

May is Mental Health Awareness Month

Since 1949, May is recognized as Mental Health Awareness Month in the United States. This year, we are challenging librarians to consider allying with millions of people and bring a heightened awareness to mental health through media and programming across the nation. Through intentional programming and special circulating collections, you are poised to help patrons living with mental health challenges, their friends, and families rediscover the importance of the community support found in libraries.

Libraries may not have thought of themselves in this way but libraries can be described as "protective factors" for those afflicted with mental illness. Protective factors are strengths and activities that reduce the likelihood of poor mental health outcomes. These may include help and information seeking behaviors or simply being a part of the community and increased socialization. Often people with mental health challenges report feeling isolated leading to poor outcomes.

Libraries contribute to "resiliency" by offering an inclusive environment. The chance to enjoy recreational and instructive reading, join in a book club, engage in afterschool or children activities, gain access to the Internet, receive homework help and learn life skills; are central protective factors that facilitate good mental health well-being.

In the field of social work, it is common to describe activities as being on the micro, mezzo, or macro level. These are ways of speaking about the continuum of the helping tradition from the individual or practitioner interaction to the influence of larger social forces. Below the micro, mezzo and macro traditions are melded into some ways libraries can help to fight stigma, provide support, educate the public and advocate for equal care.

Micro level

At the local level, any activity that brings awareness to mental health will stimulate discussion and help to reduce stigma in your local community. Despite the plethora of evidence-based treatments available, many people who would benefit from mental health services opt not to pursue them or fail to complete treatment once they begin. One of the reasons for this disconnect is a

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stigma

; namely, to avoid the label of mental illness and the harm it brings. Libraries can reduce stigma by not being afraid to talk about mental health. Learning about and discussing mental health conditions should be encouraged. Through learning we reduce labeling and are better librarian practitioners to assist those seeking mental health information.

Mezzo level

At the mezzo level, host a *gatekeeper-training for your staff or patrons at your local library. Gatekeeper-

training

for mental health care target individuals ("gatekeepers") who are in frequent contact with those living with a mental health condition in their communities. A gatekeeper

training

would equip nonprofessionals with the knowledge and skills to recognize, intervene with, and refer distressed individuals to appropriate mental health resources. Let's challenge ourselves to learn more about connecting people to mental health service providers and additional services.

If you are interested in hosting a gatekeeper training at your library, please contact Shantalea Johns, L.M.S.W. at shantalea@wayne.edu.

Macro-level

At the macro-level, partake in an advocacy effort around Michigan. During May, you will find different gatherings and walks to educate the public and legislators about mental health. NAMI-Michigan and Michigan Association of Community Health boards are organizations that publish information on advocacy efforts as well as conferences and training you can attend. Take what you have learned to the next level and be involved in efforts that take mental health awareness to larger audiences.

It takes one person to make a difference- think of what thousands of libraries can do as we work together to reduce the stigma associated with mental health.

Bibliography

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