

Health Notes

By Audeen Wagner



HEART WALK. Providence Medical Group-Vernonia has formed a "Team

for the Heart Walk" and on May 21 they will be taking the hike for the "Heart Walk." They are asking for pledges for the American Heart Association. The 5K walk is in downtown Portland, and is associated with a huge national fundraising effort to fight heart disease and stroke. We are invited to join our local team, and/or pledge our contributions for their efforts. The Providence-Vernonia Team members are (so far): Sandy Alsbury, Sue Blair, Jeanette Doherty, Sandy Fox, Judy Hargis, Denise Null, Marla Rethwill and Cathy Rozinek. It's not too late to join in; for more information, go to <<http://www.americanheart.org>>, and click on the "fundraising" link. Or, contact anyone at the clinic. Sounds like fun.

ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS.

Mental Health information and understanding are important considerations in today's world, and we all need to be informed and up-to-date on the many types of disorders and their treatment.

There is a wide variety of information on a great website

called The National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI) <www.nami.org>. Judy Hargis, P.A. at Vernonia, invites all who have access to a computer and are interested in this subject to call it up. The information is detailed, easy to understand, and helpful.

Judy says that the stigma that has always been attached to mental illness is disappearing with more understanding of mental diseases. Today we have much greater knowledge about mental illness and brain chemistry. We know that effective treatments correct the brain chemistry.

"The brain is a complex organ that runs the show," Judy says. "Everything within our bodies (mind, body, spirit) are all interconnected. A problem with one can affect the other. For example, physical illness can lead to depression, and, conversely, emotional problems can lead to physical symptoms." It is equally important to recognize that just as the heart or liver can fail, the brain can have illnesses as well. Mental illness, like diabetes, hypertension, etc., can be treated. There are very effective treatments out there for mental illnesses now, and they are successful because they work on correcting brain chemistry. Interesting!

Mental disorders can be present in family members; with a genetic predisposition, they can be passed on to children. Researchers have found

that mental diseases such as schizophrenia are present in all cultures worldwide, regardless of culture, family structure or stresses.

A few of the disorders addressed under the umbrella of "mental health" are: Depression (called major depression or clinical depression, or unipolar depression, or simply depressive disorder); Panic disorder; Anxiety; Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD); bipolar disorder; schizophrenia; Obsessive/compulsive disorder; Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). And more. A lot to digest in one short writing, but it's important to know that there is lots of help available for these illnesses.

Depression. Probably the one we hear the most about. We sometimes say we're "depressed" after hearing disturbing news, a death in the family, or loss of a job...things which make us sad and feel down for a time. But Major Depression is a serious medical illness, affecting almost 10 million Americans each year. Unlike those normal feelings of sadness, loss, or passing moodiness, major depression is persistent, and can interfere with behavior, activities and even physical health.

Symptoms. The symptoms of major depression represent a definite change from how a person functioned before the illness. Some or all of the following symptoms may appear:

(1) Persistently sad or irritable mood; (2) Pronounced changes in sleep, appetite and energy; (3) Difficulty thinking, concentrating and remembering; physical slowing or agitation; (4) Lack of interest in ac-

tivities that were once enjoyed; feelings of guilt, helplessness; (5) Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide; and (6) Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders and chronic pain.

When several of these symptoms occur at the same time or last longer than two weeks, and especially when they interfere with ordinary function, professional help is needed.

Causes. While there is no single cause of depression, psychological, biological and environmental factors may all contribute to its development. Also, a genetic predisposition can cause an increased risk for developing depression. Some people may have a biological makeup that leaves them particularly vulnerable to bouts of depression.

Treatment. Although depression is a devastating illness, it is highly treatable. The great majority of those suffering from this disorder are treated effectively and can return to their normal daily activities. The type chosen depends on the individual and the severity of patterns of the illness. The three basic types of treatment are medications, psychotherapy, and electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). They may be used singly or in combination.

For any concerns or questions, the first stop should be your regular family caregiver. The Vernonia clinic can readily refer patients to psychiatrists or other specialists. Even without insurance, there are agencies to offer counseling and treatment at little or no charge. Again, the place to start is the

local clinic.

Bipolar Disorder. Bipolar disorder (also called manic depression) can cause shifts in mood, energy and functioning. It affects 2.3 million adult Americans, and it can run in families. It is characterized by episodes of mania, switching to depression, generally requiring life-long treatment. Most patients have symptoms of both mania and depression, sometimes at the same time.

Symptoms of Mania: (1) Either an elated happy mood or an irritable, angry mood; (2) Increased activity or energy; (3) Increased thought processes, increased talking and more rapid speech than normal; (4) Ambitious plans; (5) Poor judgment; (6) Increased sexual interest and activity; (7) Decreased sleep and decreased need for sleep.

Symptoms of Depression: (1) Depressed or apathetic mood; (2) Decreased activity and energy; (3) Restlessness and irritability; (4) Slowed thinking, less talking and slowed speech; (5) Less interest and enjoyment of activities normally enjoyed; (6) Less sexual interest and activity; (7) Hopeless and helpless feelings; (8) Pessimism; (9) Thoughts of suicide; (10) Change in appetite and sleep patterns.

Causes. The exact cause of bipolar disorder is unknown, but most researchers believe it is the result of a chemical imbalance in certain parts of the brain. It also tends to run in families.

Treatment. While there is no cure, it is a treatable and manageable illness, most people can be successfully treated. A combination of medications and psycho-social therapies are used effectively.

There are many other mental illnesses, and, again, help is as close as the family physician. And in our society the stigma that has long been associated with these illnesses, like "craziness" and "weakness" are not deterrents to treatment, as once was the case. We'll discuss other mental illnesses in a later issue of The INDEPENDENT. In the meantime, patients are encouraged to seek out the internet for more specific information. Also, the clinic has some handouts that answer many questions.



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