

MHAEM Demonstrates Impact of Mental Illness, Strives to Eliminate Stigma



For Mental Health Month (May), NJAMHAA hosted a portion of Mental Health Association of Essex and Morris' (MHAEM's) exhibit, *Inside Out Project Group Action: Out in the Open. In it Together*, a powerful collection of portraits of individuals who are seeking to raise awareness, and reduce the stigma associated with mental illness. During the May meeting of NJAMHAA's Adult Mental Health Practice Group, MHAEM Family Support Counselors Renee Folzenlogen, ATR-BC, LPC, NCC, and Emily Zelner, LCSW, presented on how the exhibit was created and its purpose, as well as the impact of mental illness on family members.

Impact of Mental Illness and Support for Family Members

Families are people who care for and about each other; they are not necessarily biologically related, according to Folzenlogen

and Zelner, who work in MHAEM's Intensive Family Support Services (IFSS) program. They support caregivers, who take on many roles, including case manager, driver, companion, coach and advocate.



"Caregivers spend an estimated 32 hours each week taking care of their loved ones who have mental illnesses. In fact, this estimate is probably modest, especially when the additional hours spent worrying and being concerned are considered," Folzenlogen said. "There is much stress on caregivers and they can't operate at their best without support."

In addition to the emotional stress, which could affect caregivers' physical health, other impacts of mental illness on families include financial challenges, difficulty concentrating, arguments stemming from stress and feelings of guilt and loss. "Family members may feel at fault and feel guilty that they can't do more for their loved ones. There may also be grief over the loss of a partner's ability to be involved or loss of children's future prospects," Zelner explained. "They also may be worried about the future and they could be feeling alone and stigmatized."

"Siblings of individuals with mental illness may feel pressured to be perfect and not highlight their successes in order to not cause more burden on parents or detract from their siblings' needs. They commonly keep these feelings in," Zelner added.

In the IFSS program, Folzenlogen and Zelner emphasize self-care and self-compassion for caregivers and the fact that mental illness is not their fault.

They also strive to eliminate stigma among caregivers and, of course, the general public.

"Stigma can be eliminated by speaking out. Once mental illness is accepted, many family members become advocates. They help their own families and many others," Folzenlogen said.

Exhibit Aims to Build Awareness, Eliminate Stigma on a Large Scale

In 2018, under the leadership of CEO Bob Davison, MHAEM organized the *Inside Out Project Group Action: Out in the Open. In it Together* exhibit, as a participant of *Inside Out: The People's Art Project*, an international initiative launched by a French artist known as JR.

MHAEM formed a community based committee and named this group action to communicate the message that when one person is diagnosed with a mental illness, everyone is affected. The exhibit currently consists of 23 portraits of individuals who have experienced the impact through their own diagnoses, a loved one's illness, or as a mental health professional seeking to improve mental health services. The exhibit was displayed at 11 venues to date, including NJ Transit Newark Penn Station, and was most recently on view during the month of June at the Montclair Public Library as a signature event for "Montclair Bounce, A Festival of Optimism and Resilience."



Out in the Open. In it Together will be installed at Caldwell University's Werner Hall Gallery from September through December 2019. Essex County Hospital Center also plans to host additional portraits in the autumn.

"The exhibit is comprised of 'larger than life' portraits, with a focus on human dignity," said Folzenlogen, who is also an art therapist and engaged two local photographers and art galleries to work with MHAEM to build the exhibit.

Folzenlogen and Zelner conduct workshops with individuals who express interest in participating in the project. The workshops help them decide if they will be involved and, if so, to what extent.

They discuss possible reactions to the photos and to the individuals being associated with the campaign.

"Speaking up can be empowering and liberating. It can also be scary," Zelner said.

Photos were taken with or without anonymous statements, and some individuals felt comfortable only with giving statements. The participants can have their portraits taken down at any time. All of the photos and statements are posted on the website, <http://www.insideoutproject.net/en/group-actions/usa-montclair-0>

"The whole process felt so good. It's easier to deal with mental illness when you're united and not isolated. The participants found strength in connecting with others in a stigma free environment while learning to cope with mental illness," Folzenlogen said.

"The common denominator was 'This is about connection and unity,'" Zelner said. "The faces of mental illness speak louder than the stigma."

