

Giving Up Sane, Going for Happy

In the past, Mental Health treatment and Substance Abuse/Addiction treatment were separate disciplines, and were treated separately. The fields have now come together under the label “Behavioral Health.” It makes sense. Mental health issues and addictions both affect the brain as well as the body. Both have psychological as well as physiological and sociological components. David Satcher, PhD, M.D., former U.S. surgeon general said that protecting mental health is as important as protecting physical health, and that mental disorders are physical disorders, with the brain being the affected organ.

Satcher defined mental health as the ability to adapt to changes in one’s environment, the ability to have positive relations with other people and the ability to cope with adversity. When people see me, it usually involves one of those three things. Initially, most people want to know that they are “not crazy.” Next people want to know whether their thoughts/feelings/behaviors are “normal.” I believe that, as a society, we have lost our collective sense of humor. It used to be ok to be eccentric, a little left or right of center, and personality was encouraged. We have been led to believe that laughter, too long or is too loud, or anger (especially in women) might be “bi-polar,” or that sadness or guilt might be “depression.” Maybe. Maybe not. Both bi-polar disorder and clinical depression are serious medical problems that benefit from medication and psychotherapy. On the other hand strong feelings, indecision, communication problems, a sense of being overwhelmed, or mentally fatigued, do not necessarily warrant a psychiatric diagnosis.

More often than not, people who meet with me need to get back on track in some area of their life, or brainstorm solutions with someone who can be objective about “the problem.” Change is inevitable, and scary. We all resist change, and when the change happens anyway we feel powerless and anxious. If the sense of powerlessness totally knocks us out of orbit, it is good to have someone who can pick us up, dust us off, and help us locate a new path. A good therapist can do this.

We have to live in society and get along with each other, and that can be difficult at times. Play, humor, and creativity, acceptance and gratitude are some of the techniques I use to help people better navigate their world. I also use the Serenity Prayer from 12-Step programs because it is an excellent life tool even when the issue is not addiction. “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Refusing to accept things we cannot control is crazy making; accepting those things is soothing. Finding the courage to deal with a difficult issue gives us back our sense of competence and mastery. Knowing the difference between what we can and cannot control can greatly reduce stress and suffering.

Another tool from 12-Step programs is the acronym HALT. Never get too hungry, angry, lonely or tired. A small issue can turn into a raging crisis when these things pair up. Eat regular, nutritious meals, drink plenty of water, exercise to release tensions, pray

or meditate, see friends, rest. We are vulnerable both physically and emotionally when we neglect good self-care.

Suicidal thoughts should always be taken seriously. Anger that is too intense or dangerous should also always be taken seriously. Psychotic episodes or the intention to harm others requires assessment and intervention. Depression/anxiety or any other emotional state that has become disabling needs attention. Beyond that life is a journey, and life has its seasons. A major concept in Buddhism is “impermanence.” And just like the seasons of the earth, nothing lasts forever, neither the good things nor the bad. Trying to fend off unpleasant things while grasping onto that which we find pleasant causes stress and suffering. My prescription: lighten up, have fun, forget being perfect. If those things don't work...call me...Carol Whitescarver, LCSW, Director of Behavioral Health, (or Judi Ruder, LCSW, CDC I). Iliuliuk Family and Health Services, Inc. 581-1202. This program is partially funded by the citizens of the City of Unalaska.