

Letter to the Editor

Stigma, the stereotyping and labeling that characterizes others in unfair and hurtful ways, affects many groups of people. But how many of us realize that the way we talk about and treat people with mental illness can have a direct impact on their ability to recover?

A groundbreaking World Health Organization (WHO) study of schizophrenia found that persons with this mental illness in developing countries fare better than those in developed countries, such as the United States -- a surprising finding, given the dramatic advances made in the treatment of mental illness in developed countries. The reason, it turns out, is simple: the developing countries provide social support to their community members in need.

According to the *President's Freedom Commission on Mental Illness*, the stigma of mental illness in the United States is the primary obstacle preventing Americans with mental illness from getting care. May is *Mental Health Month*, a time that our community should begin taking concrete steps to address this problem.

Schizophrenia, depression, bipolar disorder and a range of other mental disorders affect one in five Americans, according to the U.S. Surgeon General. That's about 27,600 people in Alexandria (20% of our population of 138,000). Alexandria youth are especially vulnerable.

In a *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* of more than 2,000 students last year at Minnie Howard Ninth Grade Center and T.C. Williams High School, 36% of the girls and 20% of the boys reported having sad or hopeless feelings for more than two weeks in a row in the last 12 months, resulting in their discontinuing usual activities. Of these students, 38% of the girls and 20% of the boys reported that they had considered suicide. At the Middle School levels, 30% of 613 girls and 15% of 569 boys surveyed reported that they had seriously considered suicide. (Alexandria Youth Risk Behavior Survey: Final Report, February 2008)

But we know that the stigma surrounding mental illness keeps many Alexandrians – young and old alike - from seeking care and treatment which, if started in the early stages of the disease, can mean the difference between recovery and long-term illness.

The Partnership for a Healthier Alexandria's *Mental Health Anti-Stigma HOPE Campaign* urges all Alexandrians to:

**H**elp fight the stigma of mental illness.

**O**ffer support to a friend in need.

**P**romote respect.

**E**ducate. Mental illness is a brain disease.

Another step we can take as individuals is to avoid stigmatizing language. (See box, "Stigma: Language Matters.") Finally, please join us at two major community events this month. (See box, "Mental Health Month Community Events.")

Mary Riley

Chair, Partnership for a Healthier Alexandria's *Mental Health Anti-Stigma HOPE Campaign* and Chair, Alexandria Community Services Board

For more information, visit [www.alexhealth.org/partnership](http://www.alexhealth.org/partnership) and [www.nostigma.org](http://www.nostigma.org)