



Sue Ann Says: help end the stigma of mental illness this holiday season

The holidays have always been my favorite time of year. Family and friends coming together, cups of hot cocoa around the fireplace, and celebrating the many blessings in our lives.

Yet the holiday season is often especially difficult for people with depression and other kinds of mental illness. And the rest of us are so busy enjoying the holiday cheer that we don't recognize the often subtle signs that someone else is suffering inside.

"It's easy to miss," Rebecca Cohen says. She is co-chair of Wisconsin United for Mental Health (WUMH) and a Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation partner. Rebecca told me that many people with mental illness hide their illness because they fear ridicule or outright rejection.

As educated as our society has become about physical and mental health, there is still tremendous shame and stigma associated with mental illness. And stigma, Rebecca told me, can sometimes be more disabling than the illness itself.

"The general public still mistakenly believes stereotypes that people with mental illness simply need to 'toughen up', 'get over it' or that they willfully 'act out'," Rebecca explained. "This lack of understanding and knowledge fuels negative attitudes that perpetuate stigma and discrimination, complicating the lives of the very people who need support and treatment."

Rebecca is among the state's most vocal educators about mental illness and the burdensome impact of stigma. She told me that self-stigma and the multiple social and relational stigmas associated with mental illness limit a person's ability to live to their fullest potential. To avoid discrimination at work, people with mental illness will often not disclose their health condition to employers. This can jeopardize their job if the illness begins to impact job performance. People with mental illness often pay out-of-pocket for prescription medicines and treatment to avoid having a diagnosis of mental illness on their patient records and insurance claims. Some people with mental illness, fearing rejection from their family and friends, may hide or deny their illness even to those closest to them. Feeling ashamed, embarrassed and frightened, they suffer alone in silence. Thus, they don't get the treatment they need, increasing the duration and severity of their illness.

Our attitude about mental illness needs to change. And it needs to change now. Suicides outnumber homicides in Wisconsin four-to-one, according to the Wisconsin Violent Injuries and Deaths 2004 Annual Report, published in July 2006. And 90 percent of completed suicides are the direct result of untreated mental illness. That is a shocking statistic. These are deaths that could have been prevented.

Together, we can stop the impact of stigma. Rebecca says the best way to fight stigma is through education. WUMH recently published an invaluable resource to educate members of the media about how they can help change attitudes through more accurate and sensitive reporting. *Open Doors Open Minds: Reporting to Prevent Stigma of Mental Illness and Suicide*, provides fact sheets, compelling statistics, mental health terminology and suggested language use, and concise guidelines for reporting on mental health issues and suicide. WUMH collaborated with reporters, editors, teachers, mental health advocates and consumers to produce the guide. The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation was pleased to support WUMH in this important work.

"We are not asking the media to spin stories on mental illness," Rebecca explained. "But we hope *Open Doors Open Minds* creates a dialogue to ensure that mental health information is conveyed in a positive, respectful and accurate manner."

Wisconsin United for Mental Health urges each one of us to become actively involved in stigma reduction. Educate yourself about the issues. Read your local papers and provide local media with feedback on its coverage of mental illness and suicide. Most of all, encourage considerate conversations about mental illness in your daily life with family, friends and co-workers. The best way to fight stigma is by learning the facts, dispelling the myths, sharing our stories, opening doors to conversation, and offering your acceptance and unconditional support.

In this season of giving, please make a special effort to reach out to family and friends who may be struggling with mental health issues. Your caring and understanding can make all the difference.

From all of us at the Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation, happy holidays.

Yours in good health,

Sue Ann Thompson
Founder & President
Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation

The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF presents women's health education and outreach programs, funds women's health research, provides scholarships for women in academic medicine, and publishes resource materials. Your donations help the Foundation reach women all over Wisconsin with the

information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more about WWHF visit www.wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.

According to *Open Doors Open Minds*, an accurate and sensitive story on mental illness and/or suicide:

- Uses first person language. For example, the phrase “people with schizophrenia” is more correct than saying “schizophrenics” because it does not characterize the person by their illness.
- Does not create direct links between people with mental illness and violence
- Clearly explains and repeats important information on mental illness and suicide
- Does not include pictures that show people unnecessarily disheveled
- Uses the phrase “completed suicide” rather than “committed suicide.” The latter term connotes a sinful act, i.e. commits a crime, commits adultery. “Took his/her own life” or “ended his/her own life” is acceptable too.
- Does not glamorize suicide or explain the method in detail to the point it could influence a copycat
- Does not use the word “suicide” in the headline. This dramatizes suicide, shifting focus from the tragic loss of a life, and could influence a copycat.
- Does not refer to suicide attempts as “failed” or “succeeded” or to suicide itself as an example of an individual “giving up.”

You can find out more about Wisconsin United for Mental Health by visiting its Web site at www.wimentalhealth.org. If you are interested in helping the efforts of *Open Doors Open Minds*, please call the Wisconsin Women’s Health Foundation at 608-251-1675 and ask to speak with a member of Wisconsin United for Mental Health.