

Taking an integrated approach to overall wellness (column)

Larissa Jacobsen 1:17 p.m. EDT September 21, 2016



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Individuals with mental disorders are two times more likely to die early than their peers in the general population, according to a 2015 study published in the journal JAMA Psychiatry. What's more, nearly two-thirds of the deaths analyzed in the study resulted from natural causes like heart disease —

not suicide.

How can we work better together to address lifestyle and social factors that can increase the health risks associated with mental illness? Strong support for individuals living with or experiencing a mental illness is crucial.

At TrueNorth Wellness Services, a behavioral health and wellness nonprofit serving southcentral Pennsylvania, we offer a Peer Support program designed to help individuals through recovery and increase quality of life. The program uses trained Certified Peer Specialists who might have similar experiences and are succeeding in their own recoveries from mental illness.

Because we connect individuals with similar experiences, the Peer Support program allows for a comfortable and open relationship and uses recovery-oriented and strength-based approaches to help individuals achieve their goals and maintain wellness. While generally operating within the behavioral health setting, Peer Support often takes a holistic approach to the individuals' quality of life that can supersede just mental health and impact wellness on different levels.

The Peer Support program works with a client's professional support network, including both behavioral and mental health as well as the primary care setting. Peer Support is typically a mobile service done outside of the traditional office setting, allowing for a "hands-on approach" when working with clients to reach their goals. This empowers the client to reach broad wellness goals in a supportive way.

For example, perhaps a client wants to lose weight by physical exercise, knowing that exercise promotes improved emotional and mental health. The Peer Specialist may help a client work toward this goal by actively engaging in physical exercise with him or her, as well as encouraging the client to engage in physical exercise on his or her own.

Peer Support Specialists also support integrated health by focusing on improving sleep, nutrition, reducing stress, and encouraging recovery from substance abuse. Co-occurring disorders are common in mental health, especially when substances are used by an individual as a form of self-medication. Peer Specialists can help individuals work toward building and actively practicing positive coping skills to help an individual who is struggling with a drug and alcohol concern.

Another important aspect of Peer Support is the Wellness Recovery Action Plan, which can be helpful in generating coping strategies and preventing and identifying stressors, as well as managing relapse and crisis situations. Goals are person-centered and catered to the individual being served, allowing the client and peer specialist to identify areas to improve upon and explore action steps to achieving those goals.

Encouraging a client to be an active part of his or her recovery can help empower an individual to gain hope, which is why peer specialists also promote self-advocacy for an individual's treatment. The Peer Support program helps individuals grow in confidence and become collaborative partners with their treatment teams.

By integrating a focus on overall wellness and addressing some of the situational or lifestyle challenges that can increase health risks, Peer Support and programs like it can provide comprehensive, collaborative care to ensure optimal results for those we serve.

Larissa Jacobsen is the Peer Support Supervisor for Franklin/Fulton County and a Mental Health First Aid instructor at TrueNorth Wellness Services.

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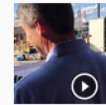
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