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World Mental Health Day helps advocates look to a new future

Bexar County elected officials and mental health leaders recognized World Mental Health Day with a resource event and balloon release today in Main Plaza. The event was organized by the County's Mental Health Department, which was recently created to help identify gaps in the mental health system, identify resources that can be leveraged to expand services, and recommend the best ways for Bexar County to invest in mental health.

World Mental Health Day is recognized annually on Oct. 10 with a particular theme to draw awareness to a specific aspect of mental health. This year's theme is "Living with schizophrenia" to emphasize that people suffering from the disorder can lead healthy and productive lives with the proper treatment. But, people with severe mental disorders on average tend to die earlier than the general population because of preventable risk factors such as smoking, physical inactivity, obesity and behaviors associated with self-medicating symptoms of mental illness.

Fourth Court of Appeals Justice Luz Elena Chapa said her brother, now in his 30s, was a gifted and talented student and star athlete. But he began using alcohol and marijuana as a teenager, something she judged him for, but never asked why he was doing it. Once her brother was diagnosed with schizophrenia, she realized he was self-medicating to silence the voices. But Chapa said she is left wondering how her younger brother's life might be different if he had been diagnosed early.

"Schizophrenia is one of the most debilitating mental illnesses. I have witnessed firsthand how it destroys a person's life if it goes undiagnosed and untreated," Judge Chapa said. "The conversation to combat mental illness has undoubtedly begun, but it must be a continuous one. We must share our personal stories because the more we share, the more we learn. Ending the stigma altogether is nearly impossible. However, if we lend our hearts to help lessen the stigma and accept those affected by mental illness, their journey to become productive members of our community will be an easier one."

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Schizophrenia is a severe mental disorder — typically presenting in late adolescence or early adulthood — that is characterized by profound disruptions in thinking, which affects language, perception and a person’s sense of self. It can cause psychotic experiences and can severely impair a person’s ability to be self-sufficient. More than 21 million people worldwide are affected by schizophrenia, according to the World Health Organization. However, half of those living with schizophrenia do not receive care for the condition.

“World Mental Health Day is a way to acknowledge that together we can make sure that our mental health needs are known, and that we value every single person here today and every day,” said Gilbert Gonzales, director of the County’s Mental Health Department. “It also is an opportunity to remove obstacles like stigma and to promote living an independent, joyful and productive life for all.”

Among Americans over the age of 18 it is estimated that 26.2 percent suffer from a diagnosable mental illness in any given year. That percentage increases significantly among the incarcerated population. Department of Justice studies have shown that approximately 45 percent of federal inmates, 56 percent of state inmates and 64 percent of jail inmates have displayed symptoms or had a history of mental disorder.

“Where appropriate, we need treatment, not incarceration,” said Commissioner Tommy Adkisson. “Let’s work to expand access to treatment and let’s take care of each other by asking, ‘Are you OK?’ and by listening to each other.”

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