

MENTAL HEALTH

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ABSTRACT

The Tennessee Coalition for Mental Health and Substance Abuse, a group of 20 mental health and substance abuse organizations, arranged the meetings to solicit concerns from consumers, medical professionals and advocates in advance of the 2004 legislative agenda. Lowell Roddy, assistant director at Austin Peay State University's counseling center, said the stigma of mental illness is a major concern for college students at an age when people are trying to fit in.

FULL TEXT

the stigma

Myths of mental illness a hurdle in path to healing

Many living with disease fear finding medical help

By AMY RITCHART

The Leaf-Chronicle

Anna Kelton spent 14 years listening to people tell her she was crazy and stupid.

"You aren't never going to amount to nothing," they said.

"When I first realized I had a problem, I was afraid to seek help," she said.

Kelton is a diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic with hallucinations and depression.

"For years I was able to hide it, but I don't hide it anymore," she said. "I'm proud of who I am."

Diagnosed at age 24, the now-43-year-old said she can trace elements of her mental illness back to age 10. She hears four voices - all with a name.

"I give them a name and a personality," she said, "to keep them separate."

As part of her treatment, she said, she'll have to take the antidepressant Paxil for the rest of her life.

"As long as I don't get depressed," she said, "the voices don't bother me."

Kelton raises a voice of her own when she hears people disparaging the mentally ill.

"She's nothing but schizo," she's heard people say. "I said, 'You know, they are. Did you know I was one?'"

"People tell me, 'You can't be. There's nothing wrong with you. People think that you can tell, but you can't. I speak up for myself and everybody else,'" she said.

Stamping out stigma

Dispelling society's myths of mental illness is one of the key topics in town hall meetings in Clarksville and all over the state.

The Tennessee Coalition for Mental Health and Substance Abuse, a group of 20 mental health and substance abuse organizations, arranged the meetings to solicit concerns from consumers, medical professionals and advocates in advance of the 2004 legislative agenda.

The push toward community discussion comes at a time when local mental health centers are also tackling seasonal blues.

"A lot of people are already dealing with holiday depression," said Karen Reigel, director of Clarksville's Centerstone Do Drop-In Center, a peer-oriented socialization program.

Kelton said it starts around Halloween.

"We keep busy as best we can," she said of the programming at the Do Drop-In Center.

Kelton is a peer counselor, in her fourth month as a full-time employee at the center.

"I'm here at a job I like. I'm happy. I'm engaged," she said.

But Kelton said bursting the stigma associated with mental disability is key to helping people deal with their illness.

Lowell Roddy, assistant director at Austin Peay State University's counseling center, said the stigma of mental illness is a major concern for college students at an age when people are trying to fit in.

"They don't want anyone to think they have a problem," he said. "Something in our society makes people think you should be able to take control of life - and people who believe that often don't seek help.

"If we could ever get over the frontier mentality that says, 'I've got to be able to control everything myself,' we'd all be better off."

Bob Benning, CEO for Ridgeview in Oak Ridge, said people need to get past the notion that the mentally ill are bad people.

"People don't understand that this is a disorder of the brain and there are chemical imbalances," he said. "I know there are people in the community who are afraid to seek treatment. They're fearful that it'll get back to the human

resources department and that might in some way endanger their job.

"When you look at mental health as an illness, this illness doesn't discriminate against anyone."

Education, honesty two solutions

Roddy said those who speak openly about having sought treatment help others feel more comfortable taking that step.

"A lot of times when dealing with a particular topic in a workshop, I'll talk very openly about when I've been depressed or that I've been in counseling a few times," he said. "That tends to make people feel like it's OK."

Kelton also believes education is key to alleviating the stigma.

"People think when you have a mental disability, it's in your head," she said. "Well, yeah, it's in my head and let's get it out. It's like cancer or any other illness - you have to learn to talk about it.

"Maybe people need to take time to learn about it. If the outside world could learn about our world as a whole, maybe we could come together," she said.

Roddy said many people do get treated differently if they admit to having a mental illness.

"Unfortunately, for some people the social circle they run in considers this to be some sort of moral failing if you can't control your life by yourself. They do get treated differently - if not shunned," he said.

Kelton said she has lost friends over the years.

"A lot of people don't want to understand. A lot don't want to learn. They just back away because they're afraid," she said.

Peer counseling, peer contact

Peer counseling can fill that void, offering a place safe from stigma, Kelton said.

"We talk. We hang out, shoot pool, eat lunch," she said. "They see me as someone just like them and are not ashamed."

The Do Drop-In Center serviced about 27 people per day, or 545 people, in October.

Kelton said people who believe they might have a mental illness shouldn't let the fear of being branded stop them from seeking help. The help, however, should come from a medical professional, she said.

"Go to a professional and seek help. That's the person who can tell," she said. "Don't go to a family member or friend."

Mental illnesses are different for different people, Kelton said, even if the diagnosis is the same. Recovery, however, has some basic principles for everyone.

"It takes medicine, time, security, shelter and help to make it through," Kelton said. "It seems like all my life this just has been my calling. God called me here. It took a while, but I got here."

Amy Ritchart can be reached at 245-0247 or at amyritchart@theleafchronicle.com.

TO GET INVOLVED

- National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, Clarksville - a support group for families of people with mental illness. Meets 7 to 8:30 p.m. on the fourth Monday of month at Gateway Medical Center. Call Diane Cary at 326-5932 for information.

- The Tennessee Mental Health Crisis Hotline can be reached at (800) 809-9957. The hot line operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The hot line is provided by the TennCare Partners Program and funded by Premier and Tennessee Behavioral Health.

- Centerstone operates the Harriett Cohn Center, which provides help to people with a wide range of mental and behavioral disorders, the Do Drop-In Center and the crisis walk-in center on the first floor of Gateway Medical Center. The main intake number is at Harriett Cohn, 920-7200, or toll free at (888) 291-HELP. The drop-in center can be reached at 905-0933 and the walk-in center can be reached at 221-2269.

- Clarksville Family Guidance Center offers a variety of mental health services. For information, call 431-7580.

- APSU Counseling and Testing Service provides free confidential help to university students. For information, call 221-6162.

FOR MORE

- For information about the Tennessee Coalition for Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, call The Mental Health Association of Tennessee at (615) 242-7122 or e-mail anitab@mhatn.org.

ABOUT THE SERIES

This is a four-part series about the state of mental health in our community and what can be done to help those in need.

Today: The stigma

Monday: Finding care

Tuesday: Saving children

Wednesday: Holiday stress

Photo Caption:

Anna Kelton, a peer counselor at the Do Drop-in Center, prepares for the day by getting snacks ready for visiting

residents. The Centerstone center is at 1840 Memorial Drive. Greg Williamson/The Leaf-Chronicle

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