

Jewish Family Service Working to Make Mental Health Matter

by Barbara Dab

A recent report by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found over 100,000 people died from drug overdoses between May 2020 and April 2021. The finding highlights not only the growing opioid crisis, but also a crisis in mental health. And while the Biden administration is getting involved in the fight against opioid addiction, locally the Jewish Family Service of Middle Tennessee is working on the mental health front. According to Toni Jacobsen, Clinical Director of JFS, the COVID19 pandemic has served to bring conversations around mental health to the forefront. "Mental Health is often overlooked because it's not something that can be easily seen, tested or measured." She says it is important for people to recognize the many facets of mental health. "Mental health doesn't always refer to an illness or someone with a diagnosis. Tending to our mental health might mean paying attention to the way we feel and manage our emotions in a healthy way." And, through a yearlong initiative called Mental Health Matters JFS is presenting programs and offering resources designed to both destigmatize and educate about mental health. Pam Kelner, Executive Director of JFS, says the program aligns with one of the agency's overarching goals, "We want to reduce stigma around mental health conversations and be inclusive while increasing awareness about the topic."

The initiative kicks off in January with a two-part Community Member Education and Enrichment seminar. JFS Social Worker Ashley Franklin is the organizer of the program. She says the goal of the seminar is to educate people about what constitutes a mental health crisis, and to provide tools for dealing with one. "This type of information is always important, but especially during the pandemic. Everyone is suffering from trauma in some way as a result, and there is a whole new level of anxiety in everyday life." She cites increased relapse rates for people with diagnoses and the need to gain greater understanding of how to deal with family members and loved ones who are struggling. "The seminar provides resources for everything from how to recognize a crisis, to knowing when and if to intervene, to knowing who to call."

The first program in the Mental Health Matters effort is being facilitated by the Blue Dove Foundation. The organization was founded in 2017 in Atlanta to help provide education about mental health through a Jewish lens. Gabby Spatt is the Founding Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer. She says the Foundation's mission aligns with that of JFS. "Traditionally in the Jewish community there is a lot of shame around mental health. We use the value of Tikkun Olam to help educate and provide tools to help." She says mental health is not a new topic, but it is typically approached from a clinical perspective, "We take a spiritual perspective to talk about it. We work with organizations and agencies to tailor a program for their specific community." For example, in Nashville, Ashley Franklin says it is important for the seminar to be small where participants can gain trust in an intimate setting. "Even though the class is virtual, we are limiting it to just 25 people."

In addition to the upcoming two-part program, JFS offers a wide array of resources and services designed to raise awareness, foster discussion, and provide outlets for creative self-expression. Jewish Family Service has a brand-new website describing and providing additional information about accessing all the resources in the Mental Health Matters initiative. Most important, says Toni Jacobsen, is continuing to provide a safe space for everyone in the community. "It's important to increase society's comfort level for individuals with a mental health diagnosis. Often these individuals are the ones with the most need of a community but are often unintentionally excluded because of their behavior." The two-part class will be held January 6th and 13th 6-8pm virtually. Space is limited, RSVP is required. Contact Ashley Franklin at ashleyfranklin@jfsnashville.org or 615-354-1662. For more information about Mental Health Matters, visit www.jfsnashville.org/mental-health-matters.



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