

Mental Health Awareness: Facility offers a place to find help

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Myron Gargis, executive director of Mountain Lakes Behavioral Center in Guntersville, tries to ensure patients with mental disorders who walk through his facility's doors meet their goals and return to feeling like themselves again.

As executive director of Mountain Lakes, Gargis is charged with leading a team of psychiatrists, nurse practitioners and 30 counselors who work together to fulfill their mission statement of "providing a consumer sensitive, outcome-oriented, behavioral healthcare system."

"We're considered a comprehensive treatment center, meaning we serve children and adults, as well as senior citizens in nursing homes who may be having trouble adjusting to life away from home," Gargis said.

The center, which serves both Marshall and Jackson counties, offers a variety of options to consumers wanting to address the wide spectrum of their mental health, including inpatient and outpatient programs focused on life skills, case management as well as alcohol and drug addiction therapy at their Cedar Lodge location in Claysville.

Ranging from psychological evaluations to simple counseling services, prescription drug referrals and hands-on intervention, Gargis said the keys to a success story in any program lie in getting a client's diagnosis under control and in the right hands.

"The first time we see a patient we do an intake evaluation and use the information to develop a treatment plan and outline goals we'd like to see them achieve based on what they tell us about their situation," said Gargis.

"They may need to see either a counselor or a doctor but sometimes the case may be they need to see both. It all depends on how far the illness or disorder has progressed and if we think they need to be medicated or not."

Even though some conditions like schizophrenia and post-traumatic stress require regularly scheduled visits to a specialist facility like Mountain Lakes, another local psychiatrist, Dr. Elizabeth Lachman, explained most of the warning signs of mental distress typically originate in the care of your primary physician.

"I'd say a majority of family practice offices do a satisfactory job in effectively treating depression and determining where clients need to be and whether they are a danger to themselves or others," Lachman said

“The big thing with mental illness is just coming to terms and accepting what you are dealing with is real and the only appropriate action is to seek real help.

“Chances are, even if you’re seeing a regular doctor, they’ll recognize an underlying issue.”

Besides clinical attention, Gargis said Mountain Lakes also offers in-home services for children and adults to allow counselors a better insight into a person’s domestic environment, which is sometimes the root of complications they don’t always recognize during interviews administered in the office setting.

Gargis explained going into a patient’s home allows Mountain Lakes employees to see how they interact with their family, sometimes catching abnormal behavior in adolescents before they become a bigger problem later in life.

“We also offer children’s day treatment, a group of kids who meet after school with counselors and case managers dealing with everything from anger issues, depression, conduct difficulties in school, trouble dealing with authority figures and stress,” said Gargis. “At that age, it’s common to find out later they’ve been dealing with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or an overlooked mood disorder which is the reason they’ve been acting out.

“Some of the kids are (attending treatment) on referrals from their school, the Department of Human Resources or parents, with a few at high-risk of being placed in a psychiatric hospital or foster home.”

While most of the work done at Mountain Lakes is done in a monitored setting, Gargis said a large portion of the rehabilitation he and his employees provide involves patients diligently following up on the advice they receive and dedicating themselves to wellness outside the clinic.

“The biggest challenge our clients face in relapsing is taking their medications, doing well for the first time in awhile, making improvements then deciding for themselves ‘they’re OK,’ (that they) no longer need it and abruptly stop taking all of them,” said Gargis.

“Sometimes, when you stop (medications) abruptly, your illness might resurface in ways worse than it initially did.

“ It’s like when I take my own medicine for high blood pressure. If I suddenly decide to stop there probably wouldn’t be too much difference at first but sooner or later it would return to elevated levels and cause problems again.”

Though both Lachman and Gargis agreed it’s tough for people to accept the fact they are ill, they said it’s even tougher for patients to grasp there are no quick fixes and certain disorders might require constant attention throughout their life.

“I can’t say for certain when a patient leaves here they’ll never come back, but they may go for a period where we no longer see them for awhile but return and seek treatment at a later time,” said Gargis.

“That’s not to say we don’t have patients who have gotten better and are in the ‘maintenance’ stage where they’re just coming in to get refills occasionally instead of constantly attending sessions.

“Most problems people come to me with are treatable in my opinion. The roadblock you’ve got to move past is ‘it must be something else besides mental illness’ and doing nothing about it.”

According to Gargis, 26 percent of any population of adult Americans experiences a bout with mental illness in the course of year.

Adjusted to local data, Gargis explained this equates to roughly 23,000 out of the 90,000 people in the Marshall County area intermittently struggling with something they might not be able to recognize.

Similarly he said, only 36 percent of those affected annually would ever seek professional treatment for their ailment, the remaining 64 percent running the risk of letting mental health continually take a toll on their physical health and ability to cope with everyday life.

The Center For Disease Control and Prevention goes on to say at least 50 percent of people will develop at least one mental illness within their lifetime.

“I think you can really be robbed of your life, who you are and ultimately happiness if you let a mental illness go untreated,” Gargis said.

“If conditions like depression continue without care, a person can go weeks or months sleeping all day in bed and eventually lose interest in things they once enjoyed, such as going to church, playing sports and hanging out with friends and family members.”

Despite mental illness having a widespread prevalence, Gargis said fearing the stigma involved with admitting you or a loved one have mental trouble is nothing to be ashamed of.

“I’ll meet people occasionally who find out what kind of work I’m in and say they have a family member who’s suffering from some mental illness they haven’t told anybody about,” said Gargis

“At that point it’s just people keeping secrets for people with secrets. Awareness has to be out in the open and the stigma removed for people to move forward.”