Destigmatizing Emotional Diseases

By Dan Reisel

Over the past few months, much has been made of the movie A Beautiful Mind — both positive and negative. Its focus was on John Nash, who developed schizophrenia in college, which disabled him and was a major point in his life and his ultimate success as a Nobel Prize-winner in Economics.

Among the aspects touched on in this movie about brain disease, albeit in a Hollywood fashion, were prejudice against people who act differently, the range and severity of schizophrenia, the role of medication, treatment, and the many complex facets that individuals and their families must confront daily.

In dealing with schizophrenia, the movie yet fails to prove its value in the discussions engendered and lessons learned, for years to come among the public, health professionals, and patients, of course.

Breaking a Loud Silence

During school-age years, when youngsters are at their most vulnerable, inappropriate educational programs are needed to help school children be able to address mental health issues in elementary, middle, and high schools. One of the best is called "Breaking the Silence (BTS)" — "Teaching the Next Generation About Mental Illness." It is sponsored by NAMI, the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, as part of their "Campaign to End Discrimination." It is a national effort to help people understand mental illnesses, to obtain the treatment, respect, understanding and economic opportunities they deserve.

"Schools have a vital role to play in countering cultural myths and media portrayals of those with mental illness, and when they do not, many are not doing their job," states Janet Sussan, Project Director of BTS and a teacher in Mankato. "Lorraine Kaplan and Louise Sussan, both with Ms. Sussan, developed the curriculum."

"Because of the shame and fear associated with mental illness, people still talk about it in whispers. Young people are developing the early signs of illness as schizophrenia in particular — may hide their symptoms for years before getting help. Too often, the school is the last place they go."

"Breaking the Silence" was created to confront these misconceptions, provide tolerance toward people with mental illness, and encourage young people to get treatment. "Schools are the last place people look," says Sussan.

BTS has three primary goals: to fight the stigma of mental illness through educating the public that mental illness is a treatable disease of the brain, to confront discrimination through education and understanding, and to challenge negative stereotypes of people with mental illness as being dangerous, unstable, hopeless, and helpless. When, in reality, they are family members, friends, coworkers and neighbors.

Wounding Words

Words wound deeply. Educators and health professionals urge avoiding such words as "psycho," "whacko," "stupid," "joky bid" and "nut house." They dehumanize individuals and create delusions in people who may end up in hospitals that treat emotional disorders. Unfortunately, these words serve to reinforce some of the stereotypes that we have in our schools or in movies, set in schoolyards and backyards. Not using these kinds of words, and spelling out exactly what words should be used and how, are major components of the BTS program at all levels.

The curricula also include excellent definitions and descriptions of the primary mental illnesses — schizophrenia, manic-depressive disorders, major depression, panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorders, borderline personality disorders and phobias covered in the program at each academic level. The "human face" of emotional illness is also emphasized by listing of famous people who suffered from the various disorders.

Other BTS Elements

At each school level, the programs also provide group interaction exercises in thinking, emotions, and learning experiences. "Illustrative stories about real people struggling to deal with their own mental illness or their family's private struggle with mental illness often elicit strong emotional responses in the students," commented Ms. Sussan.

"Some students also express the feelings of being trapped, giving up, and wasting their lives in a future, while learning about these clinical brain disorders and issues meaningful and less threatening. Lists of the warning signs of mental illnesses contribute to the success of educating students at all ages.

Teachers' Comments

"Teachers who have used the program in their classes report favorable feedback and improvements in their students' attitudes towards the mentally ill. As one teacher said, "Students have learned about people with mental illness, and they no longer fear them. They have become more compassionate and understanding."

"With knowledge comes compassion for people; they might have ridiculed," noted Ann Hill, a health teacher in Mankato.

"It helps to de-stigmatize mental illness. Students speak more openly about issues affecting themselves, family and community," said Marsha Voiles, another teacher. "By the end of the program, the students have come to understand that mental illness can affect anyone and that there is hope and help." comments June Hanse, a nurse and health teacher in the Great Neck schools.

"Breaking the Silence" is now used in many school districts. You can call your local school district and ask about BTS. As of January 20, the national number can be reached at 1-800-265-7986. Most of the materials will be useful to parents as well.

LICC - Another Unique Resource

Troubled teens and families have another unique resource in the region — the Living Digest Center. Among their many services are 24-hour sexual assault services staffed by live volunteers (not answering machines); and a Suicide Outreach Team in which counselors and other professionals go out to those who have attempted to kill themselves. According to Maureen Evening, MS, Community Educator for LICC, "We also have the nation's only suicide prevention hotline, a national suicide prevention hotline, referral, and crisis counseling. The service is free, anonymous and confidential." Their number and web site are listed in the resources below.

Information Resources

A list of resources is now available by phone or website. The "Living Digest" offers its thanks to NAMI which has provided many of the most helpful and educational resources below:

- NAMI (National Alliance for the Mentally Ill) 800-959-5842 www.nami.org
- Long Island Crisis Center (Hollis) 816-679-1111 www.longislandcrisiscenter.org
- National Depressive & Manic-Depressive Association 800-642-8929 www.ndma.org
- National Institute of Mental Health 553-455-8525 www.nimh.nih.gov
- Anxiety Disorders Association of America 212-221-9250 www.adaa.org
- Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law 202-467-5730 www.bazelon.org
- The Carter Center 404-240-5160 www.cartercenter.org
- Child and Adolescent Bipolar Foundation 847-256-8256 www.bipaf.org
- NARSAD - National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia & Depression 858-529-0111 www.narsad.org
- National Mental Health Association 703-651-7722 www.nmha.org
- Obsessive Compulsive Foundation 203-878-5009 www.offoundation.org
- Treatment Advocacy Center 703-294-6001 www.treatmentadvocacy.org
- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry www.aacap.org
- Internet Mental Health www.mentalhelp.net
- Mental Health Information www.mhi-source.com
- Mental Health: Net: www.mentalhelp.net
- Schizophrenia Home Page www.schizophrenia.com
- National Stigma Clearinghouse http://communityweb.net/stigmaten