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Making the Invisible Visible: How to Change the National Conversation Around Mental Health

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, January 30th, 2019

There is a lot to talk about when it comes to mental health, the reasons why it's not readily and openly discussed, and what can be done to help change this fact.

Historically, the stigma attached to mental health issues can be traced back to times when people had strong emotions about physical conditions. For example, outbreaks of leprosy terrified the public at one time. This terror resulted in [those afflicted by leprosy being quarantined away from the masses](#).

As other horrifying or unexplainable conditions evolved, the idea of quarantining “sick” people persisted and with that came the birth of the mental institution. Taking the afflicted and removing or hiding them from society became acceptable — most likely having something to do with the adages “out of sight, out of mind” and “ignorance is bliss.”

In reacting this way, society pushed mental health issues to the rear of their conscience and has done a tremendous disservice to those who may need help but are afraid to seek it out.

She Looks Healthy...

Some physical conditions, like [chronic illnesses](#) (those lasting over 90 days), are often left undiagnosed by medical professionals. This could be on the part of the doctor missing something. More likely, it could stem from the patient who thinks what they feel is wrong is just “in their head” based on what they have read or been told by others. Not wanting to be diagnosed with a mental condition because of the stigma, they don’t inform their provider about those symptoms.

Even if diagnosed, lots of chronic illnesses have symptoms that remain hidden to the public. Take fibromyalgia for example — the condition most often considered fake because the person who has it appears to be physically fine.

A person living with fibromyalgia can tell you that there are good and bad days. But to the average person, the fibromyalgia sufferer may always look fine. What is not shared are the different levels of physical pain experienced every day and, more importantly, varying levels of severe emotional distress as well. Imagine waking up every day wondering how your body is going to feel. Will it let you get out of bed, shower, and get dressed without issue? Will you be able to sit through a day at work without feeling like you’ve been beaten with a club? Will you feel totally exhausted by noon then find an excuse to break away from whatever activity you’re involved in just to nap for a bit?

For a person dealing with a chronic illness, the feeling that their body is not in their control takes a huge toll on their mind. Daily life feels like a battle without a way to win. Since that feeling never subsides, their mental health deteriorates, frequently becoming a full-blown anxiety disorder, depression, or other condition. Left untreated, these patients can become suicidal.

What's harmful to these people is twofold: First, they feel they can't share their exasperation. Others don't understand them, or they treat them like constant complainers. Second, most are treated by doctors who employ conventional medicine and are simply prescribed drugs to placate the physical pain and additional drugs to help calm their mental state.

The Missing Link

Some medical professionals are now recognizing that conventional medicine (the exclusive use of synthetic drugs, radiation, and surgery to treat health conditions) is a type of treatment that has its place, like in life-threatening situations or with massive injuries, but that there is something missing when it's the only choice for patients in non-critical medical circumstances. These practitioners are changing tactics to a more modern approach – one that emphasizes a link between physical and emotional health.

Enter Holistic Healthcare

Holistic healthcare is an approach that takes the whole person into account – their body, mind, spirit, and lifestyle. This approach uses facets of conventional medicine and may include alternative medicine. It forms a partnership between both the practitioner and the patient. By [bridging the gap between doctor and patient](#), there is more awareness, a sense of ownership, and better participation on the part of the patient for the control of their care and overall health.

As the patient learns more about their health and about how their mental health affects their physical well-being, they often want to learn more or find support to help them in their journey.

Fortunately, there are some major changes taking place to help assist them. Since affordability of healthcare or access to it can be problematic, things like telemedicine and online lab testing are becoming readily available. With more practitioners embracing the connection between physical and mental health, sources to assist them in their efforts to educate patients are continually being developed.

For example, social media is being used more regularly by medical professionals and health communicators to not just deliver messages to patients, but to encourage interactive sharing between the parties. According to the [Duquesne University School of Nursing](#), interactive social media has actually helped reduce suicides.

Behind Closed Doors

Despite any profession-based advancements, the public perception is still a major contender at fault for the stigma associated with mental health. So how can society change the conversation?

Technology as One Way

Duquesne goes on to state that 90 percent of adults use mobile devices and over 70 percent use video sharing platforms, and this usage has increased searches related to healthcare. Interestingly,

Google recently put out information showing that there has been a huge spike in people asking more personal questions in their searches — like “do I have schizophrenia” or “how can I help my friend who is suicidal?”

For the mental health industry, this is a sign that people are avidly using technology to search for possibly immediate assistance, and marketers are responding to this demand. There are already lots of internet-based resources out there to help people, but now more [health apps](#) are being developed. Take for example [PTSD Coach](#), developed by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, a highly successful app designed for military veterans. Apps to monitor stress, exercise, diet, relaxation time, sleep patterns, and more are abundant, and each plays into aspects of the holistic approach that lends itself to addressing both physical and mental well-being.

Share to Be Aware

While methods to increase awareness involving changes to medical approaches or the implementation of technology-based applications can be helpful, perhaps the greatest impact in changing the narrative on mental health would be for more people to share more about their personal experiences in regards to mental illness.

According to [Outrun the Stigma](#), the act of sharing knowledge, stories, opinions, questions, or anything related to an issue can be extremely useful in breaking down barriers to open conversations. As conversations take place, more people become enlightened, fear dissipates, and the stigma surrounding the topic begins to chip away.

The same can be done for mental health. As people learn to talk openly about symptoms, related actions, and ways to give or receive help, the less frightening the topic of mental health will be for everybody.

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