

Mental Health Community Comment: May 21, 2015 Mike Goldsby

We all know someone who is struggling with an illness. One close friend is living with cancer and another young friend recently shared about his emotional struggles.

What does our society offer people with cancer? We offer them support, encouragement, assistance, access to medical care. We openly donate to raise funds ^{for} their treatment expenses or for research. We all openly affirm that we can envision a day when people will not have to suffer from that disease.

What does our society offer people with emotional issues? It is very different. We don't want to see it or hear about it. Their problems are "Dirty laundry" and we do not want them to air their problems in public. We avoid them and actively discourage them from talking about their situation. We think less of them and even imagine that they will become serial killers.

People with mental illness experience prejudice. They get discriminated against when they seek housing or employment. And we justify that discrimination with comments like "It is better to be safe than sorry," or "you just never know." And, to be clear, discrimination is against the law in most of the 50 States.

My young adult friend said he started noticing a few years ago that he was having different thoughts, thoughts that he did not understand, thoughts that made little sense to him and absolutely no sense to the people ~~to~~ around him. He described how that progressed to being hospitalized, both voluntarily and involuntarily. He described the problems of getting an accurate or useful diagnosis of a mental condition. And how hard it is to get the right treatment and medication.

He described how difficult his behavior was for friends and family. He admits he damaged some relationships but he also is very grateful that some folks stuck with him. It is easy to be friends with people when everything in their life is fine. It is a lot harder when they are struggling. My friend said that support of family and friends was crucial to his recovery. He said he saw many other folks with the same struggles yet with no support.

So here's the thing; If you met him you would never know. It's the same with my other friends who are in recovery from addiction or other emotional disorders. You cannot tell by looking at them or talking with them, unless they choose to share. So that makes our discrimination and prejudice very inaccurate. In fact, I believe many people get their information about mental illness from fictional portrayals on television and the movies.

Stigma is when we as a society critically judge a group of people and justify our negative actions against them. Stigma prevents many people from seeking help, accepting help or deciding that they need treatment.

There are many local resources, to either get help or to learn more. The North Coast Association of Mental Health Providers has a very useful directory of licensed therapists and counselors online. There are also non-profit organizations like Changing Tides and County Mental Health as well.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness is a grassroots non-profit support and advocacy organization. The local chapter provides support groups in both Eureka and Fortuna. You can learn more about them online or e-mail them at NAMI.humboldt@gmail.com

This is Mike Goldsby for Community Comment