

How Do You Know When It's Time to Get Help?

Free Mental Health Series Shed Light on Important Issue. Know someone who hides behind a mask of happiness? Mental health education seminars can help.

Do you ever feel depressed? How about anxious? Maybe you have a family member with a mental illness and you aren't sure what to do. Sometimes it's hard to know if what we are dealing with is normal, or if it's time to consult with a mental health professional.

"There are so many myths—and stigma—in our community surrounding depression, anxiety and other mental health issues," said Dr. Seema Sehgal, a psychiatrist with the Washington Township Medical Foundation. "We want to open a dialog where we can talk about mental health in a supportive environment."

Dr. Sehgal helped organize the upcoming eight-session mental health education series at Washington Hospital to raise awareness and provide a forum for discussing these issues. The free series starts on February 8 and ends on May 17. The sessions will be held from 6:30 to 8 p.m. in the Conrad E. Anderson, MD, Auditorium, Washington West, in Fremont.

The mental health education series is open to the entire community. You can attend all of the sessions, or just the ones that interest you. For more information or to register, visit www.whhs.com/events or call (800) 963-7070.

The Community Health Needs of understanding in the



community about mental health. "I did a presentation last year about understanding mental illness and we noticed the robust attendance," said Dr. Sehgal, who will be presenting three of the sessions. "There were many questions and people wanted more information. We selected the series topics based on what we heard from the community."

Crisis Intervention

The series kicks off on Thursday, February 8, with a session on Crisis Intervention presented by Mark Rahman, a retired senior family advocate from the Family Education and Resource Center (FERC). When you have a family member with mental illness, it can be hard to know when to step in or what to do, Dr. Sehgal explained. The session will define what a crisis is, how to intervene and manage it, as

well as the resources available.

"The whole idea is to support the family, in addition to getting help for the patient," she added.

Understanding Anxiety Disorders

Dr. Sehgal will present Understanding Anxiety Disorders on Thursday, February 22. The session will cover generalized anxiety, panic disorder, social anxiety, post-traumatic stress syndrome, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. The session will help attendees understand what is normal anxiety compared to what is excessive.

Understanding Mood Disorders

Major depression and bipolar disorder will be the focus of the Understanding Mood Disorders session on Thursday, March 8.

"It's normal to feel a certain amount of depression depending on what's happening in our lives," said Dr. Sehgal, who will present this session. "But major depression is about more than just having a bad day. It's important for people to understand what is normal and what is excessive."

Depression is very treatable, she added, but there is a lot of stigma around getting help. She will talk about the forms it can take, how to identify it, and when to get help.

Dr. Sehgal continued, "It breaks my heart to see a patient who has had depression for months and

months, but didn't know there was help available."

Understanding Psychotic Disorders

Dr. Sehgal will address schizophrenia and schizoaffective disorder in the Understanding Psychotic Disorders session on Thursday, March 22.

"With this and all of the sessions, the goal is to identify the condition, educate and discuss the need for early treatment for the best outcomes." She added, "Early intervention is important because we can keep patients from spiraling down and prevent psychotic episodes."

The Link Between Substance Abuse and Mental Health Disorders

This session will be held on Thursday, April 5, and examines the link between substance abuse and mental disorders. It will be presented by Carmen Masson, Ph.D., an associate professor in the psychiatry school at the University of California, San Francisco.

"If you start abusing substances at an early age, there is a high correlation with developing anxiety and mood disorders," Dr. Sehgal said. "The brain is not yet developed. And people with mental health issues often turn to substances to feel better. It goes both ways."

When Depression Occurs with Other Medical Conditions

There is a connection between depression and other medical conditions, which is the session topic on Thursday, April 19. Simone Madan, Ph. D., a licensed clinical psychologist affiliated with the University of California San Francisco, will present the session.

While it seems obvious that feeling bad physically could cause someone to become depressed, there are certain diseases that have a much stronger correlation with

depression than others, including heart attack, stroke and cancer, according to Dr. Sehgal.

"We watch for it and start treatment at the first sign," she added. "Your coping mechanisms are compromised when you are dealing with major illnesses."

Mental Wellness

The session on Thursday, May 3, will focus on strategies for improving mental wellness. It will be presented by Michele Wms-Smith, a senior family advocate with FERC, and Dr. Victoria Leiphart, a gynecologist with the Washington Township Medical Foundation who teaches yoga and empowerment classes at the Washington Wellness Center.

"There are a number of ways you can improve your mental wellness, including yoga, meditation, and other activities that are good for the mind and body," Dr. Sehgal said. "This session will look at what you can do in your day-to-day life to be at your mental best."

Family Support: Caring for Those with Mental Health Disorders

Mental illness can have a significant impact on the families and loved ones of those afflicted. At the last session in the series on Thursday, May 17, Wms-Smith will talk about local resources so families know where they can turn for support.

"Mental illness can impact the health of the entire family, so we have to support the whole family," Dr. Sehgal said. "No one should suffer alone."