**Mental Health First Aid: *Teaching Us to Speak Up and Reach Out***

By Lauren Luik, Mental Health Association in New Jersey

Have you ever wondered why we lower our voices when we converse about a mental health problem that a loved one or friend may be experiencing – but have no concern about being overheard if we are talking about a broken bone, a case of chicken pox, or high blood pressure? Or why neighborhoods mobilize to offer support – visits, casseroles, flowers – to those who have received treatment for cancer or a heart attack -- but rarely do so for neighbors who have been hospitalized for depression, a suicide attempt or an addiction?

Though progress has been made over the years to bring mental health out of the shadows, our society, in general, continues to regard physical ailments very differently than psychological problems, which can still be considered “taboo topics” by many. Typically, this attitude results not from a lack of compassion, but from a lack of knowledge and understanding of the most basic facts about mental health – and illness.

**Mental Health First Aid,** an evidence-based, eight-hour training curriculum that teaches mental health literacy, takes aim at the stigma and misunderstanding that often stand in the way of the ***one in four people*** with mental health and substance abuse problems in the U.S. getting the help they need. It is teaching people to speak up and reach out, paving the way toward building a society that can talk openly about common mental health problems -- and care for the people who live with them – in the same way that we handle physical health issues.

Like CPR training, which helps a non-medical professional assist an individual following a heart attack, Mental Health First Aid training helps prepare someone who may or may not have any clinical training to assist a person who is developing a mental health issue or experiencing a crisis. In both situations, the goal is to help support the person – a loved one, co-worker, friend or stranger -- until appropriate professional help arrives or the crisis resolves.

Mental Health First Aid has been embraced across the nation since its arrival , under the guidance of the National Council for Behavioral Health in Washington, D.C. A decade later, more than 1 million people have now been certified as Mental Health “First Aiders.” In the state of New Jersey, nearly 20 organizations have banded together in a coalition called **Mental Health First Aid for New Jersey.** Its goal? To increase mental health literacy and remove stigma, ***one community at a time***.

***And “community” means******everyone*** -- faculty, nurses, counselors and administrators in the school and university setting; first responders such as police, firefighters and EMTs; health professionals like doctors, nurses and home health aides; and faith community leaders, lawyers, librarians, child welfare workers, homeless services providers, personal trainers and corporate employees – truly, anyone who encounters fellow human beings on a daily basis. ***And that’s you!*** To learn more about Mental Health First Aid USA, go to [www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org](http://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org); for trainings in New Jersey, contact us by email at [info@mentalhealthfirstaidfornewjersey.com](mailto:info@mentalhealthfirstaidfornewjersey.com).