

Opinion-Editorial
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The Limits of Our Current Reactive Mental Health Care System!

Healthcare issues dominate recent mental health discussions in political arenas and in the public media. Given the *REACTIVE FOUNDATIONS* on which our current health care system rests (i.e. "When you get sick, we're ready to treat you in our offices."), my strong opinion is that there are no satisfying solutions possible; that is, there are not enough mental health professionals to deal with the overwhelming numbers that need help nor do we have enough money to underwrite the costs. **PREVENTION OF ILLNESS/PROMOTION OF MENTAL HEALTH** emphases are strikingly absent in political discussions, in professional training programs and in ways we think and talk about healthcare.

For example, in spite of our immense mental health knowledge, mental health practitioners (MDs, PhDs, MSWs, etc.) have had no success in decreasing the *prevalence* rates of psychiatric disorders in our nation. When the U.S. is compared to 17 other countries, the U.S. has the highest rates of mental illness. 50% of our population will meet criteria for a psychiatric disorder in their lifetime and approximately 25% will meet criteria for a psychiatric disorder *this year*.

Mental illness costs in this country are staggering. Alcoholism and substance abuse affect 20 million Americans and cost the U.S. approximately \$500 billion annually; annual expenditures for the anxiety disorders, \$42 billion. Depressive disorders run \$75 billion yearly. In 2002, schizophrenia costs were \$63 billion. Reductions in annual personal earnings associated with psychiatric illness run \$193 billion annually. Major depression, on average, costs employers \$36 billion. Adolescent suicide has escalated in the last decade, and Suicide/Self-harm is now listed as the 10th leading killer in the U.S. Mental disorders impair our citizens more than chronic physical illness and have disastrous effects on families and close relationships.

The availability of services for those in need is problematical. Twenty-three percent of those needing treatment between 1900 and 1992 received treatment. Between 2001 and 2003, the percent increased to 33%. Most who need services will not receive it. African Americans are less likely to receive treatment than European Americans; only 11% of Hispanic Americans receive adequate care. 700,000 mental health professionals provide services today (U.S. population is approximately 317 million). With 25% of our citizens carrying a diagnosable psychiatric disorder, a total of 79 million Americans need help. If we

exponentially increased the number of service providers, we couldn't resolve this massive social and economic problem. Our limited group of providers faces overwhelming patient numbers with many unable to pay and this does not take into account ill citizens who will not apply for services. Thus, increasing provider numbers, instituting universal mental health care or allocating more money will not resolve these problems. *The reason is that our current REACTIVE SYSTEM cannot solve these problems!* SOMETHING MUST BE ADDED TO THE WAY WE THINK AND TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH CARE IF WE TURN THE CURRENT CRISIS INTO A SOLUTION.

Prevention/Promotion of Health Teaching! Using our immense storehouse of mental health knowledge teaching parents, caregivers, children, adolescents, young adults, middle-age adults and seniors **HOW TO PREVENT MENTAL ILLNESS AND PROMOTE MENTAL HEALTH** must become the order of the day! We must get out of our offices and into the streets of our communities because this crisis has become a community-wide threat - one that must be addressed with community prevention and mental health promotion measures. We must teach "mental illness prevention and health promotion" in the public and private schools. We must talk mental health promotion in public forums, in corporations, in community organizations such as the YMCA/YWCA, in social clubs and churches. We must talk promotion on the radio, on television, on the internet, in newspapers and magazines; we must recommend substantive self-help books. We must add prevention training and mental health promotion to our professional school training curriculums. Who must carry the burden of community prevention/promotion teaching? We have a multitude of professional practitioners, counselors and mental health experts in the colleges and universities who could shoulder much of this task. Professionals must be enlisted and challenged to teach our citizens how to live healthy lives. Treating mentally ill patients (after they get sick) one-on-one, our major treatment prescription for mental illness today, will no longer work!

What are the consequences of maintaining our *Reactive System of Health Care*? Mental illness will continue to increase and, given our current national crisis with the mentally ill, our nation's ability to meet the challenges we face economically, socially and spiritually is going to be severely compromised. Add PREVENTION and MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION to our political and educational agendas and policies now!

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