

Violence: Raising Our Awareness of the Mental Health Issues – March 10th, 2013

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1. I'm CEO of Mental Health America of Wisconsin (MHA), a statewide nonprofit agency focusing on advocacy, education and support.

I'm also a daughter, sister, friend, homeowner, tax payer, athlete, Christian, traveler and I'm also person living with a mental illness. I was diagnosed with depression at 16, diagnosed with bulimia at 19...both of which almost took my life. It took years before I let go of the stigma and realized I deserved to live a meaningful life. My near death experience and knowledge of mental illness encouraged me to see help. My relationship with God kept me alive and kept me motivated during some very dark times. It took a while to get here, but I now see my diagnosis as a blessing as it shapes the meaning in my life. I am and always be a mental health advocate. I know what it's like to cry and have no idea why...or what it's like to purge just to feel in control of the chaos. Knowing that my story educates people and provides hope, makes the pain I went thru all worth it. It keeps me fighting the fight for millions of Americans who suffer from mental illness every day. I'm definitely not alone here, as 25% of Americans have a diagnosable mental illness...that means 1 out of 4 of us in this room could be suffering right now. As a community, we need to step up...

2. Since today's focus is on violence, let's talk about the connection of Mental illness and violence. But wait...is there a connection?

With the recent tragedies, the media and state and federal policy discussions have been consumed with solutions to make our children and communities safer. In those discussions, virtually everyone outside the behavioral health community have assumed that such tragedies are a result of people with mental health conditions having access to guns. I'm here to tell you that this is not true!!! Having a mental health condition alone is not a predictor of violence. Only 1-2 percent of people with mental illness turn violent!!

People with mental health conditions are no more likely to be violent than the general population....

In fact, they are often 2 ½ times more often a victim of violence than the general pop – they are 2 ½ times more likely to be attacked, raped or mugged than the general population.

Mental illness does not cause violence, but exposure to violence is causing mental health problems.

The current rhetoric is stigmatizing and discourages many individuals who need help from seeking it. Our goal is to change the conversation and educate the public on the true sources and consequences of violence. We are working to promote dialogue to increase compassion and understanding of people with mental health conditions and policies that encourage people to get treatment.

3. If it's not mental illness...then what causes violence?

Unfortunately, violence cannot be attributed to a single factor (if only it was that easy). The causes of violence are complex. The CDC (Center for Disease Control and Prevention) uses the social ecological model to study violence...which includes four levels.

The first level identifies biological and personal factors that influence how individuals behave and increase their likelihood of becoming a victim or perpetrator of violence: that includes demographic characteristics (age, education, income), genetics, brain lesions, personality disorders, substance abuse, and a history of experiencing, witnessing, or engaging in violent behavior.

The second level focuses on close relationships, such as those with family and friends. In youth violence, for example, having friends who engage in violence can increase a young person's risk of being a victim or perpetrator of violence. For intimate partner violence, a consistent marker at this level of the model is marital conflict in the relationship. The other important thing to note is that hurt can cause violence, especially if the person has not been allowed to release the emotions resulting from the hurt. A child who is spanked, hit, beaten, or threatened with violence will have a tendency to become violent himself. Sexual abuse and emotional neglect are also hurts that can lead to violent tendencies. The accumulation of minor hurts (stress) can lead to violent behavior.

The third level explores the community context ----- so our schools, churches, workplaces, and neighborhoods. Risk at this level may be affected by factors such as the existence of a local drug trade, the absence of social networks, and concentrated poverty. All these factors have been shown to be important in several types of violence.

Finally, the fourth level looks at the broad societal factors that help to create a climate in which violence is encouraged or inhibited: the responsiveness of the criminal justice system, social and cultural norms regarding gender roles or parent-child relationships, income inequality, the strength of the social welfare system, the social acceptability of violence, the availability of firearms, the exposure to violence in mass media, and political instability.

4. Now how do we prevent this violence? The good news is there is a strong and growing science base that confirms that violence is preventable. There are a number of effective strategies that not only prevent violence but also foster good mental health. They include:

- 1) fostering social connections – reach out to others, know what is going on in your community, become educated, volunteer and give back, provide hope, lend a helping hand.

- 2) promote employment opportunities – let's get people to work...believe it or not, most people want to work. Those we work with are eager to work and provide for their family. It's empowering, meaningful and provides much needed structure.

- 3) ensuring positive emotional & social development – talk to your children about what's happening, be realistic with them. Give them a safe place to chat about their day, the bullies at school or the test they just failed. Model positive relationships with your children, keep adult conversations between adults. If your children are struggling and you need professional assistance, reach out to the mental health system...we are here to help. Successful treatment rates for mental illness are as high as 90%. Get rid of the stigma and obtain treatment, just as you would if you had cancer, diabetes or heart disease.

- 4) provide quality family support services – and as I mentioned, supports are available..take advantage of them. Can contact your EAP at work, connect with the church or call us for specific resources in your area.

5) making sure young people have connections with non-judgmental, caring adults – leave out the judgment, reach out. people may need a bit of support or hope. If you're concerned about someone, act on it...invite them to coffee or to meet after church...let them know there are resources out there. Let them know you care...you may be the first person to have done this. As an adult, you can become a mentor and positively influence lives.

5. As I mentioned, the mental health system is here to help...it can help prevent violence! But our MH system needs a lot of work. There is a gap of up to 10 years between the onset of MH symptoms and first attempt at treatment. Since 2009, our chronically underfunded mental health system has experienced \$4.6 billion in state budget, which limits the capacity to meet the needs of all who have them.

In WI in 2009, only 3.2% of youth with serious emotional disturbances received public health services! This is appalling...

As President Obama recently said, "we are going to need to work on making access to mental health care as easy as access to a gun." We must dedicate adequate resources toward prevention and early identification of emotional disturbances in children and fund cost-effective community-based interventions that work. "We know we can't predict behavior, but we can help children early on".

I'll wrap up by saying that while mental illness does not cause violence, a strong mental health system can prevent violence. We all can do our part to decrease violence. It's start with each and everyone one of us...as Margaret Mead state, "A small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

MHA has a number of resources on our website...and we are available to answer any questions you have. There are a few upcoming events you all may be interested in...and there are links to all of them on our website.

March 21 is our WI Warrior Summit which focuses us the needs of our Veterans and how we can all best support them. It will be held at the War Memorial in Milwaukee.

May 1st is our 2nd annual Eat, Learn and Give dinner fundraiser that will focus on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It'll be held at the ICC in Milwaukee.

And lastly, the play Pieces will be performing on Friday, March 15th. It's a theatrical production that depicts the real lives of people living with mental illness. It's very powerful