

Changing the Conversation Around Mental Health

by Barbara Dab

The Covid19 pandemic has both triggered and highlighted the need to change the conversation around mental health issues. According to a recent survey of adults by the Centers for Disease Control, more than one-third of those responding reported symptoms of anxiety or depression, over 10 percent reported having started or increased substance use, more than one quarter reported stress-related symptoms, and over 10 percent reported having serious thoughts of suicide in the past 30 days. All of these numbers are nearly double the rates expected before the start of the Covid19 Pandemic. These increases are tied to risks of suicide, substance abuse, loneliness, food insecurity, just to name a few. Locally the need for mental health services has risen and social workers at Jewish Family Service say that while they are working to respond to the need, there is still stigma around asking for help. Toni Jacobsen, Clinical Director for JFS, says, "It's important to change the way we talk about mental health. People are not at fault for needing help. They need compassion and understanding about the trauma that happened to them."

This approach to mental health focuses on events and situations that occur in people's lives that both trigger a crisis and create long term issues. And this concept is also changing the way Nashville's organized Jewish community looks at creating an inclusive, welcoming environment. A newly created task force is working on an action plan that aims to reduce stigma and normalize the discussion around mental health needs during program planning, synagogue services and other events. Adam Bronstone, Director of Planning and Partnerships for The Jewish Federation and Jewish Foundation of Nashville and Middle Tennessee, says, "The task force is there to work with communal organizations like JFS, bring other organizations in the community to the table, and help to highlight issues surrounding mental health in a way that helps our Jewish community be as inclusive as possible, where everyone feels that they belong"

One particularly alarming statistic reveals one of the most vulnerable population is young adults between the ages of 18 and 24. Task force member Elliot Pinsly, LCSW, CEO of Behavioral Health Foundation, a policy center in Tennessee that advances the issues around mental health, says over one-quarter of young adults considered suicide over a one month period. He says, "I hope the fact that we're still dealing with the pandemic will help keep the focus on the need for mental health services. We are finally at a point where it hits close to home for everyone." He says the Jewish community is not immune and cites a parent of a preschooler at the Gordon Jewish Community Center's preschool who reached out for help with his young child who had become afraid to leave the house. "It's important to begin to normalize the conversation and to start with the schools." He says through inclusion efforts, it will be easier to discuss things like addiction, suicide warning signs and treatment options.

The drive to reduce stigma around mental health is one the justice system has been struggling with for a long time. Judge Dan Eisenstein presided over Davidson County's Mental Health Court and during his retirement he has pushed for funding for pre-trial diversion centers to help people with minor offences find mental health care services rather than be directed to prisons. He agrees that the first step toward normalizing the discussion is to turn the focus toward experiences that shape a person's health outcomes. "We use what is called ACES, adverse childhood experiences, to learn how a person's early experiences can lead to mental health issues," he says, "The pandemic has presented a timely opportunity for the Jewish community to open the door to greater understanding. Any group has mental health issues. Everyone knows someone who suffers from it and yet it is still often swept under the rug." As a member of The Federation's mental health task force, he is hopeful the community will be able to address people's needs in a more inclusive, non-threatening and compassionate manner.

Jewish Family Service has a unique perspective on how to best shift the focus in the mental health arena. During the pandemic, social workers became certified to provide tele-health counseling and that has allowed them to serve even more people. Toni Jacobsen says she is optimistic, but there are still barriers to reaching those in need. "By looking at mental health in a more holistic way and removing language around blame, the hope is that people will feel more comfortable seeking help," she says. "Everyone is a product of their family and their experiences. To look at it from the perspective of, 'what happened to me,' rather than, 'what's wrong with me,' can make a big difference in removing stigma." She adds that through the work of JFS and The Jewish Federation Mental Health Inclusion committee, people in the community can look forward to a more comprehensive, inclusive plan that addresses both physical and mental health needs.

For more information about the inclusion committee and its work on mental health, please contact Adam Bronstone at adam@jewishnashville.org.



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barbaradab@jewishnashville.org

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