

Resources for Education, Support, and Treatment

By Vicki Cottrell

As executive director of NAMI Utah I have felt very strongly that there is great need to educate the clergy regarding mental illness. They are on the front lines and many times are the first ones to hear about the onset, due to difficult behaviors that are causing trouble with family relationships. Symptoms of mental illness manifest in ways that affect people's moods, thoughts, and behaviors. Families are confused and seek advice from spiritual leaders. These leaders are an incredible resource and can refer families to the proper place for assistance, but they need to have the correct information regarding warning signs and symptoms of mental illness. Early detection is critical to keep the disease from escalating to a severe level.

When my daughter was showing symptoms of, what we later learned was schizophrenia our world was turned upside down. She was bright and beautiful. Full of fun and great conversation. She was Homecoming Queen, head song leader in high school, and most always on the Honor role. When the drastic change started taking place our first visit was to our LDS Bishop, who was a wonderful man and so concerned about the totally out-of-character behaviors that were showing up in my daughter. His first question was "Are you holding regular family home evenings." That was a great question, the other questions that followed were along the same lines and I was able to say yes to all of them. We were doing everything that we could as a family to live good lives and follow the principles of the Gospel. When the questions were over he did not know where to go from there. We were basically on our own to figure out the next steps and deal with the trauma. If our church leaders understand and have some knowledge that certain behaviors can be symptoms of a mental disease, then they can refer appropriately and offer some hope by opening another door to those families that are deluged in emotional trauma. When there are symptoms of other physical illnesses our leaders send us immediately to the proper medical professionals. Mental illness is no different. People need to go to the proper medical professional for diagnosis and treatment.

My daughter, over the course of 5 years had 16 hospitalizations. I was drained and felt hopeless. I did not turn to loving neighbors and friends because mental illness has such stigma. I often say that with all of those hospitalizations I never received one casserole. I don't know if anyone knew of the darkness our family lived in for those years, we were pretty good at covering up. It is my goal to see the stigma go away. I listened one Sunday as a mother stood in sacrament meeting to awkwardly explain why her fine young missionary son had to return from his mission early. How many of us even know that the church has a special missionary medical committee for missionaries who return home early with mental illness. There is nothing to be ashamed of, there is nothing to explain, it is a disease and if your missionary son has returned early with mental illness then he has returned with a disease – there is no shame!

NAMI is the acronym for National Alliance for the Mentally Ill – we are the Utah chapter. There is a chapter in every state and we all have many of the same programs:

Family to Family is a 12-week education course for those who have a family member with mental illness. It is taught by trained family members who have the same lived experience as all other class members. Families are experts in the area of living with someone who has a mental illness. The course goes through the biology of the brain, medicine, symptoms of the illness, communication, problem solving, empathy, self-care, and more. This course is no charge. It changes lives.

BRIDGES: This is an education course much like Family to Family only for the person with the illness. Many of the classes are parallel, with a couple of exceptions – the participants are taught about recovery,

stress reduction, staying in treatment, and rebuilding relationships. This course is taught by people with mental illness but doing well in recovery. This model is very effective for people with mental illness.

Hope for Tomorrow is unique to NAMI Utah. It is a school education program that addresses the stigma for youth. It is a year-long program that focuses on Mood Disorders, Substance Use and Abuse, and Eating Disorders. This is a very effective program for youth as they struggle with early onset of some of these illnesses.

Community resources are influenced by a couple of things: Do you have insurance? And if you do, how much of mental health does it cover? The other scenario is no insurance or not enough. In this cause we could assist in letting you know where there is a combination of resources such as the public mental health or community health locations. There are several places including NAMI that can help people get on the free med program for mental health medications. Never give up, there is always another door to open, we have spent much time finding all of the options, there is someplace that can help.

As I think back over our lived experience – the not so far-ups and the way far-downs I can't help but be filled with gratitude for my knowledge in a Heavenly Father who knows all and a Savior that gave the ultimate sacrifice. I can't tell you how many days I did not know what was going on with my daughter and I did not know what was going to happen next, but I did know one thing for sure – I had a testimony and that testimony gave me courage and the assurance that, God is in the heavens and He knows and He would give me peace and comfort – and He did. I never felt that He did not love me or that I was being punished. I did not know what was happening, but I did know the plan of salvation was true – it isn't just true when everything is going well, it is just as true when things are not going well. The gospel was my compass! No matter what disturbance or pain came from watching this beautiful daughter digress into someone I did not know, I knew I could go on. I found help and support for myself. I became educated and I trusted in the Lord. My daughter is doing very well today – she is in recovery and is doing great things with her life. Did I believe back then that I would ever see this day? No. But, I realize today that I did not have to know what the future would hold for our family. I just held on 24 hours at a time and to my testimony of Jesus Christ.