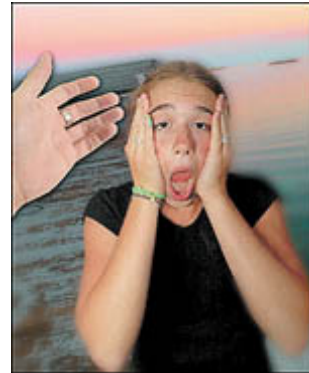


Social Security

Aristotle recognized 2,000 years ago that friendship is an essential part of life.

But the mentally ill are often left alone.

"Crazy" people want solitude. "Psychos" are dangerous. "Nuts" do weird things.



The stigma attached to people with mental illness is so strong that they very often lead socially sterile lives.

However, a study led by Larry Davidson, director of the Program for Recovery and Community Health at the Yale medical school, found that simple friendship helps most people with psychiatric disabilities.

"Loneliness is terrible. It drives people to kill themselves or keep going back to hospitals," Davidson said.

Now a nonprofit foundation in Farmington is using the Yale findings as a template to match volunteers with people with mental illness.

The Friend to Friend program is currently running in Manchester, and organizers are planning to bring it to New Haven by this winter.

Diann Wienke, president of the board of directors of the Foundation for Mental Health, said Friend to Friend is working well.

"People don't choose to be mentally ill or to be isolated or alone," Davidson said. "If people have fun, they spend less time hearing voices and being paranoid."

Actually, active symptoms such as delusions and hallucinations are usually controllable with drugs, he said.

Negative symptoms — withdrawal, apathy, blunted emotions and difficulty concentrating — are more resistant to treatment.

This is where volunteers can help. They meet once a week with people who have had psychiatric problems and spend some time with them.

Nothing fancy. Just shopping, seeing a movie, going fishing.

"Pleasure is an under-appreciated part of recovery," he said.

"In the mid-1990s, we found that two-thirds of psychotic disabled people were helped by a friend," Davidson said.

"This is a population that we assumed didn't want friends. We gave them a social life," he added.

Since state mental hospitals were largely emptied two decades ago, the education, employment and housing of the mentally ill were attended to. But not social health, he said.

Davidson said people who were paid to befriend those with serious psychological problems provided little help.

Volunteers did much better. Most of the volunteers had experience with psychiatric illnesses in their families or friends, which no doubt increased their empathy.

Davidson assessed 260 disabled participants and 190 volunteers.

"There was only one adverse effect. One of the volunteers shoplifted, which upset the participant," he said.

Many people are surprised to find that most of the people with mental illness disability do not exhibit extraordinary behavior.

In fact, they are like other men and women. Some are engaging and interesting, others are boring. They read and have opinions.

Volunteers received one to two hours of training, mostly on what they should not do.

"People try to 'fix' their friend's problems. But what the psychiatrically disabled person wants is someone to do gardening with, go to a baseball game or a movie," Davidson said.

Many middle-class Americans assume that friends talk. They chat and try to fill any lulls in conversation.

However, people with psychiatric disabilities often just want company to share a common activity with.

Wienke said the first Friend to Friend program was started in Manchester in January with 25 pairs of people.

"It has been an overwhelming success. We're really excited by it. We used the partnership program at Yale as a guide. We're implementing, not conducting, a study," she said.

People with psychiatric disability and volunteers fill out questionnaires including their sex and age.

Pairs are then matched and introduced. They meet weekly, and volunteers attend support meetings once a month, she said.

"It's huge, fabulous. People with mental illness often don't have any money," Wienke said.

"The program gives them a feeling of mutual benefit, not that they're taking from someone," she said.

Wienke had a son with schizophrenia. She checked to make sure he was taking his medication and generally kept an eye on him.

Family friends welcomed her son and never asked him about drugs or his illness. They treated

him like any other person.

"That was a huge thing for him," she said.

Wienke's son and other people with psychiatric problems could probably identify with the troubled painter Vincent Van Gogh, who in 1878 wrote, "Like everyone else I feel the need of relations and friendships ... and I am not made of stone or iron, so I cannot miss these things without feeling, as does any other intelligent and honest man, a void ..."

Abram Katz can be reached at akatz@nhregister.com or 789-5719.

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