

Picturing a community that understands mental illness
By CHET BELL, GUEST OPINION



Chet Bell is CEO of Stewart Marchman-Act Behavioral Health, the area's largest nonprofit mental-health and substance-abuse treatment provider.

Community events

- Today: 55th Annual Walk for Dignity. Honoring the late Angela Jackson for her service to people with mental illness. 10:30 a.m. Daytona Beach City Hall, 301 S. Ridgewood to the Debra Ann House, 531 S. Ridgewood. To register call 252-5785 or e-mail bob@mhavolusia.org.
- Wednesday: Andrew Wakefield, author of "Callous Disregard: Autism and Vaccines, the Truth behind the Tragedy," will talk about his book at 6 p.m. Daytona Shores Resort and Spa, Richard Petty Room, 2637 S. Atlantic Ave., Daytona Shores.
- Friday and Saturday: National and local experts speak on a variety of topics, including bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder in Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and autism spectrum disorders. Friday's community forum is open to the public at no charge, from 6-8:30 p.m. Medical and behavioral health professionals will have professional development sessions Saturday from 9 a.m. to 1:45 p.m. Both events in Building 110 are on the Daytona State College campus in Daytona Beach. Register online at www.smabehavioral.org/PictureIt.html.

Mental Illness Awareness Week started Sunday. It's important that our community understand mental illness as a group of biologically based chronic diseases. Unfortunately we are quick, through our own lack of knowledge, to see only bizarre behavior, someone to be pitied or avoided.

When the community pictures mental illness among adults it typically is thinking of schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or major depression. Schizophrenia is a disease affecting about 1 percent of the population. It interferes with the ability to think clearly, to distinguish reality from fantasy, to manage emotions, make decisions, and relate to others. Bipolar disorder, or manic depression, is an illness affecting more than 10 million Americans that causes extreme shifts in mood, energy, and functioning. Major depression is the most common major mental illness, affecting 15 million American adults. Unlike normal emotional sadness, loss or passing mood states, major depression is persistent and can significantly interfere with a person's thoughts, behavior, mood, activity and physical health.

When the community pictures mental illness among children it is typically thinking of autism spectrum disorders, or ASDs. These conditions are complex developmental disorders of brain function. Each can impair a child's ability to interact socially, communicate verbally and nonverbally and severely limit their activities and interests. These symptoms typically appear during the first three years of life. There is no cure for ASDs, but with appropriate early intervention, there can be improved social development and reduced undesirable behaviors.

ASDs affect an estimated two to six per 1,000 children and strike males about four times as often as females. ASDs are "spectrum disorders" that affect individuals differently and to varying degrees. The ASDs are autism (the defining disorder of the spectrum), Asperger syndrome, pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), Rett syndrome, and childhood disintegrative disorder (CDD). The most severe cases are marked by extremely repetitive, unusual, self-injurious, and aggressive behavior. The mildest forms of autism resemble a personality disorder associated with a perceived learning disability.

In our community the number of people seeking services for a mental illness is at an all-time high. At Stewart-Marchman-Act Behavioral Healthcare, the number of active outpatients receiving psychiatric care has nearly doubled over the past three years to more than 4,600. The sheer numbers of people with the most severe and persistent symptoms of these chronic illnesses frequently overwhelm our capacity to provide inpatient care in local crisis units and at Florida's three state psychiatric hospitals. Increasing numbers of people with severe and persistent mental illness end up in our jails and prisons. Many do not receive adequate care.

Each of these illnesses persists across the lifespan. Each is also treatable, with dramatic symptom improvement through medication and therapy for some individuals, and measurable improvement for most -- but only when behavioral health care is available and accessible.

An understanding community is aware that these diseases are no more or less different, challenging and variably treatable than other forms of chronic illness -- cancer, asthma, diabetes, heart disease. However, because these diseases affect the brain, and therefore thinking, emotions and behavior, they are highly visible. All types of visible illnesses -- often characterized as disabilities -- are unfortunately often met with fear, ridicule, avoidance, incarceration. Perhaps worst of all, indifference. That's just wrong. Let's picture a community that understands mental illness and responds with knowledge, support, accessible health care and acceptance. That's the goal of mental health awareness week.