

Mental illness help available

Printed in The Durham Herald-Sun on April 19, 2007

Mental illness is a health condition that is characterized by alterations in thinking, mood, and/or behavior, associated with distress and/or impaired functioning. The incidence of mental illness is much higher than many people realize. Schizophrenia affects about one in every 100 persons; bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depressive illness, 1.5%; clinical depression is 3 - 5%; and obsessive-compulsive disorder, 2 - 3%. When you include other kinds of illnesses, such as panic disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, and borderline personality disorder, the incidence rate for serious mental illness is around 10%.

While dealing with mental illness can be frightening, there is hope. Mental health care is available here in Durham, and can be effective. With medications (if necessary) and psychosocial supports, many people have a significant reduction of symptoms and improved quality of life. Progress is being made both in treatment effectiveness and greater public understanding of mental illnesses.

Persons with mental illness are suffering from a physical disorder of the brain. These illnesses cannot be overcome through “will power” and are not related to a person’s “character” or intelligence. While mental illness can occur at any time, the typical age of onset is late teens and early twenties for males and late twenties for females. People who have mental illness deserve the same level of understanding and support that would be given to someone with any other kinds of illness.

Mental illnesses are treatable, and it’s very important to seek treatment. Sometimes it is difficult for the person to recognize that they are ill. In addition, they may not wish to acknowledge that they have a mental illness because of the stigma that is associated with it. These attitudes and beliefs are often obstacles to seeking treatment when it is needed.

The Durham Center is Durham’s local management entity for public mental health programs, coordinating care with providers in the community. With their providers, they have initiated many evidence-based practices, which have been identified in the research community as effective in treating severe and persistent mental illness.

Despite the promising treatments and programs, there are challenges to accessing mental health services in Durham, including cost. For those who qualify for Medicaid, there is a range of services available. However, public funding is woefully short for those who are not Medicaid eligible. This is a problem statewide. For the uninsured, it can be prohibitively expensive to seek treatment, including medications. The Durham Center offers qualified clients some assistance with medication costs, and many of the drug manufacturers offer medications to individuals who cannot afford them and are able to apply for them.

Durham County, like other parts of the state, is currently struggling with decreasing the use of publicly-funded inpatient hospitalization by ensuring that a full range of community-based services are available to as many people who need them as is possible given available funding.

Even for the insured population, many insurance companies do not provide coverage for mental healthcare at the same level as they do physical healthcare, resulting in much out-of-pocket spending for the individual or family. In most cases there's a low cap on how much money the insurance policy will pay, even in cases of severe and chronic mental illness. Most insurance policies top out at \$1-2 million for illnesses like cancer or heart disease, but have a \$50,000 – 100,000 limit on expenses related to mental illness. One family member said, “Anyone who's been on the check-writing end of this will tell you that it does not take long to run through 50 or 100K.”

Unfortunately, some with mental illness become involved in the criminal justice system. Nearly 90% of court-involved youth in Durham have mental health needs -- higher than statewide and national rates -- but only 11% of them had received mental health services. In the first three months of 2006, 242 adults in Durham jails were identified as having a severe and persistent mental illness, 74% of them also suffered from substance abuse and many were homeless. More than half were not connected to any mental health services.

When we discuss access to healthcare in Durham, it is important to include mental health treatment. Families dealing with mental illness in the City of Medicine should be able to access the resources they need to put their lives back together. With help, families can overcome mental illness to see their loved ones lead healthy, meaningful lives.

Clip and save

There is a single point of access to public services for mental illness here. To access, call **560-7100**. This number is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, by personnel trained in screening, triage and referral for issues related to the full range of mental health. These calls are treated with every respect for confidentiality.

It is very important to seek help early! Research has shown that the longer serious mental illness is untreated, the likelier there is to be a decline in the person's level of functioning, affecting his or her abilities in everyday tasks like keeping house, holding a job and maintaining relationships.

The **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)** is the nation's largest grassroots advocacy and support organization for people who have mental illness. Their website is brimming with valuable information at www.nami.org

Similarly, the North Carolina arm of NAMI offers a free telephone helpline, Monday-Friday, from 8:30 until 5 pm at 1-800-451-9682. Also, there is a NAMI North Carolina website at www.naminc.org

Finally, there's an active NAMI organization in Durham, at 231-5016 and www.namidurham.org. NAMI Durham meets regularly and conducts free classes twice a year for family members. The membership is composed of people who have had personal experience in dealing with mental illnesses, either as one who has the illness, the family of someone experiencing mental illness, or as a professional in the mental health field.

The **Mental Health Association** meets the third Tuesday of every month at noon (bring a lunch) at 923 Broad Street, at the Telecare ACTT office, 220-4224. They are planning mental health advocacy activities and looking for ideas and volunteers to help plan and mobilize. For more information, contact Linnie Smith at lsmith@telecarecorp.com.

There is more information about **evidence-based practices** available at www.mentalhealthpractices.org