Parish Nurse's Notes May 2022

May is Mental Health Awareness Month

Every year, local communities organize *events* and *activities* that bring the conversation about mental health into public view.

The origins of Mental Health Awareness Month date back to 1949 when Mental Health America (then known as the *National Association for Mental Health*) first organized an observance in May as a way to raise awareness and erase the stigma attached to mental illness.

Mental Health Awareness Month has been observed every year since and remains a time where those who suffer from mental illness can be reminded of the support available to them and feel a little less alone in their struggles.

What is Mental Illness?

Mental illness is a term used to describe mental health conditions that impact mood, thinking, and behavior. These disorders may interfere with a person's ability to relate to others and function on a daily basis.

Common mental illnesses include:

- **Mood disorders** (depression, bipolar disorder, etc.)
- **Psychotic disorders** (schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, etc.)
- **Anxiety disorders** (generalized anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, phobias, etc.).

Anxiety disorders are the most common form of mental illness affecting an estimated 48 million people in the U.S per year (19.1%), followed by mood disorders (9.7%). nSymptoms vary depending on the type of mental illness one is struggling with. However, some common symptoms associated with many types of mental illness include:

- Insomnia
- Agitation
- Loss of appetite
- Social withdrawal
- Emotional numbness
- Inability to concentrate
- Excessive fear and worry
- Self-harm

The signs and symptoms of mental illness can often be confused for **various other ailments** such as stress, fatigue, or even teenage hormones.

Mental Health Awareness Statistics

According to recent **estimates from Johns Hopkins**, **one in four US adults** (*26%*) experience mental illness *each year*, while research from NAMI states that one in twenty *live* with a serious mental illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder (*13.1 million*).

Nearly **8 million children and adolescents** in the U.S. suffer from a serious mental illness. In fact, 90% of Americans who die by suicide (*the second leading cause of death among persons aged 10 to 34*) have experienced symptoms of a **treatable** mental health condition such as depression, anxiety disorders or other forms of serious mental illnesses.

Researchers also estimate that half of all chronic mental illness begins by *age 14*, and 75% by *age 24*. Yet despite these statistics, nearly **50%** of people suffering from mental illnesses *do not seek treatment*. In fact, on average, it takes ***11 years*** for someone to seek help after first experiencing symptoms of a mental disorder.

This is attributed to the **stigma** *associated with mental illness as well as* **underfunding** *for mental health care providers.* Many struggle in silence without receiving the necessary support needed to manage their condition while others *may not even realize* they have an illness and continue to suffer despite its devastating effects on their lives.

The Stigma of Mental Illness

Stigma is defined as *"a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person.".* The stigma surrounding mental health disorders leads to many people ***hiding*** their struggles and ***avoiding*** getting the help they need.

According to the American Psychological Association, more than **a third of Americans** feel uncomfortable interacting with someone who has a mental illness (*39% would view someone differently if they knew of their mental illness, 33% agreed with the statement "people with mental health disorders scare me"*). Research shows that those struggling experience discrimination in ***all aspects of society*** including at work and when trying to obtain housing due to stereotypes about *violence* and *incompetence*. Americans have been negatively portrayed in the **media** as *dangerous, violent, unable to control themselves*, and mental illness as untreatable or unrecoverable conditions.

In reality, those with mental illness are more likely to be the victims of violence rather than the perpetrators (***10 times*** *more likely than the general population*) and more than 80 percent of people who receive treatment for mental illness report significant improvement in their symptoms.

Those with a mental illness are further stigmatized by ***health insurance companies*** that refuse service or charge significantly more money for those seeking treatment for mental health disorders compared to those with physical illnesses.

Although the stigma surrounding mental health disorders has been declining over the past few decades, research shows that **56 percent of Americans** would feel uncomfortable telling their friends or family if they were suffering from a mental illness. This fear is associated with the belief that people will negatively judge them for their struggles and view it as a sign of weakness.

Stigma remains one of the ***biggest barriers*** preventing people from seeking treatment or ending their silence about their condition. Awareness is key in breaking this barrier by educating the public about **common misconceptions** and promoting acceptance of those who suffer from these conditions.

Benefit 1: Bring Awareness to Mental Health Symptoms

Mental health awareness initiatives help those who are suffering to understand how the symptoms of mental health disorders **manifest**. This allows individuals to seek treatment BEFORE their condition worsens and prevents significant disruptions to their social or work life. When individuals recognize their symptoms and seek help early, they are more likely to:

- Recover completely
- Experience *fewer* complications
- And live longer.

In fact, early treatment can often prevent tragic results such as **alcohol abuse** and **suicide**. In addition, the more the general population knows about mental illness and its symptoms, the easier it is for them to *identify* people who may be struggling and get them the necessary care.

Educate yourself about mental health: *Having better knowledge about common disorders will help you understand where others are coming from and how to interact with them in a compassionate, helpful manner.*

Benefit 2: Break the Mental Health Stigma

Mental health awareness initiatives aim at raising public knowledge of mental health disorders, reducing stigma and fostering positive attitudes towards seeking help. Mental health awareness helps people understand that mental illness is NOT a character flaw but rather an illness like any other. Research shows that when people have better knowledge about different types of mental illness, they are **significantly** less likely to hold discriminatory views towards those suffering from mental illnesses.

Having better knowledge about common disorders will further reduce discriminatory practices, create greater acceptance across communities and lead to people who suffer from mental illness feeling comfortable sharing their stories.