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Vol. 186, No. 189 • Tuesday, May 21, 2019

The Telegraph

NASHUA & REGION

www.nashuatelegraph.com • Newsroom: 603-594-1247

Tuesday, May 21, 2019 • Page A3

Providing hope to individuals with a 'co-occurring disorder'

Helping those struggling with substance misuse and mental health disorders simultaneously

By MARIE MACEDONIA, PsyD
and ERIC WALTER, MS, MA
Guest Columnists

News about substance use disorders is all around us. We continue to hear about the high numbers of overdoses occurring all across the country. Unfortunately, New Hampshire has the fourth highest rate of overdose incidents in the U.S. That said, most people are not aware of the fact that many individuals who struggle with a substance use disorder may also have a mental health disorder. Individuals who experience both a mental health and substance use disorder at the same time are considered to have what's known as a "co-occurring" disorder. In America, this definition applies to approximately 10.2 million adults. People who struggle with co-occurring disorders are more likely to experience worse outcomes than individuals suffering from single disorders, and tend to experience higher rates of homelessness, incarceration,

medical problems, relapse of mental illness, family problems, violence, victimization, and suicidal behaviors. Often, the combination of these illnesses has a tragic impact on people's lives and traditional treatment approaches prove to be challenging.

Treating co-occurring disorders requires an understanding of the complex difficulties involved in living with co-occurring substance use and mental health disorders. Traditionally, treatment for these clients consisted of treating one disorder first and then treating the other separately. For example, an individual might be treated for symptoms of bi-polar disorder before starting treatment for addiction, or vice versa. Research has shown traditional treatment approaches were successful only 20% of the time, leaving the remaining 80% of individuals receiving little or no benefit from treatment.

In response to the above facts, Greater Nashua Mental Health

(GNMH) sought out and now offers a more effective alternative for co-occurring disorders. The method is called "Integrated Dual Disorder Treatment" (IDDT), and it has been changing lives. The IDDT model was designed to treat both substance use disorders and mental illness at the same time. Compared to traditional methods, the IDDT model has a 60% success rate. This model includes a strong team approach and staff committed to collaborating to provide case management services, therapy, supported employment services, assistance for tasks in the community, facilitating access to 28-day treatment programs, attending self-help meetings with clients, and working with a psychiatrist and a nurse to provide medication services when needed.

In addition, the IDDT team at GNMH works as an outreach task force in the city of Nashua and surrounding towns. Team members will meet clients "where they are," both figuratively and literally. The IDDT staff meets clients in shelters, hospitals and the

streets of Nashua. Team members support clients through a stage-based recovery model and help individuals understand that substance use disorders and severe mental illnesses are chronic, but treatable disorders. This specially trained team understands that motivation for recovery varies depending on the individual and healing can be a challenging process, but the team supports clients every step of the way. In addition, the members of the IDDT team work hand in hand with other community providers in order to meet clients' sometimes profound and challenging needs.

The IDDT team at Greater Nashua Mental Health recently celebrated its first anniversary. In the past year, this team has played a particularly important role in the agency and in the lives of many individuals, offering a message of hope and education about the treatment of these challenging disorders. Providers are working diligently to overcome the stigma regarding individuals who struggle with both mental illness and

substance use disorders, a stigma that is very slow to disappear in our communities. The IDDT team brings an awareness that healing does not have to happen in an office and that everyone, at any stage of their illness, can get help. As the program is seeing its first clients obtaining and maintaining long-term recovery, it confirms the positive impact of the IDDT model in bringing healing and hope to an often-marginalized population.

The IDDT team of Greater Nashua Mental Health is located with our other substance use disorder treat-

ment services at 440 Amherst St., Nashua. If you or a loved one are struggling with both a mental health and a substance use disorder; please do not think that you have to face it alone. Call us today. For general information call our main number at 603-889-6147, or our videophone number at 603-821-0073. To speak to someone 24 hours a day, seven days a week if you are in crisis, call 1-800-762-8191.

Marie Macedonia is a Psychologist and IDDT Team Coordinator. Eric Walter is and IDDT Therapist

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