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Mental Illness Awareness

What is a mental illness? According to the ISPS UK site, “a mental illness is the severe change a person experiences in their thinking, feelings, or even behavior. These changes can cause distress to the person and to other people also. These severe changes can also affect the person’s actions”, (ISPS UK, What Is Mental Illness). Let’s discuss how persons with mental illnesses can be better supported in our community.

Despite the fact that there are different types of mental illnesses, “half of these cases begin mainly at age 14 and three quarters of the cases begin at age 24. 1 of 5 people will suffer from a mental illness in their lifetime”, (NIMH, Virgin Islanders and Mental Health). It is important for us to know the different types of mental illnesses so we can better address them. Bi-polar disorder, schizophrenia, and depression are some types of mental illnesses (APA, Types of Mental Illness).

Our community can learn about these mental illnesses and how to react to a person with a mental illness. For example, we can hold community campaigns where people can research the various types of mental illnesses, and share ideas of how they can help deal with these illnesses. This will show the community that mental illnesses are serious, and with the right medicine can be treated under professional supervision.

Persons with mental illnesses can be better supported in our community by creating a charity operated by people who truly care. Monetary donations would help support the mentally

ill by getting specialized doctors and mentors to guide them. Also, this staff of doctors and mentors would help to administer specific medications to treat the mental illnesses, and offer counseling.

A charity like this in the USVI is needed. This center can assist in educating the patient, the families and the community about mental illness. The doctors at this center can assist patients and teach families to recognize the signs and symptoms of mental illness. Regular forums can be held at the center to ensure public awareness on mental illness stays current. Programs can also be available to patients to assist with the purchase of the medications needed to keep them functioning as normal citizens.

Taking care of a person with a mental illness can be challenging and stressful. We need programs that will educate families on how to deal with the stress of taking care of loved ones. We often hear that laughter is the best medicine, so we should create a section in our center that will be a game and entertainment area for families to spend time together having fun and enjoying themselves. These activities should be supervised by professionals and should be geared towards individuals with these illnesses.

There may be programs available in the USVI, but the public is not aware of them. Flyers can be placed on vehicles at the various shopping centers and around town describing programs available, their benefits, and where families can go for information and assistance. Another way that we can raise public awareness is by having monthly talks on the radio and television informing them of new programs, or updating them on existing programs.

Emphasis should be placed on getting these individuals off the streets and getting them into programs that can help them regain a place in society. We as a society need to be more empathetic towards persons with mental illnesses. Instead of complaining about them, we should

try to come together to find a solution. We can get together with our senators to try and lobby for funds to build a center in the USVI. It would really be a success for us.

Mental illness is serious and we need to get serious about educating the public, creating public awareness of available programs, and getting financial assistance for individuals or who have difficulty obtaining them on their own. It's time we take a stand and get mental illness under control!

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Jeanelle Hector

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AP English 11 2nd Period

How Can Persons With Mental Illnesses Be Better Supported In Our Community?

I was asked to do an essay on Mental Health Awareness and I was quite surprised on what my research revealed. Surprisingly enough I was shocked to learn that Mental Illness was a medical condition and treatable just as heart disease and or diabetes. I always thought that someone with a Mental Illness was labeled as being “crazy”, because that is always what I heard in my community. I thought that anyone who was labeled as being mentally disturbed was just crazy. I now realize that this was a stigma that has been placed on individuals with this medical condition.

Mental illness is a disorder that affects the mind in different forms, which is known as the psychological state of the mind. This includes emotional and behavioral problems. While there are many different forms of mental illness, I am more aware of three different types in my community. Three types are Bipolar, Autism, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Bipolar disorder, also known as the bipolar affective disorder, manic-depressive disorder, or manic depression, is a mental illness classified by psychiatry as a mood disorder. Individuals with bipolar disorder experience episodes of a very high mood known as mania alternating with episodes of depression. Quite interestingly enough I knew someone with bipolar disorder that experienced episodes of mania and depression. About 4 percent of people suffer from bipolar disorder.

Autism is also known as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), a disorder of brain development. People who have this disorder may have difficulties in interacting with others in both verbal and nonverbal communications. Although they may have these difficulties, they usually excel in visual skills such as art, music, and math. Sir Isaac Newton had autism and was physicist and was credited about the discovery of gravity.

Autism appears in the early ages of brain development but the most obvious signs and symptoms tend to emerge between the ages of two and three years.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIH), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is one of the most common childhood disorders that can continue up until adulthood. Symptoms of this include difficulty with paying attention, controlling behavior, acting without thinking, and hyperactivity. ADHD is one of the disorders that cannot be cured but can be managed successfully, which can improve symptoms with age.

