

Katie Johnson: Good morning, and welcome to Apple a Day, Lake Region Healthcare's Health and Wellness Program, where we feature news and information you can use to live a healthier life. I'm Katie Johnson and my guest today is Maria Willits. She's an LPN in our Outpatient Psychiatry Department and she's one of the speakers at next Monday's Living Well series. Good morning, Maria.

Maria Willits: Good morning, Katie. Thank you for having me.

Katie Johnson: Thank you for joining me and thank you for being part of the last Living Well series session for this year. We hold it the second Monday of every month from September through May, so this will be a great topic to wrap up our 2017-2018 series. Tell me what you and Deb Forstner will be talking about next Monday night.

Maria Willits: Well, it is Mental Health Awareness Month, so we are going to be talking about mental health, dispelling some of the myths about mental health, and I will be talking about QPR. QPR is a evidence-based suicide prevention training and Deb will be touching a bit on the spirituality aspect of mental health.

Katie Johnson: That is a great topic for this month. No more stigmas. Suicide prevention and mental health education and awareness. Tell us a little bit more about you. How did you become such an advocate for suicide prevention awareness and mental health issues?

Maria Willits: Well, thank you for asking. I have been an LPN for 17 years. Six of those years I worked at Circle of Nations Indian Boarding School in Wahpeton, North Dakota, and there I was the mental health nurse. For the last there and a half years now I've been at Lake Region Healthcare in the Outpatient Psychiatry Department. As a result of my professional and personal experiences with mental health issues and suicide, I have become an advocate for suicide prevention and destigmatizing mental illness and suicide.

Katie Johnson: And you are associated with an organization called Shatter the Silence. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Maria Willits: I sure can. Shatter the Silence was founded in 2010 as a result of the loss of my oldest son, Ricky. He took his life when he was 18, and based on everything we learned after his death, we decided that we needed to start doing more in our rural areas to bring awareness about, bring the topic to the table, and start doing something about prevention.

Katie Johnson: And that is such a good outcome of a really awful situation. I am sure that you have experienced firsthand some of the stigmas that we talk about in the title of this, the stigmas of mental health and of suicide. Tell us what some of those are.

Maria Willits: Some of those stigmas are the idea that mental illness is something that you can control, that you can wish or pray away, the idea of oh, toughen up. It's not that

bad. Snap out of it type mentality. And those are the things that we really need to reeducate people about. Mental illness is not something that can just be controlled by a person. It is a medical condition of the brain, and oftentimes requires professional treatment.

Katie Johnson: And there's a certain amount of shame, I think, too, that is a stigma that really needs to be overcome.

Maria Willits: Absolutely. There's a lot of shame surrounding mental illness and suicide, and just educating people. Bringing about more knowledge about mental illness should, and we all hope, will help with that.

Katie Johnson: A gatekeeper is something that you talk about in this training. Can you tell us a little bit more about what a gatekeeper is and how a gatekeeper can be used to recognize warning signs, potential crisis, and be a part of a solution?

Maria Willits: QRP gatekeeper: According to the Surgeon General's National 2001 Strategy for Suicide Prevention, a gatekeeper is someone in a position to recognize a crisis and the warning signs that someone may be contemplating suicide. That is the whole goal of QRP gatekeeper training is to train people to recognize when somebody's in a suicide crisis.

Katie Johnson: At Monday's session, is this a full course of the training, or are you just giving kind of a brief synopsis? Give us an idea of what the gatekeeper training entails.

Maria Willits: Yes. Those who attend Monday's session will get the full training for QRP. It's no longer evidence-based unless we do give the complete training, and it is geared for the general public, seventh grade through adult, and it just teaches the basic skills that a person needs to recognize that a person is in crisis, how to talk to that person, how to persuade them to live, and how to refer them on.

Katie Johnson: You mentioned in your comments about what the session would be about earlier that it's kind of like CPR for mental health. How do you compare the two?

Maria Willits: Absolutely. QRP is an emergency mental health intervention for suicidal persons, and QRP like CPR is a part of a chain of survival. So it teaches you those basic skills, just like CPR, on how to save a life.

