

Chagrin Valley Times

Understanding mental illness provides hope

By SUE HOFFMAN

With the help of parents, schools, doctors and their own self-awareness, children with mental illness can thrive, guest speaker Susan Mikolic said at a recent seminar sponsored by the Organized Parent Education Network and Solon Council of PTAs.

"This is a program about hope," she said.

Mrs. Mikolic, a registered nurse who counsels families and educators about helping their children and students, knows from her own experience. Her two teenage sons, both diagnosed with mental illness at an early age, have benefited from strategies at home and at school.

Her oldest son, Matthew, 18, in a recently videotaped message, said he is "living proof you can get better."

Matthew, who has bipolar disorder, attention deficit and other neuro-disorders, said, "This was the first year I stayed in school all year, and I'm actually thinking about college. Giving up is the worst thing you can do when you have mental illness."

Despite his bipolar disorder, a serious illness also known as manic depression, Matthew may even graduate from high school early. "Today he is super-functioning," his mother said.

The road for her sons and others with mental illness is far from easy, said Mrs. Mikolic, who presented educational strategies for mentally ill students to Solon teachers last month. Students with mental illness often have to deal with drained energy levels, co-morbidities of other disabilities, as well as anxiety and side effects from medication.

Mrs. Mikolic is the president and founder of Stepping Stones, an educational consulting service. She recently helped spearhead an initiative by the Ohio departments of education and mental health to require future teachers to learn about pediatric mental health and school success.

Statistics show the prevalence of mental illness among children, she said. A 1999 study estimated that 21 percent of U.S. children ages 9 to 17 have a diagnosable mental or addictive disorder that caused impairment. The study showed that 11 percent of the same age group have "significant functional impairment" from these disorders.

"Fewer than one fifth are receiving treatment," she said. The remaining percentage, who are not diagnosed or treated, are frequently in the nurse's office, and are tardy and truant, she said.

"By the year 2020, childhood neuropsychiatric disorders will rise 50 percent internationally to become one of the five most common causes of morbidity, mortality and disability among children," Mrs. Mikolic said.

"My role is to hold the hope for these children until they can take it for themselves," she said.

The first step is awareness by educators, said OPEN Co-Chair Debe Klotzman in her introduction of the speaker. "Only 41.7 percent of students identified as emotionally disturbed graduate from high school. We need to educate our educators, and we must find ways to level the playing field and provide opportunities for students. This is an illness as surely as cancer or asthma."

After graduation, there are "a lot of things happening that we don't want to see," said Mrs. Mikolic. Less than 50 percent of those with mental illness are competitively employed, and nearly 60 percent have a record of being arrested.

However, Mrs. Mikolic said she has seen significant improvement in services that schools are providing to mentally ill children. About 23 percent are learning study skills and receiving one-on-one instruction, she said, and nearly 40 percent receive counseling and therapy through the school. These students also benefit from extra time for test taking, she said.

More grant projects and initiatives for services are also taking place, Mrs. Mikolic said.

Paramount to success is an effort to help these children "take care of themselves," she said. She described one such tool, called the "red-light plan" of self-regulation. The goal is to stay at the green level through healthy living, she said.

When children with mental illness find themselves in the "yellow zone" from stress, they needed to use "guided imagery" such as listening to music to get back on track. They may also need to remove themselves from the room in which the stress is taking place. The goal is to never reach the "red level," but to have a plan in place should that happen, she said.

Mrs. Mikolic will present programs annually to Solon teachers on the achievement of academic success by children with mental illness. Her four-hour presentation to teachers last month is available on videotape in the OPEN collection at the Solon branch of the Cuyahoga County Public Library.

The next OPEN program is scheduled from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m. Dec. 1 at the Solon Community Center. The theme is "Relax, Re-energize and Reconnect." For more information, call the OPEN hotline at (440) 349-7757, ext. 5184.



Susan Mikolic, a registered nurse, addressed the relationship between mental illness and student achievement during a recent seminar sponsored by the Organized Parent Education Network and Solon Council of PTAs.

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