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COMCARE Article

ISSUES & articles

about Mental Health in Sedgwick County Government

September 2011

Each of Us is Created Equal

“Each of us is created equal, but we face vastly different realities. In a world of great inequalities, educated and healthy women and girls are powerful agents of positive change.” This quote from the September 2011 National Geographic begins an article on global studies revealing that keeping girls in school, delaying marriage and childbirth and treating girls and women with dignity and respect result in reduced infant mortality and increased family income and health.

Over the past 10 years, there has been increased focus on the burden of mental illness in women’s lives and the implications to the health of society in general. Research shows that women suffer disproportionately from many types of mental illness, including Major Depressive Disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, other anxiety disorders, and certain personality disorders. In addition to purely biological issues, more recent research implicates social and environmental issues. Childhood trauma, violence and abuse in the lives of girls and women profoundly magnify the risk for development of certain mental illnesses and substance use disorders. Inarguably, women play a crucial role in either perpetuating or breaking the intergenerational cycle of mental illness since they traditionally serve as the caretakers for the emotional development of children, while also making most healthcare decisions for their families.

The prevalence of certain mental illnesses varies among women, and research indicates that women treated in programs tailored to their unique needs show improved treatment outcomes and more sustained recovery. For example, women with substance dependence have shown improved outcomes when treated in programs that address childcare and parenting issues, provide educational/vocational assistance and other social supports rather than in traditional gender neutral settings.

In August 2010, COMCARE, the community mental health center for Sedgwick County, began a new program to specifically address the mental health needs of women clients. This program initially sought to identify pregnant and post-partum women seeking mental health treatment during their pregnancy. Due to the volume and challenging needs of this population, a formal research proposal was submitted and approved to study and further develop a comprehensive program addressing the complex mental health and parenting needs of these women. Initial observation revealed that many of these women not only lacked basic housing and healthcare, but also had histories of severe childhood abuse and trauma, domestic violence, and repeated difficulty with the task of parenting. Childbirth has been rated as one of life’s biggest stressors. For many women already faced with other extreme stressors, it can be overwhelming. For the most part, women want to succeed at parenting but many lack even the most basic tools.

Ideally, childbirth and parenting can be a very rewarding and fulfilling role for most women. When a woman lacks parenting skills or faces other obstacles leading to loss of custody of a child, it often leads to long-term difficulties in the mental health of both the woman and her children. COMCARE’s goal is to help women be the best they can be in the parenting role and provide tools to help them succeed. With greater attention to the need for improved collaborative care between existing health care and social service agencies, COMCARE has strengthened its relationships with several other community organizations in Wichita, including Sedgwick County Healthy Babies, Kansas Children’s Service League, Sedgwick County Family Planning Clinic and the Department of OB/GYN at the KU School of Medicine. Collaborative care is essential to address the complexity of care in women with mental health and parenting needs, but it is also an economic necessity in the age of shrinking revenue and rising costs for social programs and mental health care.



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True mental health is more than just the absence of a diagnosable mental disorder. Ideally, mental health is a state of well-being in which a person can effectively function both as an individual and as part of a community. Mental health promotion involves actions that create healthy living conditions. Women's mental health is interested in education about the broader issues that promote mental health in women.

According to Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin, executive director of the United Nations Population Fund, "When women and girls have rights and opportunities, their families and communities prosper. Unleashing the potential of half of humanity - our mothers, daughters, sisters and wives - is one of the most critical challenges of the 21st century." The World Health Organization has presented the following issues as essential to improving the health of girls and women in their communities.

1. Relationships that respect basic human rights are fundamental to mental health promotion.
2. Mental health is linked to behavior. Domestic violence and substance abuse create an environment that destroys the basis for mental health.
3. Good physical health, including regular exercise, healthy diet, weight control, and sexual health begins a self-care approach that promotes better mental health.
4. Reproductive planning produces better chances at parenting success. Part of this planning involves caring and committed relationships, maternal economic stability, and a strong support network for women.
5. If mental health issues are present, they should be stable prior to conception. If addiction issues have been a concern, they should be in remission prior to conception with on-going treatment during pregnancy and post-partum.

If you are interested or know someone who may be interested in additional information about local community resources for women's health, the following list has been included.

1. COMCARE provides mental health services, including evaluation and diagnosis of underlying mental illness and provides medication, therapy and case management services. To schedule an intake appointment, call 660-7500.
2. Sedgwick County Healthy Babies is a free community resource providing parenting help, childbirth education, and post partum support for women who are pregnant or up to 2 years post-partum. Contact Healthy Babies at 660-7433.
3. Kansas Children's Service League provides free case management for pregnant and post-partum women. They also provide a variety of other social support services to strengthen families. Contact KCSL at 942-4261 for additional information.
4. The Family Planning Clinic is located at the Sedgwick County Health Department. This clinic offers free/reduced cost services for STD screening, mammograms, well woman checks and birth control. Contact the Family Planning Clinic at 660-7300.
5. Women's Recovery Center provides substance abuse treatment services specifically for women and may be contacted at 267-2030.