



## **It's past time to erase the stigma of mental illness**

*October 1 -7 is Mental Illness Awareness Week*

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

Mental illness is sometimes called the invisible illness – but for very different reasons than people might call high blood pressure a silent killer.

While both invisible and silent would seem to imply stealthy, secretive diseases, hypertension is referred to as a silent disease because individuals affected by it often have no symptoms. Even so, when an individual learns he or she has high blood pressure, there is little shame in acknowledging it – even if that individual's lifestyle choices may have contributed to it.

The same is not true for mental illness. Individuals with mental illness have symptoms – sometimes mild and sometimes severe but almost always distressing. And it may only be 'invisible' to the extent an individual does not recognize his or her unusual thoughts, feelings or emotions are symptoms of mental illness – and many don't. At least at first.

But a more profound reason mental illness might remain invisible is stigma. We don't want to think about mental illness. It scares us. The fact is, not all that long ago we as a society tried very hard to make mental illness invisible. People with mental illness were simply locked away in asylums – and having a family member in such a place was a shameful and well-guarded secret.

Despite our desire to turn away, or run away or ignore it, mental illness has never gone away. With continued research we've learned – and have slowly started to acknowledge – that mental illness is much more common than we once thought.

Today we know one in five people will experience a mental illness in his or her lifetime. Think you don't know anyone who has or had mental illness? Think again. If you know someone with diabetes – which affects just under one in 10 people – you are twice as likely to know someone with mental illness.

Sometimes mental illness can be temporary, such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder following the death of a loved one or other major life event. Other types of mental illness, such as bipolar disorder or schizoaffective disorder, may be chronic conditions.

Something I often tell people when thinking about those numbers is to look around – at work, the grocery store, church, school – and do the math. One in five is a pretty big number. If it seems such a large number couldn't possibly be accurate, or that mental illness would be much more visible if it affected 20 percent of the population, there's a very good reason for that: people with mental illness can recover. That's one of the most important facts we know about mental illness.

Over the past generation we've learned it's not necessary to keep individuals with mental illness locked away in institutions and state hospitals. With the right services and supports, individuals with temporary or chronic mental health conditions can recover, learn to manage their symptoms and enjoy productive, independent lives in their community.

But what's the biggest barrier to recovery? Silence. Stigma. Shame. Wanting mental illness to be invisible. Individuals simply can't work toward recovery if they or their family members are ashamed to acknowledge mental illness and seek treatment.

It's past time to erase the stigma. We must change how we think about mental illness. We must commit to making sure mental illness is no longer invisible. Because acknowledging that mental illness is not uncommon, that almost everyone is impacted by it in one way or another, and that people can recover, is the most important way we can help put individuals with mental illness on the path to recovery.