Ending the Silence: Communicating About Mental Health

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Mental health is not a topic of conversation that is commonly brought up when communicating with others. The subject of physical health is certainly mentioned quite often; many individuals are exceptionally comfortable speaking about their aches, ailments, and diseases. Considering the fact that a person’s mental health is just as important to his or her overall well-being as physical health, why is it an issue that continuously gets swept under the rug? It seems as if mental illnesses are something to be ashamed about, when in reality, that should not be the case. Mental illnesses are diagnosable, treatable medical conditions that can impact an individual’s life on a daily basis (NAMI, 2014b). Mental illnesses do not discriminate, they can affect anyone at any point in time, regardless of “age, race, religion, or income” (NAMI, 2014b, para. 3). Mental illnesses are more than prevalent in today’s population. Annually, approximately 1 in 4 adults deal with some form of mental illness, and about 1 in 17 live with a more serious type of mental illness, such as chronic depression or schizophrenia (NAMI, 2014b). With all of these known facts, why are so few people talking about mental health?

There are several obstacles preventing society from conversing about mental health. Two of the biggest issues surrounding mental health awareness is that there is a stigma attached to mental illnesses, and that communicating about mental health is very uncommon. Studies have shown that early identification and treatment of mental illness is important, and social support is beneficial to one’s overall mental health (NAMI, 2014b; Fisher et al., 2012). The purpose of this paper is to educate the public about mental health awareness along with what people can do to get rid of stigma and communicate about mental illnesses in a better way. If we take steps toward
eliminating stigma and having healthy, open conversations about mental health and illnesses, then we can allow those with mental illnesses to get the help and support that they need.

One of the largest hurdles to overcome when referring to the subject of mental illnesses is the presence of stigma. Stigma hinders a large majority of people from communicating effectively about mental health (Fisher et al., 2012). Many people have negative beliefs about mental illnesses that are not true, but are being projected into society. These critical behaviors prevent people with mental illnesses from getting the help that they desperately need. If the public becomes educated about mental health and illnesses, it is likely that the prevalence of stigma will begin to decrease.

Many individuals wrongly believe that mental illness is due to a personality defect, or they believe they are not treatable illnesses, when these ideas could not be any further from the truth (NAMI, 2014a). Flaws in a person’s character, personality, intelligence, or upbringing are not the causes of mental illness. Mental illnesses can impact anyone, regardless of these factors (NAMI, 2014b). Mental illnesses are treatable illnesses, and the lives of those affected can be improved with treatments such as medication, therapy, support groups, and services offered within the community (NAMI, 2014b).

Even though there are many accessible options for treatment, many people with mental illnesses still refrain from getting help. It has been shown that the results of leaving mental health untreated are devastating. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI, 2014b) stated that the country loses $100 billion annually because of mental illnesses left untreated, not to mention negative outcomes for the person with the mental illness, such as “unnecessary disability, unemployment, substance abuse, homelessness, inappropriate incarceration, suicide, and wasted lives” (NAMI, 2014b, para. 9). Due to the ignorance and intolerance of others, many who are
suffering with a mental illness hide their condition (Breel, 2013). Kevin Breel (2013), a young man who has struggled with depression, spoke about his experience with stigma in a thought-provoking speech:

> What you really fear the most isn’t the suffering inside of you, it’s the stigma inside of others. It’s the shame, it’s the embarrassment, it’s the disapproving look on a friend’s face, it’s the whispers in the hallway that you’re weak, it’s the comments that you’re crazy. That’s what keeps you from getting help. That’s what makes you hold it in and hide it. (Breel, 2013, 5:28)

If people with mental illnesses are afraid to speak up because of the implications that may follow, they will not receive the support and treatment that they deserve.

The stigma against people who struggle with mental illnesses may have originated with those who are unfamiliar with mental health. One study in particular has shown that those who are uneducated about mental health and illnesses are more likely to have a stigma against those with a mental illness. Girma and his colleagues (2013) conducted a cross-sectional study by distributing a questionnaire to 845 random respondents. They found that higher education about mental illnesses correlated with a lower level of stigma, and suggested that community mental health information and other programs are usually productive in reducing stigma (Girma et al., 2013). To reduce stigma by informing the public, the public must of course be willing to learn, and that is a factor that seems somewhat promising. A survey conducted by NAMI showed that 44% of Americans know little to nothing about mental illnesses or disorders, but 84% of Americans said they would benefit knowing more (NAMI, 2014a). As stigma is eliminated, positive, reassuring messages will be communicated allowing those with mental illnesses to stop being ashamed of their conditions.
Stigma, and several other factors, make it tough for someone with a mental illness to communicate their problem to others. The person with a mental illness must invest time in themselves, and think critically around others, in order to properly address the issue at hand. It is important for people with mental illnesses to realize that communicating about their condition may be a difficult process, but the benefits will make it worth enduring.

