

## **The Heart Of The Challenge Providing Public Education Regarding Mental Illness**

It may be when we no longer know what to do,  
we have come to our real work,  
and that when we no longer know which way to go,  
we have begun our real journey

---Wendell Berry

Mental illness is one of the most complex and frustrating health care issues facing Rhode Islanders today, and its impact on the state continues to be felt in every community. Empowering people with mental illnesses, and educating the public to eliminate the stigma of Mental Illness are long-term processes that require vision, planning, and intense system-wide work, such as that done by NAMI-RI, which among other things responds to the needs of the community at large.

Despite the prevalence of mental illness and the cost to Rhode Island taxpayers of inadequate mental health treatment, communities have not made access to effective mental health service a priority. According to surveys conducted by the World Health Organization “from 30 to 40 percent of people in any given population experience a mental illness during their lives.” Many more people are affected indirectly through watching family members and friends suffering the trauma of mental illness. It is therefore important that we offer to the public every educational opportunity that we can.

Public education can be identified as one of the most important components to ensuring that the missions of advocacy, education, and support are possible. Chronic mental illness is one of the most misunderstood diseases in our country today--and education is the key to eliminating misunderstandings. Therefore education, directed not only to the chronically mentally ill and their families, but also to the community as a whole must not be overestimated. Combating the stigma surrounding mental illness and enlisting broad-based support for improvements to mental health policy requires education. Until the general public comes to understand mental illness as a physical illness, public support for improved mental health services is unlikely to increase.

Promoting public education regarding mental illness is relevant to everyone. We can all enhance our knowledge and understanding through steps such as community-based lectures/discussions. The need for more public education about mental illnesses is welcomed but providing such education is only part of dealing with mental illness. Attitudes must also change. For as long as there remains a stigma attached to mental illness, equality can never be achieved. That is why the principle of care in the community is important. Allowing those who suffer from mental illness to participate in society is a crucial step, not only toward improving care and treatment, but also toward removing the devastating stigma that is often attached to mental illness. It helps to break down barriers between those who suffer and those who do not.

Mental illness continually struggles with a sort of second-class position in popular opinion, both in the United States and around the world. And yet it is one of the most prevalent afflictions known to mankind.

In a recent report from the World Health Organization “450 million people around the world are reported to suffer from some form of mental illness which is more than the figures associated with HIV/AIDS and diabetes. Mental illness goes undiagnosed, under-treated, and misunderstood all with damaging effects. Difficulties in diagnosis, as well as cultural stigmas that prevent many from confronting mental health issues, contribute to the widening gap between the problem and the resources devoted to it. Some researchers from the World Health Organization estimate that “mental illness accounts for 11.5 percent of the total world health care burden more than that caused by all forms of cancer.”

Without treatment, the consequences of mental illness for the individual and society are staggering: unnecessary disability, unemployment, substance abuse, homelessness, inappropriate incarceration, suicide and unlive lives; The economic cost alone of untreated mental illness is more than 100 billion dollars each year in the United States. Treating mental illness is not cheap, but it's still cheaper than leaving it untreated. Even so, according to reports “most middle- and low-income countries devote less than one percent of their health care expenditures to mental health, and it is often in these countries where access to quality care is needed most.”

Mental illness does not discriminate by creed, race or gender. Despite efforts to increase awareness about mental illness and mental health topics in general, the subject remains mired in stigma and prejudice. In many cases, that stigma extends beyond those directly affected and onto their families and communities as well. Stigma against those with mental illness prevents the afflicted from receiving proper care and unnecessarily instills fear in both sufferers and society as a whole. This widespread disrespect creates barriers that drive potential patients away from treatment.

The heart of the challenge is in improving acceptance of mental health treatment and the improvement of lives lies in information dispersal. We provide public education as one prong of NAMI'S mission objectives of support, education, and advocacy. As advocates for better systems of care it may be that when we feel we no longer know what we can do to make a difference or where to turn for answers that our real journey has really just begun.

- Chaz Gross