

Taking Care of Our Collective Mental Health: A Story and Lessons

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Presenter

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Session Outline

- My story
- Lessons Learned
- Importance for Families and Youth

With this in mind, I share a personal story

- Iowa City – 45 years ago!
- A newby to Iowa – intending to be here 4-5 years-Complete my Ph.D. and start a career in behavioral disorders somewhere warmer!
- My road took a sudden turn!

This Sudden Turn

- My “path to success” was interrupted by a significant change in my thought and interpretive powers.
- I felt my assertiveness in advocating for graduate students was leading to perceived retaliations from others.
- Seeking services – No way! – Look at national example – Senator Thomas Eagleton

The Result

- Hospitalization for majority of Spring, 1973
- Among the Diagnoses
 - Primary affective disorder
 - Acute atypical psychosis
 - Acute schizophrenia-form psychosis
 - Paranoid state in remission
 - Reactive agitated depression in remission

The Interventions

- Medications (Thorazine, Stellazine, Artane)
- Extended use of seclusion (quiet room for extended times)
- Talk therapy
- Support from family, friends and mentors

Possible Paths That “Could Have Followed”

Exclusion from school, financial support
Being sent back to Virginia for services

My life since . . .

- A “secret” to be hid most of my adult life
- “Bumps” along the road
- Advised by others not to share story
- Changed more recently (Commission my friend, Sally)

Let’s Look On the Positive Side

“The biggest gift of being unambiguously mentally ill is the time I’ve saved trying to be normal”
Mark Vonnegut

In addition there are . . .

Lessons Learned

Lesson # 1 – Significant Events Shape Our Lives and Journey

Positive Results

- Perhaps has deepened my understanding of mental illness and behavioral differences
- Pain and fear are manageable, particularly in comparison to the fear I faced in early stages of hospitalization

Lesson #2 – Mental Illness is Real-Not a Social Construct

- Wave goodbye to my undergraduate heroes (Thomas Szasz, Erving Goffman, D. L. Rosenhan)
- Even goodbye to some special educators (Bill Rhodes, Tom Skirtic)
- It is real, it hurts
- “... It is an act of moral cowardice to treat it as a romantic freedom” (T.M. Luhrmann)

Lesson # 4 – Importance of Multiple Interventions Across Our Lifetimes

- “Continuum” versus “Categorical” approach
- “Pills or Skills” (O’Leary) is actually “Pills and Skills”
- And, the importance of supportive relationships

Lesson #5 – Relationships, Relationships, Relationships

- Medications can’t replace “... The healing power of relationships” (T.M. Luhrmann)
- Going it alone – perhaps a myth!
- The threads of our relationships (Professor’s story)

Lesson #6 – Healing is Multifaceted

- The importance of when our struggles occur
- Avoiding biological reductionism – “... the first resort of oversimplifiers who are allergic to messy complexity” (Seymour Sarason)
- Don’t overlook – diet and sleep

Lesson #7 – Early Identification and Treatment Are Critical

- Early treatment – Minimizing effects (Ron Powers)
- Challenge of hidden symptoms
- Promise of Mental Health Checkups (Mental Health First Aid)

Lesson #8 – The Challenge of Reducing Stigma

- Making public our stories
- Decoupling mental illness and violence
- “Deservedness Criteria” (Smith)
- Replacing “Them with “Us”

Lesson #9 – Progress with Stigma Issues:
Maybe!

- Self Disclosure – Does it color interactions
- My behaviors – Would they be tolerated today (Catch 22)
- As a community – Can we afford to lose our friends?

Lesson #10 – Applying These Lessons To Our
Work with Our Students and Families

- “We have every right to be humble” (Bruce Balow)
- Rejecting the tendency to blame
- Mental Illness – A significant setting event

Thank You For Being Here!

Comments