

The Impact of Mental Health Illness on Families

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As a Clinical Psychologist who treats children and adolescents, I have the challenge each and every work day of educating parents about mental health. A basic understanding of what mental health or illness is and isn't is vital to the charge given to me by parents when they come to me asking, "Why can't my child pay attention?" "Why is my daughter washing her hands fifty times a day?" Or, "Why is my son so angry and sleeping all the time?" Before the families that I assist can begin to accept and address any formal psychiatric diagnosis and treatment plan, they have to attend my brief and basic two minute course in mental health. So before we move forward to discuss the impact of mental illness on families, here is my brief mental health tutorial:

- Mental Health is measured on a continuum. It's only when symptoms get in the way of work, love or play that formal guidance from a mental health professional is necessary.
- Mental Illness is "physical." Simply said, the only difference between someone challenged with depression and someone challenged with migraine headaches is the neurology of each individual, or how they are "wired."
- Individuals challenged with mental illness are not "weak" or "lazy" because they cannot spontaneously heal themselves.
- There is a strong genetic component associated with most mental health conditions. It is not uncommon, for instance, for children to inherit anxious or inattentive neurology from their parents.
- Genetics and environment both play a role in mental health and mental illness.
- Medication management for psychiatric conditions are useful when used for serious symptoms, and if other methods of treatment (e.g., psychotherapy) have proven unsuccessful.
- Many chronic and potentially debilitating mental disorders have their first onset between the ages of 16 and 25 years of age. Young adults seeking treatment for psychiatric conditions should be encouraged to give authorization for their parents, caregivers or

other family members to be involved in their treatment.

I think that the most difficult issue for families impacted by serious mental illness is the stigma that is often attached to these types of diagnoses (e.g., Major Depression, Bipolar Illness, and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder). Even when you consider that one in five families in the United States have a relative with mental illness, amazingly the stigma persists. It will take time for our society to possess the understanding and equal treatment of mental disorders, but I believe we are making headway – even if it means having to accept "Dr. Phil" as a sign of progress toward this lofty goal.

Parents are often caught off guard and overwhelmed when it is suggested that they seek specialized consultation for their child's behavior in the form of a mental health professional. Finding a "best fit" in a mental health professional can be difficult. Considerations include type of degree and license (e.g., social worker, psychologist, licensed professional counselor, psychiatrist), years of experience, specialty and maybe most importantly – therapeutic style and interpersonal skills. Shop around, ask others, and get recommendations from primary care physicians. Mental health care is a very "intimate" business, and you have to feel VERY comfortable with the provider, and be assured that they are aligned with your goals for treatment. I believe that it is my job as a child psychologist to effectively treat and discharge children as soon as possible. I believe it is also ideal for mental health professionals to work as a unified team when treating children. If you are able, choose a mental health professional that is part of a multidisciplinary team where the treatment is shared by participating providers. A child who is in the care of both a psychologist and psychiatrist will receive an enhanced level of treatment because they are members of a formal therapeutic team who have the opportunity to communicate face-to-face to achieve coordinated care.

I have found that parents who are informed are the best advocates for their children, and I often see a measurable positive change as a result. Parents who do

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their own research, and arrive at my office with a notepad of questions become immediate pro-active treatment team members that are vital for success. The therapy that I conduct in my office for one hour a week is meaningless if not supported, continued or encouraged by teachers, parents, siblings and other significant people in the child's life. For parents of a child or young adult challenged with a mental illness, I highly recommend referencing the National Institute of Mental Health (www.nimh.nih.gov) or The National Alliance on Mental Illness (www.nami.org) to expand their knowledge and increase their comfort level with the field of mental health. These sites taken together will offer information ranging from the latest research and treatment innovations to legislation affecting mental health care.