If someone is struggling with a mental illness, it is important for them to first take care of his or her own feelings and learn to accept themselves before communicating with others (Albert, 2014; Breel, 2013). If they are already experiencing negative feelings about their condition, they will be vulnerable to negative feelings from others (Albert, 2014). In his speech, Breel (2013) also suggested that society should encourage the acceptance of one’s self rather than trying to eliminate the ignorance in the world. It is impossible to educate the entire world about mental illnesses, so the person with a mental illness should be proactive and educate themselves. They will soon learn that there is nothing to be embarrassed of in regards to their condition.

One of the hardest steps for people with mental illnesses to overcome is deciding who they should talk to about the subject. It is important for people with mental illnesses to have the knowledge that not everyone they tell will be understanding, and they must choose who they disclose their mental illness to wisely (Albert, 2014). They should be able to find a balance between those who they are going to tell, as well as those who they are going to spare, because not everyone needs to know (Albert, 2014). Once they reveal this information, it may not always go as expected. Some may not support them, some may deny they even have a mental illness, and some may just be generally insensitive (Albert, 2014). The individual must realize that these
reactions are the other party’s problem, not their own, and others will come to terms with the situation when they are ready.

Individuals with mental illnesses should take time to research their illnesses with loved ones and educate them if they are willing to learn more (Albert, 2014). The people that they communicate this information to may have a lot of questions and concerns that they want to look into. Learning about the mental illness with family will help clear the air and may even make conversation flow easier. If loved ones begin to worry, the person with a mental illness should consider their concerns because they most likely just want the best for them (Albert 2014).

Once the person with a mental illness has disclosed information about their illness to the right people, finding help will be an easier process. Using helpful resources available in his or her community and searching for possible treatment options will be beneficial (Albert, 2014). If the individual’s family is supportive, they will be able to assist in this process. The family can even attend appointments with their loved one. Support groups are also something for the person to consider. Similar mental illnesses within the group will encourage communication without the fear of being judged (Fisher et al., 2012). These methods of communication should decrease stress and put the individual on the road to recovery.

Family and friends may find themselves in a tough spot when someone discloses to them that they have a mental illness. This information can put a huge strain on relationships, and may be difficult to talk about at first (Albert, 2014). However, support is vital for someone with a mental illness, and when someone confides in someone else about this subject matter, it should not be taken lightly. Healthy communication skills are valuable, especially in this situation.

It can be surprising to find out that a loved one has been struggling with a mental illness. It is crucial that once one finds out about this information, they should listen intently and always
be cautious about what they say (Albert, 2014; Shrivastava, 2012). People with mental illnesses may already have a poor view of themselves, so any type of criticism will obviously be counterproductive. Always think before speaking, and avoid saying the first thing that comes to mind (Albert, 2014). Most of the time, people with mental illnesses just need someone to listen to them without judgment (Shrivastava, 2012). Family members should also be aware of warning signs of mental illnesses, and be able to, in a calm manner, step in and discuss the situation if needed (Shrivastava, 2012).

Those that are around people with mental illnesses can have a large impact on their recovery process. There should always be an abundance of support, positivity, and love offered to the one in distress (Albert, 2014; Shrivastava, 2012). Speak calmly and with respect for the person who has a mental illness. Clarity, direct messages, and “I” statements are almost always beneficial. Saying phrases such as “I believe you would benefit from treatment” instead of “You need treatment” puts less blame on the person who has a mental illness (Shrivastava, 2012). Arguments and heated communication usually backfire, because it also seems like you are blaming the individual for their mental illness (Shrivastava, 2012). Be sure to express love and hope as much as possible. This gives the individuals with mental illness reassurance that they are not alone (Shrivastava, 2012).

Finally, family and friends must realize that this is not something that they can fix on their own. Loved ones should do what they can, but they should not try to solve the situation completely (Albert, 2014). When a family tries to be the “hero” they do not realize that this is something beyond what they can handle (Albert, 2014). For example, a family member trying to help a loved one may become distressed themselves. Loved ones can express concerns, but should avoid taking full responsibility for the individual with a mental illness (Albert, 2014). It is
also important for those dealing with a person with a mental illness to take care of their own needs and rights, and to be assertive rather than aggressive. The family must remember to look after themselves as well as the affected individual in this process (Shrivastava, 2012).

Communication is an essential part of the mental health awareness movement. Finding methods to fight stigma and communicate more effectively will help the issue of mental health in America progress forward. Communicating more openly about mental illnesses will allow people to realize these are common illnesses that can be treated, and they are nothing to be ashamed about. Nothing is going to change overnight, but with these small steps we can slowly start to change the way people look at mental health as well as help people realize how important it is.
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