

MARYLAND Enewsletter

May is Mental Health Awareness Month



Dispelling Myths about Mental Health to Overcome Stigma

Although an estimated 25 percent of Americans will experience a mental disorder in any given year, fewer than one-third of adults and one half of children with a diagnosable mental disorder receive any mental health services. Stigma still discourages people from getting help, despite advances in education and research. By learning the truth about mental illness and encouraging others to do the same, you can help lessen the stigma.

What is stigma?

"Stigma" describes the shame, fear and discrimination that result from stereotypes surrounding mental illness. It can affect people with a mental illness psychologically and even economically, when it comes to finding housing and employment. Stigma can cause family tension and rejection. It also leads to fear, mistrust and violence against people with mental illness. As a society, we are bombarded with negative images of mental illness.

Myth: People with mental illness are violent.

Fact: The overall contribution of mental disorders to the level of violence is very small. Research has shown that the vast majority of people who are violent do not suffer from mental illness. In cases

where violence does occur, the incident typically results from the same reasons as with the general public, such as feeling threatened or excessive use of alcohol or drugs.

Myth: Children and teens don't experience mental illness.

Fact: Twenty-one percent of children ages 9 to 17 have a diagnosable mental illness. Half of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14. Early identification can significantly improve quality of life.

You can help

Even in the last decade, the media has become more sensitive to mental illness. The general public also has become more knowledgeable. However, there still is a long way to go. Most importantly, educate yourself. You can then help educate others and gently point out stigmatizing behavior. Further, you can insist on media and government accountability. Contact your local mental health organization or the offensive media outlet when you hear stereotyping and support funding and legislation that improves mental health care. Finally, treat people who have a mental illness with the same dignity and respect that you would give to anyone else.

Resources

Mental Health America www.nmha.org The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration www.samhsa.gov

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