

Mental Illness - What's in a Label?

When people have a mental illness, to the outside world they become that mental illness. They become “that schizophrenic” or “the personality disorder.” When mental illnesses are used as labels (such as depressed, schizophrenic, manic, or hyperactive), these labels hurt. Labels lead to stigma, a word that means branding and shame, and stigma leads to discrimination. Everyone knows why it is wrong to discriminate against people because of their race, religion, culture, or appearance. They are less aware of how people with mental illness experience discrimination. Although such discrimination may not always be obvious, it exists, and it hurts. Anyone can experience depression or other mental health issues. **One in five Wisconsinites will be affected by mental illness this year.** It can happen to any of us.

Stigma

Stigma is not just a matter of using the wrong word or action. Stigma is about disrespect. It is the negative use of labels to identify a person living with mental illness. Stigma creates barriers. The stigma of mental illness is real, painful, and damaging to people's lives. Stigma prevents them from getting the treatment and support they need to lead healthy, normal lives.

Stigma can:

- discourage people from getting help
- keep people from getting good jobs and advancing in the workplace
- lead to fear, mistrust, and violence
- result in prejudice and discrimination
- result in inadequate insurance coverage

Do use respectful language, emphasize abilities, not limitations, and tell someone if they express a stigmatizing attitude. **Don't** use generic labels such as retard, mentally ill, or terms like crazy, lunatic, manic-depressive, or slow functioning; don't portray successful persons with disabilities as super human.

The 2007 Couleecap Needs Assessment results show that mental illness (including depression) was a moderate to serious problem for about one-fourth of the low-income households responding to the survey. Sixty-one percent of key agencies, Couleecap staff, and Couleecap Board/Planning committees report the prevalence of problems related to mental health among low-income individuals or families as a serious problem. Depression was rated at 55 percent and other mental illness rated 48 percent. Changes that could be made to improve the quality of services for mental-health related issues are to: 1) increase the awareness of the need, and 2) improve access and availability to mental health services.

Many national and state groups have begun projects and campaigns to reverse stigma. The Mental Health Coalition of the Greater La Crosse Area provides speakers and trainings to educate the community that mental illnesses affect all of us, these illnesses can be successfully treated, and the understanding and support of family and friends is essential to recovering a satisfying life.

Warning Signs

Mental and behavioral health issues describe a broad range of mental and emotional conditions. Mental illness, if left untreated, often shows up in a person as another health complaint. Symptoms can be provoked if left untreated. Blocks to mental and behavioral health can significantly interfere with the performance of major life activities, such as learning, thinking, communicating, and sleeping, among others. Mental health related issues include anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorders, and other mental disorders. These disorders can profoundly disrupt a person's thinking, feeling, moods, ability to relate to others and capacity for coping with the demands of life. Problems with mental health can affect

persons of any age, race, religion, or income. Mental illnesses are not the result of personal weakness, lack of character, or poor upbringing. Fear of stigma, and the resulting discrimination, discourages individuals and their families from getting the help they need.

The best treatments for serious mental and behavioral health-related illnesses are highly effective; between 70 and 90 percent of individuals have a significant reduction of symptoms and an improved quality of life with a combination of pharmacological and psychosocial treatments and supports.

Mental health screenings are so important. Research shows that one in five Wisconsinites will be affected by mental illness this year, however nearly two thirds of those with a diagnosable disorder do not get the treatment and support that would help them recover. Screening provides a quick way to identify whether you may be experiencing symptoms commonly associated with an illness and determine whether follow up with a professional is recommended. Keep in mind that a screening is not a substitute for a complete mental health evaluation. It does not result in a diagnosis but rather provides an indication of whether or not a person has symptoms consistent with a particular illness.

The Wisconsin statutes define mental illness as a “**mental disease to such extent that a person so afflicted requires care and treatment for his or her own welfare, or the welfare of others, or of the community.**” Chronic mental illness is defined as “a mental illness which is severe in degree and persistent in duration, which causes a substantially diminished level of functioning in the primary aspects of daily living and an inability to cope with the ordinary demands of life, which may lead to an inability to maintain stable adjustment and independent functioning without long-term treatment and support and which may be of lifelong duration.” This definition does not include infirmities of aging or a primary diagnosis of mental retardation or of alcohol or drug dependence.

Local resources

Couleecap currently operates two programs in Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon counties that specifically assist individuals with mental illness. The Tenant Based Rental Assistance (TBRA) Program serves people who are homeless with a serious mental illness, which may include major depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. The New Hope Program is a supportive housing program that works with people who have physical and/or mental disabilities. Most of the participants in the TBRA Program and the New Hope Program have special needs such as physical disabilities, mental illness, alcohol and/or drug abuse or a combination of both, and issues with domestic violence. Couleecap staff receives specialized training to meet these needs, as well as consults with other area professionals and community services as needed.

The Mental Health Coalition of the Greater La Crosse Area is a community coalition composed of advocates for mental health and providers of mental health services. Visit their website at www.mentalhealthlacrosse.org for a list of participating agencies and groups, or call your county Human Services Department, Great Rivers 2-1-1, or Independent Living Resources for information in your area.

Couleecap, Inc. is a private, non-profit 501 (c)3 charitable organization created in 1966. Our mission is to fight poverty and promote self-sufficiency for people in the Coulee Region. Our four-county service area includes Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon counties in Wisconsin. For more than 42 years, we have been helping low-income people build on their strengths and become more self-sufficient. We currently operate over 40 programs in the areas of housing, family and youth services, and emergency services. Each year, Couleecap helps more than 10,000 people work towards self-sufficiency. For more information regarding Couleecap and its programs, please visit our website at www.couleecap.org.

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References: 2007 Couleecap Needs Assessment, Couleecap, Inc. www.couleecap.org
Mental Health America of Wisconsin www.mhawisconsin.org
Mental Health Coalition of the Greater La Crosse Area www.mentalhealthlacrosse.org
Mental Health Intervention www.addictionintervention.com
SAMHSA's National Mental Health Information Center www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov
Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau, Informational Paper 51 www.legis.state.wi.us

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