

Bradenton Herald

Tuesday, June 10, 2014

Living/Health

Mental Health Minute | First aid for mental health

BY MELANIE TEVES BELL, ED.S., LMFT

Imagine that someone you know -- maybe someone you love -- is distressed, depressed or in a crisis. You want to help, but don't know what to do or how to do it. It's a helpless feeling. Most of us know what to do when someone is having a physical emergency: perform first aid or CPR and call 911. These interventions save thousands of lives every year.

Until recently, there was not similar help for those in emotional, behavioral or mental distress. Now, there is Mental Health First Aid, a public education program to help people understand mental illness and substance abuse disorders. This international program helps laypeople understand behavioral health concerns and the risk factors and warning signs. These signs include changes in emotion, panic attacks, irregular sleep and isolation or withdrawal.

The program doesn't take the place of medical assistance, but rather bridges the gap. In many situations, a traumatic event, chronic medical difficulties or a chemical imbalance can lead to an anxiety disorder that requires medical attention. Through Mental Health First Aid, the layperson gains some tools to keep the sufferer stable and bring him or her to the point they will accept professional help.

To start, let them know you are concerned and ask them questions without being negative, critical or judgmental. Begin a conversation by saying things such as, "I am concerned about you" or "Something seems to be bothering you. Do you want to talk about it?" Be calm and give your loved one or colleague some options and choices. You don't have to have all the answers.

When working with someone who is in a crisis, use short, simple sentences. Speak quietly and calmly and help them with their simple requests. Don't raise your voice or talk too fast. Use positive words. Give them space. Tell them you are there when they are ready to talk.

"One of the many benefits of Mental Health First Aid is that those who are trained in the program have fewer negative perceptions and attitudes about people with mental illnesses and addictions," said Manatee Glens' Director of Adult Mental Health Nestor Levesque. "This gives them the confidence to help others and direct them to the professional help they need."

One of the critical points is to learn the warning signs of suicide and what to do when someone is threatening to harm himself/herself. Let them know you are concerned. Asking someone about suicide does not put the thought into their mind. Let them know you are concerned and ask the questions without judgment. Be confident and re-assuring, and don't leave them alone.

With some training, such as Mental Health First Aid, you can make a difference and significantly assist someone with an emotional or behavioral health challenge.

The emphasis is always that help is available and recovery is possible.

Melanie Teves Bell, Ed.S., LMFT, is vice president of outpatient services at Manatee Glens, Your Community Behavioral Health Hospital. Manatee Glens is the specialty hospital and outpatient practice for mental health and addictions headquartered in Manatee and Sarasota. For information on Mental Health First Aid, call 941-782-4150.