

DAILY REPUBLIC

Mental illness' stigma -- Medication, education and support can make all the difference to those who suffer from treatable afflictions

By Andrea E. Garcia

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VALLEJO - Anthony Lara, 39, spent 10 years in and out of hospitals before understanding why he heard voices in his head.

Lara, a man whose smile produces defined dimples, was told in 1991 he had a chemical imbalance and was given medication to alleviate his problems. But they remained and actually worsened.



Anthony Lara, right, who suffers from schizophrenia, is the team coach at Crestwood Behavioral Health Center in Vallejo. (Christine Baker/Daily Republic)

At times, he heard voices while driving. But mainly, he felt the voices radiated from walls, saying "You're no good!" along with comments that seem to make this humble man uncomfortable.

He described the voices as "listening to a radio in your head, with a lot of garbage coming out.

"It's scary and so thought-consuming, trying to decipher the things said while trying not to react," he admitted. "It's an emotional package and I wanted to fight the voices."

Lara turned to methamphetamine while intermittently taking medications, which fostered insomnia, more voices and hallucinations. For a decade, he jumped from one hospital to the next in between living on the streets and being ousted from apartments.

"Because I was talking and yelling at my voices, I scared people and they complained to the manager. That's when I got evicted," he recalled of his experience at a Fairfield apartment.

After 10 years of living a life filled with stress and fear, which nourished his low self-esteem, Lara moved into a board and care facility in Vacaville and was introduced to Donovan's Place in Fairfield, where support, counseling and life skill programs helped him to understand his mental illness of schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and insomnia.

It then took Lara four years to learn the essentials of managing his symptoms, of understanding the importance of taking his medication and the role community members play during moments of healing.

"We're not all crazy, we are people who think. We're living in a community and participating in the community just like anyone else," he said. "We are a part of the community."

Wellness to recovery Lara works at the Wellness Recovery Center in Vallejo, a place that fosters wellness, recovery, resiliency and hope to a group of people with mental illness.

He is a team coach for roughly 30-50 clients who frequent the facility, funded by the Mental Health Services Act. He spends 40 hours a week with folks that some community members shy away from.

To him, however, they are family members. Mental illness is a medical condition that disrupts a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others and daily functioning, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness. It can affect persons of any age, race, religion or income and isn't a result of a personal weakness, lack of character or poor upbringing.

"It's a brain disorder that a lot of folks commonly think can be controlled if people wanted to stop the behaviors associated with the mental illness. But that's not the case," said Fred Heacock, mental health director for Solano County Department of Health and Social Services. "Just as a person with a heart condition can live a relatively normal life by taking medication and exercising, so can people with mental illness."

It is similar to having any other disease, he added, such as diabetes or high blood pressure, where medication helps to control the symptoms and allows people to have normal and healthy lives.

Lara takes 11 medications daily and continues with counseling and education to be a successful community member.

But not everyone with mental illness is as fortunate. According to NARSAD, the Mental Health Research Association, one in five Americans suffer from a diagnosable mental illness in a given year but only one-third seek treatment.

The economic cost of untreated mental illness is more than \$100 billion each year in the United States.

As a result, people with untreated mental illness suffer the consequences, such as being unable to find housing, employment and a normal life.

"People with mental illness do not have a character flaw. It's not something someone chooses and they're not mentally retarded. It's a medical issue that needs to be treated," stressed Janet Flores, family advocate for Solano County Mental Health department. "Those labels affect their self-esteem and creates shame."

According to Flores, mental illness is a community issue, which is why she urged those with mental illness to bring their friends, family and neighbors to monthly meetings held at the multi-purpose room at the Solano County Mental Health clinic, where myths and misconceptions are addressed.

"People think you're crazy and no matter how hard you try, these labels are what people put on them. It stops them from getting hired, living in places and having the quality of life they deserve," she said.

For Lara, education helped bring his life to normalcy, which is why he advocates the message to those at the Wellness Center.

"Through medication and life changes, it could be managed and through support, we can do well," Lara said. "We need to work as a community and get educated. We're all members of this community."

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At a glance

Who: Solano County Mental Health Services
What: Understanding mental illness
When: 6-8:30 p.m. today
Where: 2101 Courage Drive, Multipurpose Room
Info: 784-2097

MENTAL ILLNESS FACTS

- About 26.2 percent of Americans 18 and older suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year.
- Mental Disorders include: Mood disorders, such as bipolar, schizophrenia and suicide; Anxiety disorders, such as panic disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder; Eating disorders; Autism; and Alzheimer's Disease.
- About 20.9 million Americans 18 and older have a mood disorder in a given year.
- Major Depressive Disorder is the leading cause of disability in the U.S. for people 15-44.
- In Solano County, the number of mental health clients receiving county services has steadily increased from 3,681 in the 1998-99 fiscal year to 5,570 in the 2003-04 fiscal year, more than a 50 percent increase.

Source: National Institute of Mental Health, Solano County Mental Health Services