The myth of shame must be debunked

Mental health is a key part of overall health. When you're not feeling well physically, symptoms fall on a continuum from something like a minor cold to a major illness.

It is much the same with mental health. You may have minor symptoms — for instance feeling "blue" — at one end of the continuum. On the other is the possibility of a more serious mental health issue, such as major depression or other disorders.

When we don't feel well physically, we call our doctors. That call is often more difficult to make if the concern is a mental health issue. Many people have a sense that they should just "buck up and get over it." Or they worry about what others will think or believe that calling for help for mental health reasons is a sign of weakness.

As a licensed clinical social worker and president and CEO of the largest nonprofit provider of mental health and social services in the western and southwestern suburbs, I cannot stress enough how misguided these feelings can be. I see this type of stigma up close every day, and it's unfortunate that people feel such a fear when it comes to reaching out for help. That makes it all the more essential that we actively combat stigma with our friends, families and neighbors every day.

The best way I know to help reduce the myth of shame associated with mental health treatment is to talk as much as possible about the successful outcomes associated with reaching out for help. As a clinician, it is truly a privilege to witness the amazing changes people undergo through therapy. These changes have positive ripple effects throughout their families, schools, communities and places of employment.

Ann Schreiner
On mental health

Take Joe, for instance. Joe is a 45-year-old man, married with two children. After 15 years as a successful salesman at a marketing firm, he was downsized out of his position. While Joe was initially optimistic about finding employment, the search went on longer than expected and eventually that began to erode Joe's positive self-regard and optimism. During this time, Joe became withdrawn and irritable at home and began to decline invitations to be with friends and colleagues. At the suggestion of his father, Joe reluctantly sought mental health services.

He battled with worries that the stigma associated with his seeking help would haunt him for the rest of his life, making it harder to become employed, and resulting in Joe having a secret he would need to hold on to forever. Thankfully, he engaged in therapy anyway. Through a course of talk therapy, Joe discovered a renewed sense of himself. The discussions led him to explore skill sets and interests he had not formerly allowed himself to explore — and that led Joe to seek employment opportunities that energized and fulfilled him in undiscovered ways.

It is great to see Joe benefiting from mental health services he thought he would never use. Even better, Joe is now a vocal advocate who supports mental health resources in our community, a role he never envisioned but one that he describes as "life-changing and tremendously fulfilling." His story is a testament to the importance of mental health as part of overall health and the power of overcoming stigma.

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