

Metal Health Stigma – Part II



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Today's column is a continuation of the series of columns on mental health stigma. The last column addressed the broad view of mental health stigma. Today's column focuses specifically on mental health stigma in Lebanon County. Presented below is this writer's profile of Lebanon County's mental health stigma. This profile was developed based on this writer's experiences while working in the mental health field.

1. Mental illness is not a disease. Mental illness continues to be referred to as emotional problems or a nervous breakdown.
2. Mental illness is not treatable and therefore persons with mental illness cannot recover from mental illness; they can only be maintained by medications which keep them from being a danger to the community.
3. Persons with mental health disorders are not able to function in the community – they can't work, maintain daily activities, socialize with others, and/or be a productive member of the community.
4. Persons with mental health disorders need someone to take care of them as they can't take care of themselves. They cannot live independently.
5. Not in my back yard. A community or neighborhood does not want persons with mental health disorders to live in their community or neighborhood.
6. Persons with mental health disorders belong in an institution not in the community.
7. Persons with mental health disorders are dangerous or violent and get into trouble all the time.
8. Persons with mental health disorders are not capable of working in a competitive employment environment and should be limited to controlled work environments such as sheltered workshops or minimum wage jobs.
9. The families of persons with mental health disorders should be responsible for taking care of their family members.
10. Seeking help for a mental health disorder is a sign of weakness.
11. Persons with mental health disorders can't be helped because mental illness is genetic.
12. Medication is the only way to treat mental illnesses.
13. Therapy is not appropriate for persons with mental health disorders.
14. Persons with mental health disorders are criminals and belong in jail.
15. Persons with mental health disorders do not belong in jail. They are mentally incapable of knowing that they committed a crime so they should not be sentenced to jail.
16. Persons with mental health disorders are not capable of taking care of their homes or apartments.
17. Persons with mental health disorders hoard items.
18. Persons with mental health disorders cannot manage money.
19. Persons with mental health disorders are viewed as a diagnosis not a person.
20. Persons with mental health disorders do not have goals or dreams for their lives.
21. Persons with mental health disorders do not have physical health problems that are unrelated to their mental illness.
22. Persons with mental health disorders are always in some type of crisis.
23. Persons with mental health disorders are a burden to the health care system.
24. Persons with mental health disorders are not disabled; they are just lazy and do not want to handle their problems.
25. All mental health disorders can be handled by the family. There is no need to seek professional help.
26. Mental health is about mental illness or mental health disorders.
27. Mental health disorders happen to other people not me.

This is not an all inclusive list of mental health stigma present in Lebanon County. This writer hopes that this list will be a catalyst for you, the citizens of Lebanon County, to become aware of your view of persons with mental health disorders. It should be noted that this writer found that the most predominate stigma is item #26 – mental health is about mental illness or mental health disorders. This was accurately portrayed at a recent Lebanon County event attended by the Mental Health Association (MHA). This writer observed that the majority of attendees either avoided the MHA table, literally walking away from the table, or made a comment that they either “did not need services or they were glad they did not need mental health services.” We all need mental health services – to develop good mental health and brain health, to promote recovery from mental illness, and to provide care for those with mental health disorders. Remember that 22 to 23 percent of adults suffer some type of mental health disorder this year and a majority of the other adults will be involved in helping an adult with a mental health disorder. All the other listed items are present in specific communities or groups of people.

The next column will present actions that can be taken to eliminate stigma in Lebanon County. The Mental Health Association recognizes that there are many individuals in Lebanon County already working hard to eliminate mental health stigma and we commend these individuals for their work. We encourage every Lebanon County citizen to become involved in this effort to eliminate mental health stigma in Lebanon County.

We hope that you will come out and see us at the CLA's Car Show on August 22, 2010. We are currently selling tickets for our September British Tea event. Please contact the MHA office if you are interested in purchasing tickets.

By Shem Heller, Executive Director of the Mental Health Association of Lebanon County