

Children's Mental Health Matters: Fight the Stigma

Let's really talk about children's mental health. Childhood mental illness is real, and very common. In fact, half of all psychiatric illness occurs before the age of 14 and 75 percent by the age of 24. For far too long, families of children with a mental health disorder have hidden in the shadows of the fear and shame of seeking proper care for their children and adolescents. The stigma of seeking help too often creates a barrier many can't overcome. May is National Mental Health Awareness Month, and a great time to spotlight what is needed to overcome stigma and find help, healing and hope.

Throughout May, WJCS and many other organizations will focus attention on child and adolescent mental health, and the opportu-

nity to transform the lives of thousands of children and families in our county through education, early intervention and identification of mental health challenges.

Stigma is most commonly defined as a sign of social unacceptability, the shame or disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality or person. It's prohibitive effects are widespread: more than 17 million children in the U.S. have a mental health disorder, but only half of them will ever receive treatment. One in five children in the U.S. suffers from a mental health disorder, reports the National Institute for Mental Health. Mental illness is the number one disability in the world, according to the World Health Organiza-

tion. Suicide continues to be the third leading cause of death in youth ages 15-24. Yet somehow, many still find it more widely acceptable to get treatment for other significant illnesses than for a mental health disorder.

These statistics can no longer be ignored...it is time to address this stigma head-on, by engaging in a public conversation. Ignorance breeds fear...and results in discrimination against what is not understood. One of the best ways to combat stigma is through education. Another is through actively meeting individuals and hearing a personal story, for example, from individuals who speak out about living with a mental health disorder, or through community events that help change attitudes.

Often, parents and caregivers report it can be difficult to distinguish between signs of a mental health concern and normal childhood behavior. It is essential for parents, caregivers and educators to become aware and address the warning signs, including mood changes, intense feelings, difficulty concentrating, sleep irregularities, behavior changes, unexplained weight loss, substance abuse or physical harm. If concerned, it is important to ask for support, information and referral to professional providers in order to best help children cope.

There is hope for the millions of children and youth living with mental illness and their families. Current research shows that many emotional and behavioral disorders can be mitigated if identified and treated early in childhood and adolescence. There are many new, very effective interventions and treatments available.

WJCS provides many

programs and services for children, youth and families that address mental health literacy and enhance community awareness. The newest initiative is Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHA), a nationally recognized, evidence-based certification course that teaches warning signs and risk factors of various mental health challenges common among adolescents and ways to deal with them until professional help is available. The YMHA training program is intended for non-mental health professionals who work with and care for youth, 12-21, including, but not limited to educators and school personnel, youth agencies, coaches, parents, volunteers and mentors.

Other WJCS programs and services include mental health clinics and school-based clinics and youth programs, programs for the Jewish community in synagogues and Jewish Day Schools, including Partners In Caring and Guiding Parents Through Services x318.

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