

# The importance of engaging with local mental health organizations

Shane Burke, MD

"Hi Dr. Burke, thanks for coming in today. My daughter struggles with depression and I feel like every time I try to reach out, I hit a dead end with her. How do I connect with someone, who by the nature of their disease, is hard to reach?"

**T**he answer? I'm not quite sure. I stood in front of a classroom of parents, siblings, and persons struggling with mental health issues, lecturing about depression. I can tell you about the complex interplay of biologic, psychological, and social factors that can lead one to become depressed. I can tell you the prevalence of depression in today's society, and how it is rising among all age groups. I can tell you a myriad of different treatments, from pharmacologic to therapeutic to procedural, for depression. But how, from a parent's perspective, can you connect with your child struggling with depression when they do not want your help? That I cannot tell you, at least not yet, anyways.

I had connected with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) in the Fall of 2018, when a patient of mine was discharged from hospitalization and told by a faith-based substance use treatment program that he would not be allowed to use any "mind-altering" medications when he returned to their program. Concerned about my patient, whom I had just stabilized with the use of medications, I did my best to work through that organization's resistance to psychotropic medications. When that failed, I reached out to NAMI for help in advocating for persons with mental

illness. My involvement escalated to giving a lecture on "Living with Depression" to our local chapter of approximately 25 individuals that night. I had expected to lecture to an engaged crowd about what I thought was my immense knowledge of depression, from diagnosis to development to treatment. What I had not expected, however, was to have a learning experience of my own.

I stood at the front of the room, listening to story after story of persons with depression and their family members discussing their experiences. Throughout the 90-minute lecture, my emotions ranged from being impressed to shocked, scared, and, ultimately, proud. For the past year and 7 months, I had been spending time with persons with mental illness on what was likely the worst days of their lives. I had seen a variety of severe presentations, from grossly psychotic to acutely manic to majorly depressed to highly agitated. With that wealth of experience, I had thought I was becoming an expert; however, at the front of that classroom that night, I realized how little I actually knew. Yes, I had contemplated before how much severe mental illness and hospitalization could affect a person and their loved ones.

continued



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#### Disclosure

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### Clinical Point

**My experience at NAMI opened my eyes to struggles that I had failed to even notice**

However, it was a different level of understanding to hear first-hand accounts of the loss of relationships, the struggle to connect, and the fall-out from intensive inpatient treatment.

In residency, we spend what seems like an immeasurable amount of time on inpatient psychiatric units, in outpatient clinics, and everywhere in between. We see so many patients on a daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly basis that it becomes easy to lose the individuality of each patient. We start associating patients with their disorder, rather than with who they are. However, if we take a step back and allow a larger

perspective—one that considers not only the patient but their families and communities—we likely would be able to provide greater and more comprehensive care.

My experience at NAMI was one that I will treasure forever. It opened my eyes to struggles that had I failed to even notice, and for that, and many other connections I made, I am grateful to have been blessed with this experience. My greatest recommendation to my fellow residents would be to engage with your local community organizations in the hope that you, too, can have an eye-opening experience that will strengthen your practice.



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