target of stigma.

Diabetes, cancer and heart disease are a part of the human condition. We don't laugh at those debilitating and life-threatening illnesses...so why is it OK for us to laugh at mental illness?

- The effects of stigma and failure to treat the whole person can have catastrophic results.

Studies have shown that individuals with SMI die, on average, twenty-five years earlier than their same-age counterparts who do not have significant mental health issues.

Virtually no other patients must confront both a disease and the prejudices that accompany it like patients dealing with mental illness.

Again, the U.S. Surgeon General: “Stigma is a national, even international disgrace...which has throughout history...been manifested by bias, distrust, stereotyping, fear, embarrassment, anger, and/or avoidance.”

We call on our elected leaders to “put their money where their mouths are” to significantly increase funding of mental health services. We call on them to act responsibly and with the facts as they address gun control, and we remind them to consider: If Abraham Lincoln were a candidate for public office today, would we disqualify him because of his major depressive disorder?

We call on all Kentuckians to get educated about mental illness and to help wipe out the stigma that sadly accompanies it. Go to: www.AdvocacyAction.net and click on “MH Facts and Help”.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sheila A. Schuster, Ph.D." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sheila A. Schuster, Ph.D., a licensed psychologist in Louisville, is Executive Director of the KY Mental Health Coalition. This letter was signed by 36 organizations.