

May is Mental Health Month

Written by Dr. Annice Golden, Director of Behavioral Health, NorthPoint Health & Wellness Center
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Pathway to Wellness is the theme for this year's "May is Mental Health Month" campaign. For over 60 years, Mental Health America has promoted "May is Mental Health Month" and has reached millions through media and events, providing information about prevention and treatment for mental health conditions. In an effort to raise more awareness, NorthPoint staff will be available to answer questions about mental health and wellness as well as educational materials. Staff will be in the lobbies of the clinic and Human Services every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday throughout the month of May. A free confidential mental health screening will also be available.

Wellness can be defined as developing healthy lifestyle choices that promote wellbeing. In order to live a full and productive life, you must maintain a balance in your emotional, physical, spiritual and mental health. Developing healthy lifestyles and strategies can prevent or reduce the duration or severity of illnesses.

Up to one third of those with chronic health conditions such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, stroke, chronic pain and cancer experience depression. In fact, depression is one of the most common complications of chronic illness. Trauma, both witnessed and experienced, can have a major role in overall health. Exposure to violence, abuse, and any other threat to safety can negatively impact emotional, physical and spiritual health long after the trauma. Adults exposed to community or domestic violence during childhood have been shown to have poorer health outcomes and are at increased risk for alcohol and drug abuse, depression and suicide.

We are all at risk for stress given the demands of daily life and the challenges it brings-at home, at work and in the community. Steps such as eating a balanced diet, getting regular exercise, getting enough sleep, developing a sense of self-worth, as well as learning effective coping strategies can help build and maintain well-being. Using strategies that promote mental wellness can prevent mental health and substance use disorders leading to improved health outcomes, stronger families and a healthier community.

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Mental Health America has wellness tips for each day in May and can be found on their website at www.mentalhealthamerica.net. An example of one of their wellness tips is to enjoy at least 15 minutes of sunshine (don't forget sunscreen). Exposure to the sun can help our body use Vitamin D which has been found to improve our mood. Some experience Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) where lack of sunlight during winter months, such as in Alaska, leads to depressive symptoms. There are special lights that you can use to simulate the positive effect of the sun on mood.

Another wellness tip is to create opportunities to laugh. Laughter can boost our immune system, increase "feel good" chemicals in the brain, and can act as a buffer against stress. When you share laughter with those you care about, it can strengthen the relationship and increase the sense of closeness. There are many self-defeating behaviors that people engage in to deal with stress and depression. Oprah Winfrey admitted that she is an "emotional eater" when dealing with depression. Some turn to drugs, alcohol, gambling, shopping and overeating to cope with emotional distress. Engaging in these inappropriate behaviors is harmful and can be a barrier to wellness. Denial and avoidance of feelings may also complicate recovery from distress and depression.

There has been an increased national interest in mental health with the mass shootings, most recently at Sandy Hook Elementary in Connecticut. This has sparked a national debate on the availability of firearms and treatment for the mentally ill. President Obama has increased funding to improve access to mental health services in the schools and in communities. Even the most severely mentally ill are no more likely to engage in violence when compared with peers without mental illness. However, those with mental illness are at greater risk of suicide. Whenever someone you know threatens to harm themselves or others, ensure your safety and call 911. Although it is commonly believed that when someone threatens suicide they are seeking attention, suicidal threats increase the risk for completed suicide, especially if they have a past attempt or a relative that completed suicide.

Although there is a growing acceptance and support for those experiencing mental health concerns, many myths persist. Some believe that few people have mental health issues; however, up to 25% of adults and 20% of youth will experience mental health distress during their lifetime. Many historical public figures, including Abraham Lincoln, Sir Winston Churchill and Teddy Roosevelt, reportedly experienced depression at some point in their life. Depression and anxiety can be treated successfully, often with "talk therapy."

Fear of being labeled or placed on medication can be barriers to seeking help. Some may resist seeking mental health services due to concerns about people "getting in my business." Others may avoid mental health services because seeking help is seen as a sign of weakness and "suffer in silence;" however, recognizing that you need help is a sign of strength.

Mental health services can be accessed through your primary care physician or you may contact Behavioral Health providers directly. For additional information about mental wellness or resources for mental health services, please contact Dr. Annice Golden, Director of Behavioral Health, NorthPoint Health & Wellness Center, at 612-543-2566.