

COMPASS

CPR for the Brain

Mental Health First Aid shatters stigma and saves lives

by rhea maze

When Kimberly Pratt broke her leg in a bike accident, she was showered with love, kindness and support. But when she suffered from major depression, feeling the saddest she's ever felt every day for a year and a half straight, no one dropped off a home-cooked meal or offered her a ride to work. No one even asked her how she was doing.

"People see physical injuries and want to help—we treat that scenario with urgency. But when someone is depressed, others often think that they just need to snap out of it," says Pratt, an educator and clinician with North Range Behavioral Health's Suicide Education and Support Services program and a Mental Health First Aid instructor.

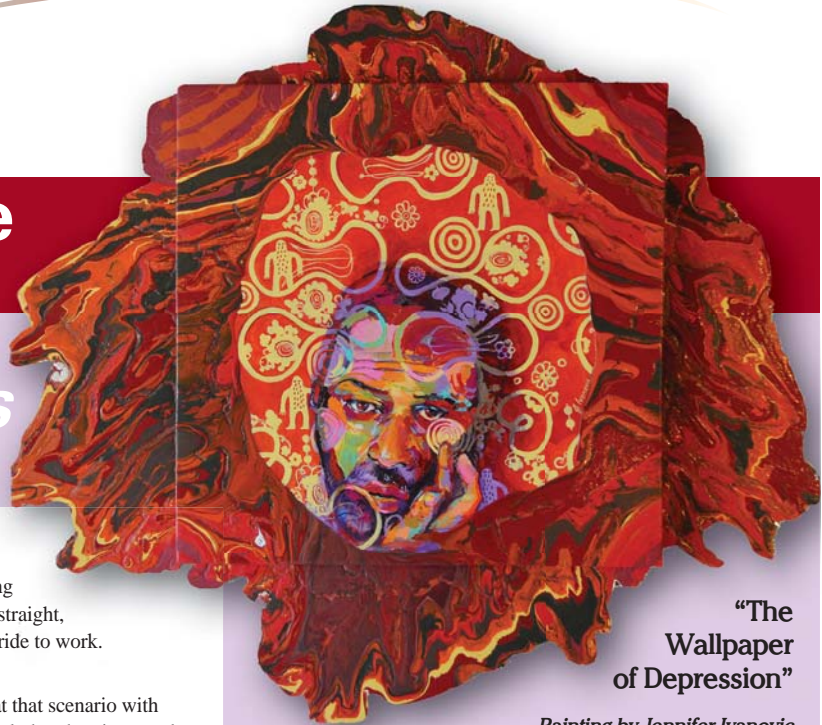
The Health District's 2013 Community Health Survey found that one in five Health District residents who responded to the survey reported that they were currently experiencing depression, anxiety or other mental health problems. Even though one in four Americans will experience a need for mental health care in their lifetime, two-thirds of these people will be undiagnosed and untreated, often due to a lack of knowledge or fear of stigma.

Colorado has consistently been among the states with the highest suicide rates.

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"Mental illness is not a 'casserole illness,'" says Chris Fine, development specialist and coordinator of Mental Health First Aid programs at Touchstone Health Partners. "No one shows up with food or offers of support because they don't know what to say or do. But mental illness can occur just like cancer and other diseases. Mental illnesses are brain-based disorders and are very treatable."

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"The Wallpaper of Depression"

Painting by Jennifer Ivanovic


The subject whose story inspired this painting felt as if he had become a backdrop in his own life—like wallpaper that was beginning to peel and bubble up from dingy walls.

"The bravest thing I ever did was continue living my life when all I wanted to do was die. This place is not somewhere anyone would want to be. It is soul-destroying. It is lonely. The battle back from the depths of depression is so very hard... But if I have done it once before, then I can do it again. I can. I can. I can."

Jennifer Ivanovic is a Fort Collins artist and the creator of "Stigma Stains," a traveling art installation of paintings and corresponding written narratives that illustrate the struggles of real people with different forms of mental illness. The project strives to inspire a dialogue that challenges people to examine their own perceptions and prejudices by demystifying the secrecy and stigma surrounding mental health issues.

"We know that services work and that people recover," Ivanovic says. "Yet in order to address the needs of those struggling with mental illness in our community, we must also address our attitudes toward it."

stigmastains.com, jenniferivanovic.com

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The disability from even moderate depression is similar to the impact from relapsing multiple sclerosis, severe asthma or chronic hepatitis B.

