

Stigma: Breaking the cycle of mental health perception

By Olivia Goudy ogoudy@heraldstandard.com | Posted: Sunday, November 2, 2014 2:30 am

“Labels are for jars, not people.”

That’s what peer support specialist Cathy Karwatski repeats to herself and to the men and women in her support group.

At Chestnut Ridge Counseling Services, she works daily with adults diagnosed with mental health disorders, helping them develop goals and objectives.

“You see so much negative with mental health issues and we just want to bring the positive,” she said. “So many people who don’t get to apply themselves are so creative, so intelligent.”

With weekly support groups, and using a “wellness toolbox” that focuses on exercises to stay in the present moment, Karwatski guides the group members through physical and emotional challenges.

The work is personal for her.

She too has struggled with mental health issues.

A troubled childhood left Karwatski, 45, with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and alcohol and drug issues. She dropped out of high school, though she got her GED three years ago.

“I was never taught about goals. And one day, my counselor said, ‘Cathy, you have potential. You can develop goals.’ I didn’t know what they were,” said Karwatski. “It felt good when someone saw potential. If I wouldn’t have went through my trials and tribulations growing up, I wouldn’t be the strong person I am today.”

“Sometimes, all we want is to be heard, for someone to listen to us. It’s hurtful to be ignored; it doesn’t help,” she continued. “Moving forward is such a journey.”



Fighting the Stigma

Amanda Steen | Herald-Standard
Kenny DeLaCruz sorts clothes at St. Vincent De Paul in Uniontown on Oct. 30. DeLaCruz was diagnosed with schizophrenia at 15 and spent most of his young adult life in and out of psychiatric hospitals. “I want to be the real go-getter so people can look at me and say, ‘Hey, he works, he lives independently, he does his own shopping, laundry, cooking and cleaning,’” said DeLaCruz.

Stigma

The phrase “mental illness” comes with a host of preconceived notions.

Those who have a diagnosis say that as they battle their illness, they also have to battle unfair perceptions and knee jerk reactions from the people around them. Sometimes, it keeps them from treatment.

“People with a heart problem also have a diagnosis, but they aren’t referred to by their diagnosis, whereas a mental health [patient] is,” Jennifer Williams said.

The 33-year-old has impulsive behavioral patters, and deals with anxiety, depression and borderline personality disorder.

“There are a lot of people who need mental health treatments who are afraid to take the first step because of this stigma,” she continued.

Beginning with psychiatric hospitalization at age 18, Williams, who has PTSD from childhood trauma, went through a number of treatment and rehabilitation programs.

In 2003, she started going to Union Station Clubhouse in South Union Township several days a week. There, she learned job and life skills and was encouraged to try independent living. Now, she lives in a domiciliary care facility in Dunbar where a family-like environment enriches her drive to succeed.

“My problem is that I don’t feel like I’m where most 33-year-old women are in their lives. But I do have accomplishments,” said Williams.

Kenny DeLaCruz was diagnosed with schizophrenia at 15, and spent most of his young adult life in and out of psychiatric hospitals.

Treatment, said DeLaCruz, has given him perspective on his illness, and a childhood of abuse; however, that doesn’t stop people from assuming there should be shame associated with it.

“It doesn’t mean you’re trapped inside an ivory tower and you can’t get out. It means you’re working on your problems, coming through in society and telling them, ‘No more stigma, no more labeling us as schizo or crazy or dumb,’ because we’re not,” he said.

“We’re human beings, and we have feelings, too.”

Recovery

“Sometimes, when you’re talking to people out in the community and you say, ‘Oh I’m in recovery,’ most people, a large percentage, think, ‘Oh you’re recovering from drug use.’ That’s not the case,” said Karwatski.

For all three, “recovery” means something different, something special.

“Recovery means living my life to the fullest. And yes, sometimes I take one step back, but it’s all about bouncing back and taking two steps forward,” said Williams, who works part time for the county’s mental health department, giving surveys to clients.

She also volunteers at the Uniontown Station Club House and Chestnut Ridge, and wants to continue her education in the human services field with an online college program.

Though things are going smoothly now, Williams said there was a point in her life when recovery seemed impossible, when depression and a lack of goals and guidance threatened to overwhelm her. But if you never experience anything wrong, you won’t know what’s right, according to Williams. She said she found her recovery to be an ongoing journey.

Whether she’s guiding DeLaCruz and other patients at Chestnut Ridge or being a wife and a mother of three, Karwatski finds a welcome challenge in recovery.

“Go out and make it happen — work for what you believe in,” she said. “I always say that I have a master’s degree in life experience.”

For DeLaCruz, recovery is having goals, and not feeling hampered by mental illness.

“We can show the world that you can really do something with your life and have a nice life with respect. I’m living proof,” he said.

While on medication, he went on to complete high school and work with Goodwill Industries where he picked up job and life skills. Though he said his diagnosis could be debilitating at times, he pushed through it and now lives independently at Gallatin Living Center, as he has for the past 10 years. He volunteers his time at the St. Vincent de Paul store in Uniontown.

“I want to be the real go-getter so people can look at me and say, ‘Hey, he works, he lives independently, he does his own shopping, laundry, cooking and cleaning,’” said DeLaCruz.

He also attends Bible study at the center weekly, adding that attending it is one of the elements in his wellness toolbox.

“Sometimes I cry and ask God why I have these hallucinations. But then I think about the times when Jesus was around. There were people with hallucinations and demons, and He helped them,” said DeLaCruz. He added that he uses prayer and meditation to help keep him grounded.

“I thank God every day that I’m on this Earth. He put me here,” he continued.