

Erasing the Stigma

Major strides have been made in mental health treatment and the stigma surrounding mental illness, but there's still more ground to cover

By Chris Syracuse

My mother still recalls the time in the mid-1950s when her parents had to call the police on her 18-year-old sister. She remembers the feeling of helplessness as she watched the police handcuff her partially-clothed sister and place her in the police car while the neighbors observed.

Over the last 27 years of working in the mental health field, I have talked to hundreds of family members whose loved ones have been afflicted with mental illness. In the overwhelming number of cases, their stories are eerily similar to my Aunt Elinore's story and usually go something like this.

"My son (or daughter) had a pretty normal childhood. They were attractive, social; they did well in school and had many friends until all of a sudden we saw a change."

Their loved one would start to show this change in their late teens. They would begin to shy away from people, become suspicious of others, stay in their bedroom and in some cases, begin using drugs and /or alcohol. Parents will often tell me they would make attempts to intervene, but their child would become argumentative or isolate even more. The inevitability of most of these situations resulted in the person being psychiatrically hospitalized for the first time.

Mental illness, family members tell me, is a horrible thing. It strips the person of their personality. The delusions going on in their head or their disorganized thought patterns can dilute their identity. You can't necessarily "see" mental illness the way you can see cancer or multiple sclerosis, yet the disease can be just as disabling. Many people with a mental illness use alcohol and drugs to self-medicate, further complicating matters.

Initially, this is a frightening and bleak reality. However, there is some good news and hope. Like many other diseases, doctors believe that early intervention and treatment provides the best opportunity for a positive outcome for individuals living with mental illness. Early intervention means recognizing the symptoms of the disease and getting your child to the doctor as soon as possible. This is not to say that pressing the panic button is the answer. The teenage years are challenging enough but if the person's unusual behaviors continue over a period of time and they appear to be increasingly isolating, the child should be seen by their doctor.

A positive outcome means the lessening or ceasing of symptoms to the extent that the person can lead a normal and productive life. Not too long ago, being diagnosed with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or major depression meant spending many years in a state psychiatric hospital. Thanks to the advancement in anti-psychotic medications, mood stabilizers, anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medications, many or most people can go on to live fulfilling and productive lives. Since there is no cure for mental

illness, using medications will most likely continue for the duration of the person's life.

Although medications are critical to the solution, there are other pieces of the equation that can make the person whole again. These include family supports, peer supports and a good psy-

chiatrist and /or therapist willing to work with the individual and his/her family.

The final component is structure which could mean work, school, volunteer work, attending a social club, or any other activity that is meaningful to that person.



Syracuse

All of these elements are critical to a person's recovery. Recovery, like any other illness, occurs at a different pace for everyone.

Unfortunately, my Aunt Elinore never had the opportunity to "recover" from her mental illness. She ended up dying of lung cancer in the state hospital. Major strides have been made in mental health treatment and the issues surrounding stigma since those days. As we celebrate May as Mental Health Month, we take this opportunity to tell the world that hope and recovery are possible for all those who are afflicted with mental illness. We also work to erase the stigma sometimes associated with the disease.

Unfortunately, people still believe schizophrenia means split personality or that all mentally ill people are violent. Ironically, some of these same people who once held ill-conceived beliefs approach me years later seeking help for themselves or their loved one. One in four adults in the United States will experience mental illness in a given year. One just never knows.

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