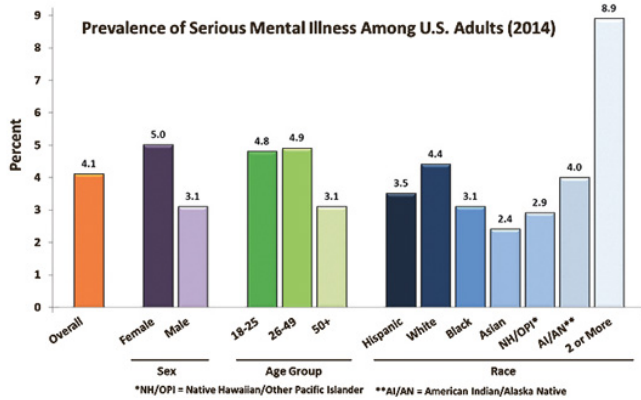


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## Getting Past a Stigma of Psychosis

By Daniel Smith



Data courtesy of SAMHSA

Orinda resident Chantel Garrett launched Partners for StrongMinds in November, a mental health nonprofit with a mission to raise awareness about psychosis and transform the way it's "detected, treated and understood in the United States." Her brother was diagnosed with schizophrenia when she was 22 and Garrett hopes that her organization can help future families detect the warning signs that hers missed.

To most Americans, the adolescent behavior of Garrett's brother sounds typical of the teenage blues: anxiety, depression, lack of focus, social withdrawal. Garrett came to suspect something more was the matter, though, in the months preceding her brother's abrupt departure for the Marine Reserves. "Something was off ... something wasn't right," she says. Some of her family members thought perhaps drugs were to blame, but no one suspected they were witnessing the onset of schizophrenia. How many of us would?

The shock was unimaginable when Garrett received the news that her brother, at age 20, had just experienced a psychotic break. He was treated for the next three months through forced hospitalizations and medications, but by then "it was almost too late," she says. What followed was a 15-year period marked by resurgent psychotic episodes, unemployment, diminished social interaction and a quality of life that remains below what the Garrett family, like any loving family, had hoped for.

Garrett later learned that the rapid decline she witnessed in her brother were "prodromal symptoms" - a typical prelude to psychosis.

"There's a whole stage of this illness that happens far before a psychotic break," says Garrett, and adds that the symptoms of this stage are detectable if people know what to look for and seek proper professional help. Through Partners for StrongMinds, Garrett plans to "put these early warning signs on the road map for parents and for young people."

Partners for StrongMinds believes that early detection leads to the potential for full recovery from an initial psychotic break through "a more effective, more empowering treatment." Early psychosis intervention begins treatment before or immediately after the first psychotic break, reducing the accelerated loss of social and cognitive function experienced by individuals with persistent psychosis. The treatment model is more empowering than traditional medication-based treatments, with an emphasis on patient-professional collaboration and support networks in addition to medicine. Despite success abroad, early psychosis intervention facilities are relatively new in the United States and virtually unknown to the public.

Garrett was largely inspired to start Partners for StrongMinds by this shortage of early psychosis intervention treatment centers, as well as the striking lack of public awareness on the subject - Garrett herself advocated for her brother's care for a decade before learning of early intervention. A former marketing professional, Garrett remembers thinking, "a lifesaving intervention for young

people like my brother that no one knows about? That's a product I can market all day long."

Putting thought into action, Garrett's primary focus for her nascent organization has been a website and a social media campaign to raise awareness about psychosis treatment and symptoms. The campaign, still in development, is targeted at teens and young adults - those most likely to experience their first psychotic break - and utilizes a social media-savvy Youth Leadership Board, comprised of age 30-and-under volunteers recruited to share their own experiences with psychosis and early intervention.

Bay Area resident Andrew Echeguren - himself a former patient in San Francisco's Prevention and Recovery in Early Psychosis program - is one such youth leader. Echeguren was recently interviewed in a YouTube film for the campaign, which he hopes will educate and "de-stigmatize mental health and mental illness." The latter part is crucial to Echeguren, who believes that Partners for StrongMinds "promotes dialogue, which ultimately leads to recovery."

In addition to YouTube, Partners for StrongMinds is also busy creating content for other social media channels including Tumblr, Instagram and Snapchat.

Garrett has not overlooked the older generation, who despite their probable lack of Instagram accounts, have an important role as "youth influencers." Partners for StrongMinds is currently engineering educational curriculum to be disseminated through the school system to parents and teachers, as well as students. This way youngsters have access to informed adults who are receptive to a conversation regarding psychosis and capable of directing them to the proper services.

Garrett is well aware of the challenges facing Partners for StrongMinds. Psychosis remains an uncomfortable, hush-hush topic, which has led to continued ignorance and preventable suffering. With early detection and treatment, psychosis does not have to ruin lives. And Garrett is going to make sure everybody knows it.

More information can be found on the Partners for StrongMinds' website: <http://partners4strongminds.org>

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