

by Lorraine Kaplan

BREAKING THE Silence

Teaching children about mental illness.

As a teacher in a Long Island, New York, district for 25 years, I loved teaching and the close involvement with my students' families. I knew of the joyful occasions and the more serious events—a dad's heart attack, a brother's diagnosis of cystic fibrosis, a mom's kidney transplant. My classes often sent get-well cards. However, in all 25 years, no parent ever told me about a member of the family who was suffering from a mental illness. I now consider this disturbing after reviewing the statistics and truths surrounding diseases of the brain.

—Mental Illness Statistics—

- One in five people will suffer a severe mental illness at some point in his or her life. On average, one in five children in classrooms nationwide are likely living with someone who has a mental illness.
- Mental illness is second only to heart disease as the leading cause of disability in this country and worldwide, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) and Harvard University.
- Four of the top ten causes of lifetime disability are severe mental illnesses, including depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and obsessive compulsive disorder. The leading cause of lifetime disability is depression.
- Twelve percent of children and adolescents have a diagnosable mental illness requiring treatment.

How is it that no student or parent ever told me there was mental illness in the family? Imagine a child who goes home from school to a parent unable to get out of bed due to severe depression. Or think about having a sibling who hears voices due to schizophrenia? The reason for this silence is the stigma surrounding mental illness. With a stigma comes misinformation, isolation, fear and shame.

I learned firsthand all about the stigma. In my son's senior year of high school, his personality began to change. He became obsessed, brooded in his room and appeared to be in a stupor. My family didn't know where to turn, but eventually we sought psychiatric help. When diagnosing my son, the doctor said, "Your son has schizophrenia, and I have one good piece of advice: Do *not* tell anyone. The stigma is so pervasive that your entire family will never be looked at the same way."

Unfortunately, we did as we were told. My husband, myself and my daughter kept silent—and felt shame for many years.

Then when my husband and I attended a local National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) meeting, I learned that we were not alone. Inspired by the hope and help of NAMI members, we became advocates for people with mentally illnesses. NAMI is a nationwide nonprofit, grassroots, self-help and advocacy organization dedicated to improving the lives of all those affected by severe mental illness.

- Of those needing treatment, less than one in five people will receive it.
- Suicide is the third leading cause of death in people ages 15 to 24.
- Adolescents who may be experiencing a mental illness often turn to drugs and alcohol to self medicate, finding it more socially acceptable than going for treatment.
- Half of the people who develop a mental illness show symptoms before the age of 14.
- Mental illnesses are biological-based brain disorders. They cannot be overcome by will power and are not related to a person's character or intelligence.

Upon retiring from teaching, I was determined to use my expertise to combat the stigma of mental illness. With two other NAMI members who were also teachers and mothers of sons with a mental illness, we created Breaking the Silence: Teaching the Next Generation about Mental Illness (BTS), an educational program for upper elementary, middle and high school classrooms designed to inform students about mental illness. Stories, games, posters and activities teach students that mental illnesses are treatable brain disorders, which are no one's fault.

BTS helps children to recognize the warning signs of mental illnesses, encourages early treatment and discourages bullying behavior.

I often think how valuable these lessons would have been to my son, his friends and our family members. Today, more than 25,000 copies of BTS materials have been distributed nationwide, as well as in several countries. BTS has been translated into Spanish and disseminated in Mexico. Letters and e-mails from teachers and advocates who use BTS express its validity in breaking down the barriers of the stigma surrounding mental illnesses.

Together we can foster classrooms where children feel free to ask for help when they are emotionally troubled, just as they would to cope with a stomachache or muscle pain. Education is the key to "breaking the silence" about mental illness.

—Mental Illness Resources—

- Breaking the Silence, www.btslessonplans.org
- The National Institute of Mental Health, www.nimh.nih.gov
- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), www.nami.org
- Mental Health Association, www.nmha.org
- Depression & Bipolar Support Alliance, www.dbsalliance.org
- What a Difference a Friend Makes, www.whatadifference.org
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, www.afsp.org

Lorraine Kaplan lectures in schools and to organizations to promote mental illness education. On the boards of Aid to the Developmentally Disabled in Riverhead, New York, and NAMI in Queens/Nassau Counties, www.namiqn.org, Kaplan can be reached at lorkaplan@verizon.net. For more information on the Breaking the Silence program, visit www.btslessonplans.org.