

Mental health issues a concern in S. Lake Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

There is no magic pill to cure mental illness. There is no one-size-fits-all diagnosis. There is no single cause.

The complexities of the illness and limited resources in South Lake Tahoe can exacerbate the problem or delay diagnosis. And being in a small town may mean those in need feel intimidated about asking for help for fear they will be mocked or run into the person who is helping them at the grocery store or elsewhere. Added to the equation, Medi-Cal options are limited.

These were some of the revelations to come out of last week's mental health workshop sponsored by Tahoe Regional Young Professionals at Lake Tahoe Community College. Panelists were Cheyenne Lane with Tahoe Youth & Family Services, Sabrina Owen from El Dorado County Mental Health Services, and Betsy Glass, social worker with Barton Health.

Lane has noticed that while her agency's crisis line is receiving fewer calls, experts don't believe this is because the need has diminished.

"I think now we need something more like a text help line. We would get more younger people to talk to us," Lane said.

With there being no psychiatrist in South Lake Tahoe, Barton Health uses telemedicine to reach specialists. This month Barton started offering telepsychology as well. Patients are able to interact with these medical professionals remotely and in turn receive care and prescriptions.

TED Talks are another resource, according to the panelists.

This is for those in need of help and those wanting to learn what can be done.



Cheyenne Lane with Tahoe Youth & Family Services, from left, Sabrina Owen from El Dorado County Mental Health Services, and Betsy Glass, social worker with Barton Health, talk about mental health issues. Photo/LTN

All three said it's imperative for each member of society to learn compassion, to listen to people and then try to provide help. Help can be a shoulder to cry on, getting the person care or alerting authorities.

Those with mental health issues are prone to hurting themselves as well as others – sometimes fatally either by committing suicide or homicide.

Owen said car accidents don't always get recorded as a suicide or the deliberate killing of someone else. Without a note left behind or a survivor to tell the story, these deaths get labeled merely as a vehicle "accident".

About one-third of the audience admitted to having had thoughts of suicide in the past. The professionals guessed even more sitting there were afraid to raise their hands.

Depression is a mental issue with many gradients to it. It is something everyone will experience. It's the degree and how one copes with it that varies so greatly.

"A lot of times people with mental health issues are always in a state of anxiety," Lane said.

How a past trauma translates to mental health issues is a relatively new area of study. Glass said conversations and studies about physiological impact on mental health are just starting.

Trauma could be a car accident, military experience, sexual abuse, childhood upbringing or something else.

"Your history affects how you respond to current situations," Owen said.

The presenters noted that on the South Shore the level of poverty (more than 60 percent of students in Lake Tahoe Unified School District qualify for a reduced or free lunch) is contributing to mental health issues. It may be manifested with alcohol or other drug use, domestic violence or child abuse.

Poverty often means poor nutrition and living conditions. This can all lead to stress. Stress is a mental issue and can escalate into unhealthy situations.

Lane said one of the problems with today's society is people are desensitized.

People seem to accept certain behaviors that a few years ago would have come with consequences for the aggressor.

"When we are in pain we hurt others. We hurt ourselves," Glass said.

Mental issues also can come in the form of bullying and lashing out. That type of inflicted pain is harder to define.

It's something akin to knowing what pornography is when one sees it, but not always being able define it cerebrally. Mentally stable individuals don't routinely act in a bullying manner.

"Bullies are often diagnosed with anti-social personalities," Owen said.

She said children who are bullied tend to have issues as adults.

But it's not just adults who have mental health issues.

According to the gun-control advocacy group Everytown Gun Safety, there were an average of two shootings a month in K-12 schools in 2013.

There is a growing desire by some in law enforcement and mental health circles for the media to not use the names of the shooter. This way their deadly act is not glamorized. For the media, though, the First Amendment is a concern.

Owen said it's important to talk about what goes on, but at the same there is a need to be careful what the media shows.

School shootings aren't just something local law enforcement deals with. The FBI has a behavior-analysis team working with schools that have identified students they believe pose a potential threat. The federal government has also made \$45 million available for armed school resource officers.

South Tahoe High School for years has had such an officer on campus – at least sporadically.

California requires all law enforcement officers to receive some training in how to handle calls involving mental health issues. A select number of El Dorado County sheriff's deputies have received extra training to be more specialized in these types of situations.

Notes:

- South Lake Tahoe 24-hour crisis hot line – 530.544.2219.
- National 24-hour crisis hot line – 800.273.8255.
- There will be a free Mental Health First Aid for Youth class through Barton University on Nov. 22 from 8am-4pm. For more info, go **online**.