Like first aid and CPR classes, Mental Health First Aid training teaches basic lifesaving skills. Pratt refers to Mental Health First Aid as CPR for the brain

After cancer and heart disease, suicide accounts for more years of lost life than any other cause of death in the U.S. and more than 90 percent of those who die by suicide had one or more mental disorders.

and views the nonjudgmental listening aspect of the course's action plan as conceptually similar to giving someone chest compressions.

Created in 2001 in Australia and adapted for the U.S. in 2008 by the National Council for Behavioral Health, the Maryland Department of Health and Mental

Hygiene and the Missouri Department of Mental Health, the eight-hour class teaches people how to respond to an individual in distress.

The class is for anyone and everyone and no prior experience is required to take it. One of the most important goals of Mental Health First Aid training is to break down myths, misconceptions and stigma so that people are not afraid of mental health issues or of helping others in crisis.

Through scenarios, interactive group exercises, discussions and videos, participants learn to assess a mental health crisis, select appropriate interventions, provide initial help, and connect people to professional, peer and social supports as well as self-help resources.

"As a society, we tend to focus on outputs such as cutting or a suicide attempt," says Fine. "But those outputs are usually a byproduct of an underlying problem." Mental Health First Aid training helps initiate the process of addressing a person's underlying problems in order for them to begin a journey toward recovery and healing.

The class also goes over approaches that don't work, such as telling someone you know exactly how they feel or acting on a common first impulse of wanting to "cure" them.

Mental Health First Aid training teaches you that as a first-aider, you cannot cure people, but you can get them the help they need and reassure them that it can get better.

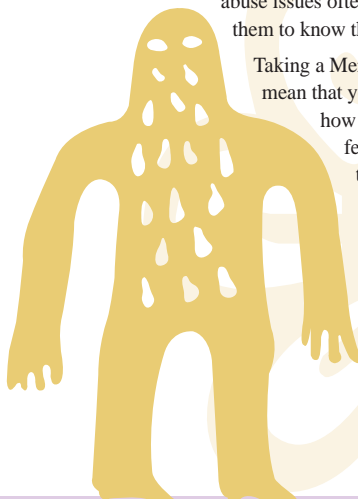
"I always tell my classes: 'you're first-aiders, not crusaders,'" Fine says. "All we care about is getting people appropriate care." Letting people talk, and listening nonjudgmentally to their story, is one of your best tools as a first-aider.

While some might sign up for Mental Health First Aid training because they think it will help them in their work, "most people who have taken my class say that they use the skills they learned more in their daily personal lives with friends and family," says Fine.

The action plan steps taught in the class are meant to reduce stigma and give hope and first aid until appropriate treatment and support are received or the crisis is resolved. People experiencing mental health problems and/or substance abuse issues often feel alone and it's important for them to know that they can get help.

Taking a Mental Health First Aid class doesn't mean that you have to remember word-for-word how to administer the action plan perfectly. The training's most important take away is how crucial it is to offer a distressed person hope.

"People who experience a mental health crisis are not going to remember exactly what you said to them," Pratt says. "They're going to remember how you made them feel."



24/7/365 support if you or someone you know is in crisis:

- National Suicide Hotline: (800) 273-TALK (8255)
- Colorado Crisis Support Line: (844) 493-TALK (8255)
- Mental Health Connections: (970) 221-5551
- Touchstone Health Partners Access Center: (970) 494-4200
- Suicide Education and Support Services: (970) 313-1089
- Medical Emergency: 911
- Another option when worried about someone is to call 911 and request a welfare check. Give the dispatcher the person's address and the police will stop by to assess their safety.

Take a Mental Health First Aid class and learn:

- A clear understanding of disorders and the need to reduce stigma
- To spot risk factors and warning signs of mental health problems including depression, anxiety, trauma, psychosis, psychotic disorders, eating disorders, substance use disorders and self-injury
- How to spot the signs of mental health and substance use emergencies
- Appropriate professional, peer, social and self-help resources for people experiencing mental health issues
- The following five-step action plan to assess the situation, select and implement interventions and help individuals in crisis:

- A**ssess for risk of suicide or harm
- L**isten nonjudgmentally
- G**ive reassurance and information
- E**ncourage appropriate professional help
- E**ncourage self-help and other support strategies

Upcoming free classes at Touchstone Health Partners in Fort Collins:

- Mental Health First Aid - July 13, Sept. 14, Nov. 2
- Youth Mental Health First Aid - Aug. 3, Oct. 5, Dec. 7
- In addition to regularly offered classes available throughout northern Colorado, businesses and groups can schedule special classes. Visit touchstonehealthpartners.org or call (970) 494-4253 to learn more and/or enroll in a class.
- Find additional classes near you and get more information at mentalhealthfirstaid.org.