



Families play key role in treating mental illness

April 12, 2010

Evansville Courier and Press

Families can provide a critical link in securing and maintaining treatment for individuals suffering from serious mental illness. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder together affect approximately two percent of the population. These illnesses are chronic and severe brain disorders characterized by psychosis (distortions of perception and reality).

Symptoms can include hallucinations, delusions and disorganized thinking, as well as problems with mood, motivation, withdrawal and impaired judgment.

Illnesses like schizophrenia were once considered to be relatively hopeless, often resulting in individuals spending years in institutions. Fortunately, times have changed.

After decades of advances in treatment, particularly in the area of medication, the symptoms of these disorders can in many cases be effectively managed allowing for significant recovery. While there is still no cure for serious mental illness, with treatment and support many individuals with these disorders go on to lead independent and fulfilling lives.

Unfortunately, in spite of advances in treatment, many of these disorders continue to go untreated. In addition to wasted potential, untreated mental illness can have serious consequences, such as homelessness, incarceration, physical harm, and even death.

There are many reasons why individuals may reject a diagnostic label and fail to accept treatment. Individuals with mental illness have historically been portrayed very negatively in popular media, contributing to fear and stigma. Fear of hospitalization, past negative

treatment experiences and not wanting to take prescribed medications can also be contributing factors. Individuals may focus on the side effects and inconvenience of treatment without recognizing the benefits.

Since most outpatient treatment is voluntary, the responsibility for getting an individual to accept and maintain treatment often falls to family members. In illnesses like schizophrenia, lack of insight into the need for treatment can be the most significant challenge facing families. False beliefs and hallucinations can be very real to the affected individual, and although it may be obvious that they are experiencing symptoms of illness, they may not recognize that they are sick.

To the extent that resistance to treatment is viewed as simply stubbornness, families may attempt to confront the individual with logic and reason or even coercion. Arguing with someone who is out of touch with reality is not helpful and will likely fail. Emotional intensity and stress can escalate symptoms. The realization that lack of insight is often an actual symptom of a biological illness challenges us to take a different approach to encouraging treatment.

Although there are no quick and simple formulas for such a complex issue, maintaining an attitude and interaction style that focuses on patience, respect, trust and collaboration will serve to support the relationship, keeping communication lines open. Active listening and attempting to really understand the individual's concerns about treatment can be helpful.

While it is not productive to challenge false beliefs or hallucinations, it is also

important not to reinforce them. It may be possible to agree to disagree on questions of whether or not someone has an illness, and shift the focus to possible benefits of treatment such as justifying the use of medication to help with sleep or to quiet internal voices. Finding areas of mutual agreement supports cooperation, and focusing on strengths and realistic goals may encourage the individual towards treatment and recovery.

These illnesses can be severe and, in spite of all best efforts, situations may worsen and become unmanageable. Families should not tolerate inappropriate or out of control behavior. The option of court ordered hospitalization in extreme situations may become necessary.

It is helpful for families to educate themselves as much as possible about these illnesses. The local chapter of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill sponsors free educational classes, as well as support groups for families and individuals affected by mental illness.

This organization can be an invaluable source of information, encouragement and support in the effort to get help for someone suffering from serious mental illness. Further information can be obtained by calling 423-4333 or visiting www.namievansville.org.

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