

# Diagnosis – mental illness a serious issue in Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

Suicide. It's on a lot of people's minds. And that's what worries those who want to prevent people from acting on those thoughts.

In a survey of South Tahoe Middle School students, 65 out of 509 youths have thought about suicide, while 45 out of 509 have tried to kill themselves in the last year. Of those, 55 percent were girls and 25 percent boys.

The others didn't put a gender. It could be they are trans or gender neutral or use some other way to identify. Nationally, for the LGBTQ community, the suicide related numbers are triple those of the mainstream youth population.

These were some of the sobering facts that came out of the annual mental health forum organized by Barton Health. More than 50 people attended the May 9 gathering at South Tahoe High School. There were representatives from health care, law enforcement, businesses, nonprofits, social services, the general public and education.

A 2016 South Tahoe School graduate said it's great that those in the know gather to talk about the services available and what they are finding in their sphere of influence, but what really needs to happen for this information to get to the people who need it. She has had mental health issues and recently received treatment in the Bay Area. She wishes while she were in school, she had known about many of the services that are available here.

She is now a peer counselor with NAMI – the National Alliance on Mental Health. The local NAMI chapter headed by Jeanne and

Alan Nelson continues to expand its offerings.

What Jeanne Nelson shared with the group is that dealing with mental illness can be a lifelong issue – for the person and their loved ones.

Help is available and recovery is possible.

What was stressed is that mental illness comes in a variety of forms, none of which should be brushed aside. Depression is the most common issue and will likely affect everyone at some point.

It's only been in the last few years that locally a greater emphasis has been placed on mental health. Part of this is the result of a 2012 community needs assessment by Barton Health that revealed the South Shore was lacking in mental health services. Since that time the pendulum has started to swing in the other direction. (*Lake Tahoe News* did a multi-part series on mental health in 2016, with the stories accessible from the Home Page under Special Projects.)

Being able to openly talk about mental health as easily as one would talk about cancer or a heart attack or any physical ailment is a goal. Erasing the stigma; that's what needs to happen so people will treat mental health with the same seriousness and reverence accorded physical issues.

A multitude of events is going in May in recognition of this being Mental Health Awareness Month. More information is **online**.