The first step that can be taken in better supporting these people in our community would be to better aware the community on this topic. The community is not fully aware of this topic because it's not taken seriously as other medical conditions like heart disease, diabetes, and high blood pressure. If the community would also help by better educating themselves about mental illnesses or disorders, it would help the people with these disorders in a lot of ways. Another thing is that if the community is better educated, they would stop labeling people with these disorders as "crazy" or making them feel uncomfortable to go seek help about their disorder. The community can also help by assisting people with mental illnesses by assisting them in seek of professional help, counseling, and therapy.

The government's input and support would also be a huge help for people with mental illnesses. The government would be able to come up with better mental illness programs that would be better funded in order to help people with mental illnesses. The best and easiest way to effectively treat people with mental illnesses or disorders would probably be to treat them in their own homes where they are most comfortable. Trying to

treat them in hospitals would be very expensive and also very disturbing and uncomfortable for those people with the disorders. If our community can develop “The Assertive Community Treatment” (ACT), they would be able to help the people of mental health services to receive the support they need in order for them to live successfully in the community. The ACT team should include psychiatrists, nurses, mental health and substance abuse professionals, and employment specialist. This team should work together and be available 24/7 for when people with these illnesses or disorders are in need.

The support for people with mental illnesses or disorders can be provided but the community has to work together with the government’s help in order to provide help that is needed for that group of people. Another thing is to stop labeling them as “crazy” and treat them as normal human beings so that they can feel accepted in our community or any other community.

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Over 300 mental disorders have been classified by the American Psychiatric Association. In the Virgin Islands less than 5% of mental health disorders are commonly treated in outpatient clinics and at the Roy Lester Schneider Hospital and Medical Center's 21-bed acute care unit; the only acute care unit in the Virgin Islands. Sadly, there are no acute care psychiatric services available on St. Croix. The most common disorders treated in the Virgin Islands are Schizophrenia, Bipolar disorder in manic phase and Suicides. In fiscal year 2009, the Division of Mental Health, Alcoholism and Drug Dependence Services on St. Croix served over 400 clients in its clinics; 16% were younger than 18-years-old (Valmond.)

The first and foremost way to support persons with mental illness is to reduce stigma in our community. The community's general feeling towards mental illness is one of disgrace. The overwhelming perception is "crazy" people should be segregated from the rest of society. This perception only shows how ignorant and misinformed our community is about mental illness. This past June, President Obama called for an end to mental illness stigma. He told the American people, including us in the United States Virgin Islands, that we should not be ashamed and not to be afraid of asking questions about mental illness. Associated Press Journalist Nedra Pickler quoted President Obama as saying, "The brain is a body part, too.... there should be no shame in discussing or seeking help for treatable illnesses that affect too many people that we love. We've got to get rid of that embarrassment...."

Here in the Virgin Islands, we are very much embarrassed; evident by the significant mentally homeless people on our streets. In a simple survey I conducted, 7 out of 10 people felt

mental illness was negative. These mentally ill homeless people didn't just drop from the sky or was put on a plane from some far away place as we are commonly told. In fact, most have family who pass them by everyday and turn their head in embarrassment. So to help people with mental illness, we first have to educate the people who should be obligated to love them no matter their condition as well as, the community as a whole.

The government and mental health advocates should join forces to increase community awareness about mental illness affecting our community. Local advocacy groups include Disability Rights Center of the USVI, The Virgin Islands Alliance for the Mentally Ill, and Ten Thousand Helpers of St. Croix, Inc (Valmond.) Social media campaigns targeting all including adolescents should be launched. The key message; mental illness is a disease, no different than Diabetes, High Blood Pressure, or HIV/AIDS. Schizophrenia, Bipolar disorders, and Suicide as the most common disorders should be the focus. The campaigns should also educate about drugs and the effect they have on mental illness. Finally, early signs of mental illness, treatment options, and support groups should be included in the community awareness campaigns.

Adolescents are not exempted from mental illness, but treatment and support services specific to adolescents are limited in our community. One in five children and adolescents, according to the U.S. Surgeon General, will suffer from mental health problems before finishing school. Ironically, 20% of clients seen in St. Croix mental health clinics are adolescents. "What stress do you have? You don't have to worry about bills;" the most common parental statements to dismiss mental health symptoms of adolescents. The pressures of an adolescent are real and

extremely stressful. The last Youth Risk Behavior Survey for the District of St. Croix revealed 33.8% of females and 22.5% of males surveyed felt sad and hopeless causing them to limit their activities. When ask about suicide, more females and lower classmen responded they had thought about it, made plans and/or attempted suicide. Males were only within a 5% range of female respondents. The survey also revealed that there was a high use of alcohol at around 70% and marijuana usage was around 35%. Both can affect mental illness.

Parents, teachers and other adults need to be educated about stress and mental illness in order to support adolescents. They must be able to recognize early signs for immediate treatment to occur. We are not “rude and disrespectful” for no reason; most times it is because we are stressed and unable to cope. It can develop into a bipolar disorder or the extreme - attempting suicide.

Work Cited

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