



High Country

Walking With Friends Through Mental Illness

Our brains are amazingly complex. Resilient, yet delicate.

Head injury, exposure to drugs or elements, traumatic experiences and genetic disposition can all affect change - or "dis-ease" - in our brains. Through no fault nor choice of our own, these types of disruptions can result in neuro-biologically based "mental illness."

When mental illness disrupts one person's life, family, spouses and friends of that person are also affected. Acclimating to new medications (with their potential side-effects), learning new boundaries of what is possible - or not, and learning to cope with the changes can be a confusing, grieving, challenging time for all involved. While individuals with the diagnoses and their families are adjusting and adapting to their new "normal," they especially need the support of family and friends.

Because of the stigma mental illness carries and the lack of understanding about the causes, effects, and prognoses for these different disorders, we may be unsure about how we can best support others dealing with the complexity of life with mental illness. Here are a few suggestions offered by individuals with diagnoses, along with family members and spouses of those with diagnoses, that may inspire us all to better support them on their journeys.

First of all, the closer we are to the ones affected, the more we need to do. Do not hesitate to be with them and present the opportunity for them to talk about what they are experiencing. Be real. Take them dinner. Go for a walk with them. Do something fun together that you both enjoy. Know they may be reeling, feeling devastated or isolated as they cope and need to have a moment of relief from their heartache. Do for them

what you would do for a friend who has received a diagnosis of cancer.

Secondly, stay in touch. Commit to connecting on a regular basis and follow through. Visit, call, send cards or emails. All gestures of kindness are appreciated. Knowing others care is powerful medicine.

Faithfully offer words of encouragement. Understand they may need to talk or vent sometimes, but at other times, individuals and family members may need to not talk about the illness's effects, choosing to "normalize" and speak about other aspects of life. Start conversations about other topics, but don't hesitate to ask, "How are things?"

We can pray specifically for their needs and regularly check with them regarding answers to prayer requests. Celebrate small steps of progress.

We can listen with compassion and unconditional regard for the experiences of the individual and family members. By acknowledging how difficult this situation must be, we can validate their fears, grief and struggles.

We should be sensitive that everyone may not know about the illness and not ask about how they are doing regarding the illness in the presence of others.

We can read a book or research the illnesses via other avenues to better understand their experiences and to better offer encouragement to individuals and family members.

Specifically for the individual with the diagnosis, we can address and treat him or her with respect, as an adult. We should treat individuals as we did before they became ill, no matter how odd their behavior may be.

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We can keep open minds, not judging. We cannot imagine what individuals may be experiencing, nor how we would respond in the same situation.

We can assist in empowering the person. One individual suggested helping her find tools to help herself. Having the tools she needs helps her feel competent and confident. We can remind the person of the bigger picture and her value. Help individuals recognize their contributions to others. Remind them of their talents and what they do well.

Encourage individuals to express themselves through whatever medium they are comfortable: writing, painting, crafts, etc.

Help them make a list of things to accomplish, then help them start. Encourage them to use a planner and to set little goals. Cheer their successes; let them know we are proud of them. Support them in finding a community where they can participate and connect with others.

We can tell our friends if we feel overwhelmed and need to take a break. Reassure them that we will be back then stick to our word.

Keep them aware of resources. No one counselor nor program nor medication regime fits everyone. Persuade them to pursue the options that best fit them and allow them to function at their optimal level.

By consistently connecting, listening, trying to understand, respecting and encouraging our friends as they walk through the devastating detours of mental illness, we communicate their value to us. Through our efforts we can foster their hope and reduce the stigma of these physically based “mental illnesses.”

-Sharon Carlton, NAMI High Country Board Member



Sharon teaches, speaks, and writes about life skills and modern etiquette through multiple outlets. She also works as a children’s ministry director at a local church. Having close family members and friends with diagnoses led Sharon to get involved with NAMI. As a certified NAMI Family-to-Family instructor,

she looks forward to supporting and encouraging others in the High Country. Contact NAMI for information about Family-to-Family meetings starting in 2014.

Upcoming Meetings

Monday, January 6, 2014

Brenda Reece

Caring for Others, Caring for Yourself

Brenda is the Family Caregiver Specialists for the High Country Council of Government’s Area Agency on Aging and has worked in the healthcare and aging fields for the past 15 years. She is co-founder and Executive Director of the High Country Caregiver Foundation. *This meeting will run from 7pm-8pm

Monday, February 3, 2014

Caroline Stahlschmidt

Food and Mood: How What You Eat Affects Your Brain and Mental Health

Caroline is a Certified Holistic Health Coach from the Institute for Integrative Nutrition. She helps clients reach optimal health by upgrading their nutrition, making lifestyle changes, and reducing stress. She uses a functional nutrition approach to uncover the root cause of health challenges. Caroline’s specialties include digestive issues, autoimmune conditions, cancer and working with athletes. *This meeting will run from 7pm-8pm

Monday, March 3, 2014

Screening of “Call Me Crazy.”

In April, Lifetime Television premiered *Call Me Crazy*, a series of interconnected short films that deal with the subject of mental illness. Through five short stories named after each title character—Lucy, Eddie, Allison, Grace and Maggie—powerful relationships built on hope and triumph give viewers a new understanding of what happens when a loved one struggles with mental illness. This TV movie was co-produced with NAMI. *This meeting will run from 7pm-9pm

Our meetings are in the Watauga County Public Library conference room. Watauga County Public Library in downtown Boone is located at 140 Queen Street, behind Mast General Store. If you get there before 7pm you will be able to go in the main door. After that we will enter and exit through the side door.

