

Barriers to Access...

"Prejudice cannot see the things that are because it is always looking for things that aren't".

Negative perceptions of mental illness discourages people from seeking help. It is estimated that nearly two thirds of people with mental illness do not receive professional treatment. Of those that do – almost 40% do not complete their prescribed treatment. Now these are real concerns.

The most common reason cited for the failure to seek treatment, or continue in treatment, is the stigma associated with mental illness. There are a number of factors which contribute to this.

A person may simply be in denial about the existence of the problem, even though all of the evidence points to the contrary.

They may be at a stage where they have recognised the seriousness of their problem but believe they are still in control of it.

But the major problem seems to be fear. There are many types of fear that hinders people from seeking help. Some of these include:

Fear of embarrassment and shame about having other people know about the problem although it is usually quite evident to others. This can be very debilitating, particularly when they are afraid that their friends and family may not accept them because of their illness. Fear of becoming further isolated by friends and family will often add further stress to an already stressful situation. It has the potential to further erode self-esteem and self worth.

Fear of failure to be 'cured' can discourage people from seeking help.

Fear of having to deal with underlying issues masked by the presenting problems, issues that a person may not wish to confront and deal with.

Access to mental health services may be hindered by distance, unavailability or lack of a 'user-friendly service'. The recent call for a 'one-stop shop' offering user-friendly health services for youth has many, many advantages.

Seeing a GP can prove problematical for some, be it cost or the perception that their GP may not have the necessary expertise. The vast majority of GPs do but often are hindered by time constraints.

Clearly, there are many reasons why someone we care about does not want to seek treatment about their mental health problems. Unfortunately, not seeking treatment almost inevitably results in longer and more severe experiences of mental illness, greater chance of relapse and disruption to life-style, impacting on relationships, employment and ultimately leading to self-harm.

If you know someone experiencing mental health problems and who has not yet sought treatment, try encouraging and supporting her/him to seek advice from their GP. The sooner the better.

The next column on mental illness concerns Nic – a young woman who did seek help - sooner than later – with the right outcomes.

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