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VITAL SIGNS: 'BREAKING THE SILENCE'

Teachers draw mental illness into the open

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For 10 years Lorraine Kaplan kept silent, isolated and ashamed.

Her secret should never be a secret, she now asserts: Her son had been diagnosed as schizophrenic.

Devastated, Kaplan said nothing on the advice of a psychiatrist who told her the "stigma of mental illness" would impact the whole family, including her younger daughter.

But in 1983, at a meeting of a then-new organization called NAMI Queens Nassau, a branch of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, she met 50 other parents who were harboring the same heartbreak "and we thought we were the only ones," she recalls.

She became an outspoken advocate for all the mentally ill.

Erasing the stigma

When she retired from teaching eight years later, determined to erase the stigma, she joined with three other teachers to write a lesson plan for elementary, middle and high school classes called "Breaking the Silence: Teaching the Next Generation About Mental Illness."

The lesson plans, now in schools in every state and Australia, Canada and Mexico, where they're translated into Spanish, drive home the message: Mental illnesses are physical illnesses like diabetes and heart disease. Children are taught how to fight the stigma, recognize the warning signs, and understand that mental illnesses are treatable brain disorders.

"Brains can get sick, too. But with treatment they can get better," reads a poster in the teaching package for the upper elementary grades. The lessons are user-friendly with stories, games and puzzles.

"We are trying to take mental illness out of the shadows," Kaplan says. One out of five families is impacted by the disease, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.

In Plainview in the 1970s, Kaplan, then a kindergarten teacher, and her husband, Eli, an aerospace engineer, had an almost idyllic suburban life with their two children. Their teenaged son was in high school advanced classes, on the debate and wrestling teams and played first trombone in the school orchestra.

But by his junior year, he began to change. He studied little, saying he couldn't concentrate. At camp that summer, he won a wrestling match against the cabin bully who retaliated by punching him in the eye. Obsessing for months over the incident, he spent most of the time in his room, wouldn't see his friends and suffered irrational fears. Reluctantly, his parents accepted the advice of a psychiatrist to hospitalize their son, then 18.

A similar story about behavior changes in a teenaged boy is told in the middle school lesson plan as a basis for class discussion. "Do you think his parents blame themselves for what happened to Brian?" is one of the discussion questions.

The answer: It's no one's fault. Neither the family nor the person with mental illness is to blame.

The lessons urge compassion.

In a story for the elementary grades, a young girl is mortified when a boy suggests her brother is a "nut case."

The class discusses "what can we do to stop others from making fun of people with mental illness?"

The middle school plan also lists famous people who have been treated for a brain disorder, from Abraham Lincoln (depression) to football star Lionel Aldridge (schizophrenia).

Success stories

The high school package includes success stories such as Jessica Lynch, Miss New York State 2003, who takes medication for depression. "Many young people turn to drugs and alcohol to relieve their symptoms," Kaplan says. "Suicide is the third-leading cause of death among teenagers."

The National Alliance on Mental Illness began in Wisconsin in 1979 and the Queens Nassau unit was formed a year later. The chapter meets monthly in Zucker Hillside Hospital, the mental health division of the North Shore-Long Island Jewish Health System.

"Breaking the Silence," begun in 1991 by Kaplan and NAMI members Janet Susin of Manhasset and Ruth Wolosoff and Louise Slater, both of Great Neck, is now in its fourth printing. Friendly's Restaurants helped sponsor the full-color project, and Kaplan went

from school to school to promote it.

Susin also led NAMI Queens Nassau's second annual "Walk for the Mind of America," on Jones Beach in May, drawing 2,000 walkers and raising \$150,000.

"While we need money desperately," Kaplan said, "we also walk for awareness. We don't get our fair share of resources because of the stigma."

Her son now lives semi-independently with two others in a house in Riverhead, thanks to new medications.

Mentally ill people "still have to get up in the morning and face their anxieties and get through the day," Kaplan said.

NAMI Queens Nassau now has an office in Lake Success, and "Breaking the Silence" has an outreach representative, Amy Lax.

Kaplan and Susin speak at libraries, schools, colleges, to community groups and conferences.

Their passion, Kaplan said, is to have "Breaking the Silence" taught in every school. It can be purchased at \$15 for a lesson plan or \$40 for all three, from the Web site www.btslessonplans.org or call 516-326-0797.