

Mental Illness Stigma Hampers Recovery & Understanding

Letter from the Executive Director & Board President

For our new MHA video we interviewed a number of people on the sidewalks of downtown Santa Barbara. We simply asked, “What do you think of when you hear the words mental illness?” To no one’s surprise most reactions included someone dangerous and probably homeless, who should be avoided. Too many reactions expressed the notion that people with mental illness should be locked up or kept apart from the rest of us. And if this idea was not spoken aloud, it was inferred, even by those who showed some understanding in their response to our question.

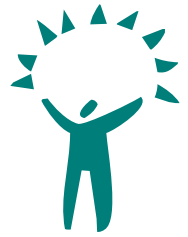
The reactions we received suggest a fear of mental illness and those who struggle with the effects of a brain disorder that can be frightening. What is the basis of our fear? Are we afraid that mental illness is contagious? Are we afraid of the possible awkwardness of interacting with someone whose social skills may be “atypical” and whose behavior may not always be predictable? Are we afraid of that which we don’t understand? Are we afraid to be associated with the stigma that is linked with mental illness?

According to the National Institute of Health, 26.2% of the American population over the age of 18 (1 in 4 adults) will experience a diagnosable mental health disorder in a given year. From anxiety disorders, depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, we all know or love someone who lives with some form of mental illness.

Most devastating is the stigma that surrounds mental illness. Once a person has disclosed that they live with a mental illness, or that someone in their family does, the reaction can cause a series of unanticipated consequences that can lead to misunderstandings; thus the spiraling nature of keeping mental illness a secret, and perpetuating the misconceptions rather than breaking them down. The stigma associated with a mental health problem can be far more damaging and destructive than the illnesses themselves. Mental illness is not an easy disease and can often be debilitating and especially difficult for the individual as well as his/her family. But, stigma can be equally debilitating.

One way we can eradicate the stigma of mental illness is to educate ourselves and learn more about those who courageously confront these illnesses. Through education, our fears about those with mental illness can be addressed and better understood. And, as we integrate people who struggle with the effects of mental illness more fully into our society, as we come to know them as neighbors, co-workers and fellow community members, we will find that our lives are in fact enriched. Many who suffer from mental illness are some of our greatest contributors to mankind — poets, writers, artists, scientists, teachers, social activists, and national leaders — representing virtually every category of human involvement.

Just as in the life changing chronic illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes, living with a mental illness requires lifestyle changes and diligent monitoring of physical health indicators; it is not only about the psychotic episodes that, unfortunately, may occur. It also requires understanding. The Mental Health Association in Santa Barbara is here to educate the community and eradicate stigma. We do this with facts, real stories and hopeful messages. Mental illness is a highly treatable illness — one that affects real people who are our neighbors, friends, families... and yes, even ourselves. ☺



Annmarie Cameron
Executive Director



David Prenatt
President,
Board of Directors

Annmarie Cameron
Executive Director

David Prenatt
President, Board of Directors