Patience and the willingness to make tough decisions are mandatory for parents caring for children and young adults diagnosed with mental disorders. Although positive change can come quickly via short-term solution oriented therapy or medication management, it often takes months or years to arrive at a life style that is balanced and "predictable." This delay is not necessarily the product of ineffective treatments, but the dynamic nature of development. Simply put, what works now may not work later because the bodies and minds of children and young adults are constantly maturing – and that is a positive thing. Tough decisions come by way of therapeutic roadblocks. If as a parent you know that what is in place therapeutically is not working, then you need to work with your child's treatment team in trying something else. This is often a leap of faith, a tough decision that may include starting psychotropic medication, or in cases of suicidal or homicidal behavior, psychiatric hospitalization.

I have now practiced child psychology long enough to have helped struggling first graders develop into successful high school seniors. Every hour of my work day is different and challenging in that it requires my entire focus and energy. Like an air traffic controller, I cannot lose focus. In my office, lack of attention within therapeutic conversation and play could easily lead to a missed opportunity for me to promote healing and change. Although my work can be exhausting, this is why I get up in the morning. I feel privileged to have worked with so many families over the past twelve years; it has made me a better person, father, friend and spouse. I look forward to tomorrow when I can meet a new family in my office, and help them navigate the complex road back to a "new normal" where work, love and play is restored and the promotion of mental health is an everyday affair.

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Water Becomes the New Oil

supply, the technological process uses a huge amount of energy, making it 'too expensive for many African and Asian countries', says Lee.

Max Lawson, senior policy adviser for Oxfam, says: 'We are skeptical that private-sector involvement is the solution for very poor countries. In fact, there is an argument that much greater public sector involvement and cash is needed to channel supplies to where they are most needed.' But Abel Mejia at the World Bank in Washington says the organization does not favor one form of investment over the other: 'We lend to private companies and governments, but we are not ideologically motivated. Solutions may need a mix of private and public money.'

The World Development Movement lobby group has in the past criticized the World Bank's enthusiasm for private firms controlling water projects; it prefers public-private partnerships, run on a not-for-profit basis.

But it is in China - the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gas - that the water problem is most pronounced, as fears grow that the country is turning into an ecological disaster area. The head of the country's national development agency said recently that a quarter of the length of China's seven main rivers was so poisoned that the water was harmful to the skin. Moreover, water-related issues are sparking popular protests after the sanctioning of dams and irrigation projects that have displaced hundreds of thousands of people who have no recourse to compensation. Beijing has passed legislation to punish companies that pollute supplies but, in China, such laws can be difficult to enforce.

So pressing are issues surrounding water that China has invited Western companies to run systems in many towns and cities. One of the biggest is French-owned Veolia, once part of the Vivendi utilities empire. In parts of China, water provided by Veolia no longer has to be boiled, but the cost to consumers has doubled. For the middle class, the price is still relatively low - but most Chinese are not middle class. Many say up to half their income is now being swallowed by water bills. That leaves Beijing between a rock and a hard place because, like many emerging economies, it desperately needs Western know-how and technology to solve its water problems, but it is anxious to avoid the kind of civil unrest that the Bolivian government experienced in Cochabamba.

In the City of London, there is a growing realization that investing in water technology companies offers opportunities for savvy shareholders, and possibly for ethical investors. 'There is also an appetite from institutions for water-related investments - they know it's going to be big,' says Julian Sevaux, managing partner at Stanhope Capital.

Olivia Bowen, an independent financial adviser at the Gaeia Partnership, says: 'New climate change funds have recently come to market; some are well established, such as Impax's Environmental Markets Fund.'

GE and Dow Chemical are among big US companies diversifying into water services, while the UK-based Thames Water is expanding overseas.

But the crux of the problem remains: according to a report from Credit Suisse, annual world water use has risen sixfold during the past century, more than double the rate of population growth. By 2025, almost two-thirds of the global population will live in countries where water will be a scarce commodity. And that could lead to conflict, as United Nations secretary-general Ban Ki-moon warned last week.

Asia looks vulnerable, with China planning to siphon off Tibet's water supply to make up for shortages in the parched north. Elsewhere, the Israel-Palestine conflict is at least partly about securing supplies from the River Jordan; similarly, water is a major feature of the strife in Sudan that has left Darfur devastated. When it comes to this most basic of commodities, the stakes could hardly be higher.