

Reaching Out to Improve Mental Health

Psychiatrist Bruce A. Wright, M.D. believes the stigma long associated with “mental illness” has waned over the last decade or so, but says there are still hurdles preventing people from reaching out for what sometimes can be desperately needed help.

“Many people simply believe that nothing can be done to treat the way they are feeling,” says Dr. Wright, Medical Director of Psychiatry in the Behavioral and Mental Health program at St. Clair Hospital.

But that, he says, is far from the truth.

People suffering from mental illnesses today—whether mood disorders such as major depression, anxiety or panic disorders, or other psychiatric disorders—are being treated effectively and successfully with a combination of therapy and medication.

And, says Dr. Wright, the goal in treating people with mental illnesses is much like that of physicians who are treating patients with physical ailments. “Our aim is to not just make people feel better. It is to bring about a remission, where they feel completely better.”

Dr. Wright says he and the other board-certified psychiatrists, as well as the therapists at St. Clair, are helping people every day return to lives free of despair and worry.

He says the majority of men and women who are treated at St. Clair are suffering from mood disorders, which include major depression and anxiety disorders, in which people are unusually or overly anxious, or may experience panic attacks.

Dr. Wright says some studies show that up to 15 percent to 20 percent of the general adult population suffers an episode of major depression at some point in their lives. (Women are twice as likely to experience an episode of major depression as men.) He says those numbers reflect,

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in part, the growing number of men and women who are actively seeking treatment for mental illness after seeing that other people have been treated effectively for it, including celebrities.

“People are realizing that psychiatric illnesses are diseases, not a sign of weakness,” he says. “They know it’s not as simple as pulling yourself up by your bootstraps.”

Dr. Wright says St. Clair Hospital offers a continuum of services for people in need of treatment. The Hospital’s 26-bed inpatient unit is designed for adult patients who need treatment during the acute phase of their illness. Outpatient services include the Partial Hospitalization program and the Intensive Outpatient program. Both of these programs are designed as a possible alternative to an inpatient stay for adults with acute psychiatric illness or can be beneficial as a transition following an inpatient stay.

The Hospital’s Mental Health Consultation-Liaison program provides comprehensive evaluation services for patients in St. Clair’s Emergency Room who are identified as needing psychiatric care or other crisis intervention.

In addition, the Hospital facilitates two support groups in the community.

 For more information, please call St. Clair Hospital Behavioral and Mental Health Services at 412.942.4850.

A Patient’s Path to Recovery

For Samantha (not her real name), her entrée into Behavioral and Mental Health Services at St. Clair Hospital was precipitated by a host of stress-inducing family issues, including a troubled marriage and, like so many other Baby Boomers, with having to care for elderly parents.

“There were a lot of issues that I was dealing with at that particular time,” Samantha recalls of summer 2007 when a deep depression began to creep into her everyday life.

The private clinical psychologist Samantha was seeing at the time suggested she enroll in the Partial Hospitalization program at St. Clair. “She felt that at that particular moment in time, I needed more intensive therapy than what I was going to be receiving from her in one, 45-minute session per week,” Samantha says.

A teacher by profession, Samantha admits that she didn’t follow the same advice she gives her students, which is to immerse themselves in their studies in order to receive the most benefit. “At the time, I really didn’t get what I could have out of the Partial Hospitalization program, because I wasn’t fully embracing it.”

In 2008, having been diagnosed with major clinical depression, she was treated in the Hospital’s inpatient unit, where she participated in a “much more structured program” before returning to the Partial Hospitalization program.



DR. BRUCE WRIGHT (CENTER) CONFERS WITH BEHAVIORAL AND MENTAL HEALTH COLLEAGUES KIM FRITZ, R.N. AND ED WALSH, R.N.

BRUCE A. WRIGHT, M.D.

Dr. Wright is Chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at St. Clair Hospital. He is board-certified by the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology in Psychiatry. He earned his medical degree from the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine and completed his internship and residency at the University Health Center of Pittsburgh Western Psychiatric Institute & Clinic.

Samantha credits the dedication and professionalism of the staff of both programs with helping her make great strides toward recovery. “I felt like I was treated like a human being and not just another patient in a hospital,” she says. “The staff in both the inpatient and the Partial Hospitalization program at St. Clair are dedicated to their profession and very dedicated to their patients. They wanted us to make improvements and they encouraged us to do so.”

Also key to making progress was developing a level of trust between not just herself and staff, but other patients during group therapy. “When I was in therapy, I wanted to be able to tell people what was going on so they could help me. But you had to develop a level of trust. And that was something I thought was definitely developed at St. Clair,” Samantha says.

A combination of therapy and medication was helping Samantha, but she suffered a relapse when she stopped taking the prescribed doses of medication. “I made a big mistake in going off my medication, a decision I had made on my own without conferring with my psychiatrist.”

But, she says, she found the Partial Hospitalization program served as a “safety net” for her just when she needed it most. “I found I could rely on St. Clair Hospital and the staff to welcome me back to the program and not ridicule or belittle me because I had a relapse and had to come back to the program. That was heartwarming to me that they did not make me feel that way.”

Today, Samantha is seeing a private therapist outside the Hospital, but believes the veil of depression she was living with has been lifted. “I am doing great. I feel the cognitive behavior therapy that I went through in the Partial Hospitalization program has helped me to look at life and how to handle issues and stressors that arise in my life in a more positive and productive way.” She credits the good connections she made with other patients with helping her form a solid support mechanism to fall back on.

Samantha agrees with Dr. Wright that the stigma long associated with mental illness is preventing people from getting help. “When it comes to dealing with mental health issues, the stigma of seeking out help needs to be removed,” she says. “Our society needs to realize that mental health is the same as physical health. If I had a broken bone, or diabetes, or had suffered a heart attack, I would not hesitate to seek out medical attention. But people don’t seek out medical attention for mental health issues because we have stereotyped people who do go for mental health or psychiatric help. But the mind is part of the body that needs to be taken care of, as well.” Based on her own experience, Samantha says, “Don’t be afraid to reach out for help. There are so many things that happen in our lives that we cannot handle on our own. We need to rely on others to help us through those issues.”

