

Removing the Stigma of Mental Illness

May 2018 - By Lisa Turner, LMHC, Counselor

In any given news cycle, there are reports of atrocities committed by people against people: chemical warfare attacks in Syria, school shootings, cars plowing through crowds of pedestrians, and more. And the common human impulse is to try to make sense of the senseless and try to understand, why do people do what they do?

Too often, the blame for the inexplicable has been mental illness and by extension, those who provide them love and care. These acts of violence are hard to understand and they are complicated and instead of thinking issues through thoughtfully (because that can be difficult and not feel very good), human nature seeks out the easy answer. Additionally, because acts of violence and things we do not understand (like mental illness) are scary, we want to distance ourselves from it. Put it in a box. Label it. Mental illness. This is the definition of stigma – negative attitudes towards something, often accompanied by negative behavior.

According to the National Association for Mental Illness (NAMI), one in five people – one fifth of the population of the United States – have experienced a mental health issue. One in 20 people live with a serious mental illness like bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, or severe depression. Eighteen percent of adults struggle with anxiety in any given year.

NAMI reports that mental illnesses are biologically based brain diseases that can severely disturb a person's ability to think, feel, and relate to other people and the environment. Unfortunately, due to how mentally ill individuals are characterized in the media, including the news, television, social media, and the movies, mentally ill people are feared or stereotyped as irrational, aggressive, and violent when in fact, they are more likely to be isolated, passive, and withdrawn. Recent reports have indicated that those who live with a mental illness are more likely to be the victim of violence, or die by suicide, than to perpetrate a violent crime. The American Psychiatric Association reported in 2016 that "public health and education campaigns are needed to teach people how to report concerning behavior to authorities and how to learn coping skills for anger and conflict resolution." Our society is often quick to judge those who struggle with a mental illness even though many of these illness are clearly biologically based. The NAMI website states that people with mental illness might be denied the opportunity to rebuild their lives in the community because of discrimination in housing, employment, and insurance coverage.

Trying to tell the difference between what expected behaviors are and what might be the signs of a mental illness isn't always easy. There are no easy tests that can let someone know if there is mental illness or if actions and thoughts might be typical behaviors of a person or the result of a physical illness. One or two of symptoms alone cannot predict a mental illness. However, if a person is experiencing several at one time and the symptoms are causing serious problems in the ability to study, work, or relate to others, he/she should be seen by a mental health professional.

People with suicidal thoughts or intent, or thoughts of harming others, need immediate attention.

So you're reading this and you're thinking, I think I know someone who fits some of these criteria. Now what? When interacting with someone with a serious mental illness:

- Always be calm both in volume and mannerisms
- Ensure safety for yourself and the individual, to the degree that it is possible
- Respond to their feelings nonjudgmentally
- Talk about feelings rather than content (this is especially appropriate if someone is displaying delusional thinking)
- Be helpful, encouraging, and supportive
- When speaking or responding, do so simply, truthfully, and briefly
- Limit your input to minimize overstimulation
- Stay on topic without showing disregard or disrespect
- Do not argue with delusions

It is difficult to convince someone to get help when they don't think they need it. Listening, empathizing, agreeing, and partnering with them or others is the first step.

Catholic Charities has taken the initiative to have three of its counselors – Clinical Director Lynne Lutze in Dubuque, Lori Eastwood in Decorah, and Lisa Turner in Ames – trained as trainers in Mental Health First Aid. Mental Health First Aid “is the help offered to a person developing a mental health problem or experiencing a mental health crisis. The first aid is given until appropriate treatment and support are received or until the crisis resolves.” As trainers, Catholic Charities will be at the forefront of educating others how to preserve life, provide help, promote and enhance recovery, and provide comfort and support within the Archdiocese. If you or your organization is interested in being trained in Mental Health First Aid, and joining the fight against stigmatizing mental illness, please contact Lynne Lutze at 563-588-0558.

A Prayer for the Mentally Ill (From Catholic Health Association of the United States)

*The righteous cry out, the Lord hears
and he rescues them from all their afflictions.*

*The Lord is close to the brokenhearted,
saves those whose spirit is crushed.*

PSALM 34:18-20

**LOVING GOD, YOU ARE ALWAYS NEAR TO US, ESPECIALLY WHEN WE ARE WEAK,
SUFFERING AND VULNERABLE.**

Reach out to those who experience mental illness. Lift their burdens, calm their anxiety, and quiet their fears. Surround them with your healing presence that they may know that they are not alone. We ask this through the intercession of Our Lady of Lourdes and in the name of your Son, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. **AMEN.**

Resources

Amador, Xavier. “I’m Not Sick, I Don’t Need Help,” 10th anniversary edition. Vida Press, 2011

Amador, Xavier and Epstein, Laura. “When Someone You Love is Depressed: How to help without losing yourself.” Fireside, 1998

National Association for Mental Illness (NAMI), www.nami.org – includes information about support

groups for family members

https://www.namigdm.org/documents/resources/NAMIHOWAchildrensmentalhealthresource_83A18D4074C73.pdf

<https://www.nami.org/NAMI/media/NAMI-Media/Infographics/GeneralMHFacts.pdf>

<https://www.nami.org/NAMI/media/NAMI-Media/Infographics/Children-MH-Facts-NAMI.pdf>

<https://www.nami.org/NAMI/media/NAMI-Media/Infographics/NAMI-Want-to-know-how-to-help-a-friend.pdf>

The National Mental Health Association (NMHA), www.nmha.org

<https://www.chausa.org/publications/health-progress/article/january-february-2018/behavioral-health-basics-for-chaplains>