Katie Johnson: What are some of the warning signs that someone may be contemplating suicide?

Maria Willits: Some of the more common warning signs are when a person's threatening to take their lives or kill themselves. Maybe they're looking for ways to kill themselves. They might acquire a gun or be stockpiling pills, talking or writing about death or suicide. When those actions are out of the ordinary for that person, that can be a very common sign. The feeling of hopelessness. Oftentimes

when a person is to the point of hopelessness, they are much closer to a crisis situation than we may know.

Unexplainable rage, anger, irritability more so than normal or out of character. Someone who's acting reckless, not seeming to care what happens to them, like maybe somebody who's driving more reckless than usual. Increase of alcohol or drug use, withdrawing from friends, family, society, not taking enjoyment in doing things that they used to enjoy doing. Somebody who's feeling more anxious maybe. Sleep disturbances. Maybe it's somebody who's sleeping more or less than normal. Eating disturbances are also a common sign. Dramatic mood changes, and seeing no reason for living or having no sense of purpose in life could also be a sign that somebody's contemplating suicide.

Katie Johnson: If you see these signs in someone, how do you approach them? What should you do?

Maria Willits: And that is part of the QPR training. It teaches you how important ... it talks about how important it is to just reach out to that person. If you suspect that somebody's suicidal or struggling with a mental illness, you need to just ask them. You need to let them know that you care about them and that you've noticed some differences, and ask them. Just come right out and ask them, "Are you feeling suicidal?"

Katie Johnson: There's probably words or phrases that can be harmful that you use in those situations, too. Do you have any advice on things not to say?

Maria Willits: Well, you're certainly not ... if you are feeling comfortable enough to ask them if they're feeling suicidal, you're not going to want to ask that question in a way that makes them think that you're going to judge them. For instance, you won't say, "You're not suicidal, are you?" That could definitely close that opportunity and those lines of communication with that person. You're not going to want to make comments like, "Oh, come on. Get it over it" or "Hang in there. Things will get better." "You're overreacting." "Come on, you're tougher than that." Things like that. Basically what a person at that point usually needs is just a listening ear and for you to understand that they're dealing with something that maybe you don't understand, but you're willing to listen and help.

Katie Johnson: Good advice. We talked a little bit about Deb Forstner being part of the program, as well, and give us just an idea what she will add to the program.

Maria Willits: Yes, my co-facilitator of this session is Deb, and she'll be discussing some of the spiritual aspects of mental health and dispelling the stigma surrounding that.

Katie Johnson: And Deb, of course, is a chaplain here at Lake Region Healthcare and has some fantastic experience and knowledge to bring to Monday night's discussion, as well. Anything else you'd like to add about what do you plan to cover on Monday or the topic in general for May, Mental Health Awareness Month?

Maria Willits: I think I covered it pretty well here. I just want to highlight the importance of having the opportunity to come and get this QPR training. It's free and it's definitely something that could be used in anybody's lifetime, and why not take advantage of it.

Katie Johnson: Exactly. It is a tremendous opportunity to get this QPR training, again Monday night at the Living Well series. As Maria mentioned, completely free of charge. It's Monday night in the clinic lobby, main clinic lobby here in Fergus Falls at 111 West Vernon Avenue. We'll start at 5:45 and wrap up by 7:00. And if folks want to register ahead of time, we appreciate that, because we provide refreshments. But if you don't and you find yourself free on Monday night, please just stop in and take advantage of this free training that's available to you, and if do want to RSVP or get more information, shoot us an email at [livingwell@Llrhc.org](mailto:livingwell@Llrhc.org) or a phone call to 218-736-8699 is our Living Well phone number. We have the information on our website, too, [lrhc.org](http://lrhc.org).

Maria, thank you so much for all the work that you do to help bring attention to this important, important topic of mental health and suicide prevention.

Maria Willits: Thank you, Katie.

Katie Johnson: Maria and Katie remind you there is so much to do here. Stay healthy for it. Have a great day.