

Resources for Education, Support, and Treatment

By Sherri Wittwer, Executive Director, NAMI Utah

I am so grateful for the opportunity to be here today. It is an honor to speak to you all and I appreciate your attendance here tonight. As the executive director of NAMI Utah, I can attest to the need for church leaders to be educated on mental illness. When mental illness affects a family member, the result can be a family that is in crisis and chaos. Ecclesiastical leaders are often the first people families contact to find support and assistance. Church leaders can be a wonderful resource and can help families and those living with mental illness find the proper places for assistance. Priesthood leaders, Relief Society leaders, Young Men, Young Women leaders, and Primary leaders can be incredible sources of support. But first, we must all have the correct information regarding the signs and symptoms of mental illness.

Mental illness affects people's moods, thoughts and behaviors. Many of the behaviors of those living with mental illness are simply symptoms of their illness. Too often families and church leaders do not have the information they need to understand mental illness. Yet, early detection and early intervention is critical, and can prevent the illness from escalating to a severe level.

I know the pain that mental illness can bring to a family from personal experience. I have a beautiful teenage son who has a fine mind – he is extremely intelligent. He has a love for animals and children and tells me he would like to work with children who have developmental disabilities, when he is older. This son is very sensitive to the feelings of those around him and has a keen sense of humor. This son has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Although, he was a bit of a “high maintenance” child as he grew up, he did well in school, in athletics and socially. As puberty hit, he spiraled downward. My husband and I did not know what was happening to him. His behaviors were so foreign to us, his actions so unpredictable, we were baffled, confused and extremely frightened. I felt like my child – the most precious thing to me -- had become a complete stranger.

In our case, we did not immediately go to our bishop for assistance. Instead, we suffered in silence, terrified that someone would find out that our family had such a problem – such a dysfunction. We sat alone in quiet and excruciating isolation. Those months took me to depths of despair that I did not know were even possible. Our entire family was buried by the emotional trauma and shattered dreams. I was taken to my knees and it was there, on my knees, that I was finally able to find peace and guidance for my son. We were finally able to get my son appropriate treatment – what a difference this has made! This beautiful boy is making such wonderful strides, such progress. He is doing well and is in recovery. We will always have to be alert and watch for the return of symptoms and be quick to manage those symptoms. But we would have to do this if he had any other illness such as diabetes or asthma. Through proper treatment, he is reclaiming his life, rebuilding many of those shattered dreams and has hope for his future. And as for our family, we have also moved along our own path of healing. We have realized that in spite of the stigma associated with mental illness, there is no shame. We need not live in

fear and isolation. We have realized that we are not alone and that while there are those who may not understand, there is also a network of families who have been where we have.

That is why I love NAMI. NAMI is made up of volunteers -- people who are brought together through their own pain who desire to uplift and strengthen one another and bear one another's burdens.

NAMI is the National Alliance on Mental Illness. There is a national organization and state chapters in every state throughout the United States. NAMI Utah's mission is to ensure the dignity and improve the quality of life of those living with mental illness and their families through education, support, advocacy and research. NAMI Utah's objective is to offer statewide educational and support services to those affected by mental illness, free of cost, with the goal of raising public awareness and reducing the stigma associated with mental illness.

NAMI Utah has a variety of programs that are available to help those who are living with a mental illness and their families.

Family-to-Family is a 12-week education course for those who have a family member with a mental illness. The Family-to-Family courses are taught by trained family members who have the same lived experience of the other class members. The courses teach about mental illness and the biology of the brain, medications, communication, problem solving, and empathy. As caregivers, families often feel a tremendous burden. Family-to-Family talks about self-care and how to strengthen families. And, when families learn that many of the behaviors they see in their loved ones are actually symptoms of an illness, a whole new understanding takes place and lives are truly changed.

BRIDGES is an education course similar to Family-to-Family, but it is for the person who has the illness. These classes are 10-week peer-to-peer courses that are taught by people who have a mental illness, but are doing well and are in recovery. Much of the material is the same as in Family-to-Family, but there is a focus on recovery, on stress management, the importance of staying in treatment and rebuilding relationships.

NAMI Utah also has family and consumer mentors that you can call or visit with at our office that offer information and guidance in finding mental health resources in the community.

Hope for Tomorrow is a NAMI Utah program. This program is a school program for junior high and high school students, parents and educators. This program focuses on mood disorders, substance use and eating disorders. This program raises awareness, addresses the stigma, and fosters hope.

The NAMI Utah message is "Treatment works, recovery is possible, you are not alone and there is hope."

I am grateful for my association with many families and individuals who have taught me about courage and endurance – about love and hope. Although it is so easy to feel alone and lost, there are so many who have the same lived experience and know from personal experience what can help.

As with many trials and difficulties, there are often important lessons to be learned and many accompanying blessings. How grateful I am for the Gospel of Jesus Christ and for my Savior Jesus Christ. There have been many times when I thought the burden was too heavy, the pain too excruciating. Yet, I always had the knowledge that the Savior understood. When I finally came to the change in my thinking to trust God and turn my son and my needs over to Him -- all the while keeping my heart and mind open to guidance, direction and inspiration -- I saw great blessings take place in my life and my son's life. I finally truly realized that God loved my son more than even I, his mother, could ever comprehend. I had a renewed understanding and appreciation of the atonement and the realization that through it, my son, and I, could be made whole again. This testimony has been my strength and my comfort – a gift well beyond words, through many unanticipated life events. I am so grateful for it. I am also grateful for the opportunity we have to bear one another's burdens and lift one another up and truly act as followers of Christ. I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.