



Mental Health Treatment Makes a Difference

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

Mental health services help a growing percentage of residents in Cecil County, sometimes even saving lives. Here are two examples illustrating the importance of mental health in our neighborhood.

At a young age, John noticed that his moods varied to the extremes. When he was eight years old he began sneaking alcoholic drinks from his parents. But by his mid-teens he had become a full-blown alcoholic and at age 16 he had quit school.

Soon he started getting in trouble with the law and was in and out of jail. During this time his moods were still uncontrolled. They ranged from extreme sadness to extreme anger with occasional violent outbursts. Also alcohol gave him the false impression that he could control these moods.

Finally, an officer of the court recognized the mental health problems and referred John for treatment. John was reluctant but agreed to come for therapy. Over time, he developed a rapport with his therapist. But he steadfastly refused to take any medication so he continued to struggle with mood swings. In addition he still struggled with his alcohol addiction.

In his late twenties, he was committed to a mental health hospital. There, he finally submitted to medication. He remained in this hospital for a couple years before being released to the community to live in a supervised apartment. In this apartment he had access to mental health counselors and he began seeing his therapist again.

He also started going to a day program that offered psychiatric rehabilitation. At this point in his life he kept taking his medication and he stayed off the alcohol. Soon he became interested in working and, through the rehab's employment program, he found a part-time job.

Around that time, John also began dating. Eventually he married and moved into different housing to live with his wife. Soon after, he graduated from the day program.

Now he continues with the medication to control his moods and comes for therapy just once every two weeks.

This, of course, is a success story. It illustrates what happens when mental health treatment works well.

Over the years countless individuals have been able to improve their lives through mental health treatment. In fact, many of these individuals were able to get jobs to support themselves and their families. Here at Upper Bay, we've seen many of these successes.

It's true that effective mental health care not only helps people to improve their lives, it also helps to save lives. In almost all cases it saves people from years of emotional torment and dysfunction, and it has brought many people back from the brink of suicide.

On the other hand, there's a problem when mental health services are taken away. Here's another true story...

Marie started doing well and her life continued to improve after she began attending a specialized therapeutic school program. Prior to entering that program, she had times when she threatened suicide and occasionally she would cut on herself with a knife or razorblade. Prior to attending the therapeutic program, she was doing poorly in school but, while attending, her school performance improved.

Unfortunately, due to the present state budget crisis in Maryland, the state has cut back on approvals for children going to this type of therapeutic program. Due to these cutbacks, Marie lost access to her program.

In a letter of protest, Marie described the positive results she had gotten from the program. She closed by stating, "This program has helped me so much. What will I do now?"

What Will She Do Now?

Both of these cases represent the kinds of situations regularly faced by people in Cecil County and across the state. Their examples document the critical importance of having a wide range of mental health services available to people in our community.

Basic mental health treatment is fairly simple. It consists of outpatient counseling and medication. These two interventions alone serve 80% of those in need. But the remaining 20% have more complex problems and require more intensive services, such as day programs, case management, therapeutically supervised apartments, supportive employment, school based therapy, and therapeutic afterschool programs.

But now these programs—for our most vulnerable citizens—are being downsized or cut completely. To do without such programs puts many of our citizens at risk of more problems, and it puts the remainder of the health care and human service system on the line to pick up the slack.

In the past few years our legislature has been verbally supportive of the mental health system, and our Governor made and kept several promises to help fund the system. But with the continued growth in the number of people receiving Medicaid, the demands on mental health have exceeded budget. So state mental health officials have been forced to cut back on critical services.

So what can you do?

If you believe that mental health treatment makes a difference in our community, you can take action by calling or writing your representatives in congress. You can request that state funding for mental health services be made an ongoing priority. This would show your support for improving the lives of some of this community's most vulnerable citizens.

Helping them can help you too.

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