

Lesson learned: Reaching out to mentally ill is a must

by Reginald Ballantyne

The lessons are both humbling and hopeful.

While we can send astronauts to a space station hundreds of miles from Earth, we don't fully understand the workings of the brain, an organ whose apparent dysfunction in one individual can cause so much suffering.

Yet it is the same organ that is demonstrating incredible resilience in U.S. [Rep. Gabrielle Giffords](#)

Helping her pull through to complete recovery - it is hoped - are the complex knowledge and skills of medical professionals.

However, experts emphasize that a very simple first step is required to help a person who seems disturbed, although it's a difficult step for many of us. It's reaching out and saying, "I'm concerned about you. I noticed you haven't been yourself lately."

But a major obstacle prevents many from seeking care: the stigma attached to mental illness. A family might not want to admit something seems to be wrong with their teenager. The teenager does not want to be labeled a nutcase, a psycho - someone who needs a shrink.

For weeks on end now, newscasts have bombarded us with that photo of the young man with the crazed grin, demonizing the category "mentally ill." Who would want to be lumped into that category by admitting one needs help?

Those who work in the public and private sectors have been grappling for years with ways to improve mental-health care in the United States. But improved services are of limited use if people are reluctant to seek them.

Admittedly, cuts in Medicaid eligibility in Arizona and around the country have left thousands who need mental-health care without the full range of services that would benefit them. We must work to achieve a fiscal conscience that will restore eligibility to more of our citizens in need.

Meanwhile, we should keep in mind that despite the cuts in Medicaid eligibility, "there have been no cuts in behavioral health care in Arizona Medicaid," explains Dr. Laura Nelson, a psychiatrist and deputy director of the Division of Behavioral [Health Services](#) at the Arizona Department of Health Services.

In fact, Arizona is considered a progressive state because of the robust public mental-health services provided through cost-effective outpatient programs, based on best practices.

In addition to clinicians, those services include a case manager, support in maintaining employment and peer-support organizations. In 15 peer agencies across the state, hundreds of recipients of mental-health services who have made progress in managing their illness are able to relate with those in need in ways professionals cannot.

Magellan Health Services, serving predominantly Maricopa County, funds a crisis line (800-631-1314) as do health authorities in our other regions. Anyone can call 24/7 and talk to a behavioral-health professional, who can either dispatch a mobile crisis team or help someone get connected to sources of care.

In addition, employees of most businesses have access to an employee-assistance program that provides counseling and referrals to providers. Employers must provide mental-health services comparable with traditional medical coverage.

But, again, people who need help must be encouraged to walk through those doors.

Nelson says, "What we've learned through the tragedy in Tucson is we need to reach out and educate the general public about how they can recognize early who needs help. Here's a real role for our teachers, family members, friends - people who have a relationship with the person.

"How do we help individuals feel comfortable reaching out and having that conversation and teach them what resources are available?"

First, look in the mirror. Are we open to connecting with the "other" whom we do not understand and may have learned to fear?

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