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A new anti-stigma campaign aims to teach youths about mental illness

BY DIANE SMITH

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FORT WORTH — Layne Lynch sat at her piano inspired by a feeling.

A tune soon emerged. It was followed by the lyrics.

"Trying to find words to tell you why I act the way I do. No limitations, but I feel restricted. All these thoughts in my head collide," sang Lynch, 17, a senior at Colleyville Heritage High School.

The song, *Dear Friend of Mine*, is asking teens to be understanding with classmates, friends and siblings struggling with mental disorders such as anxiety, depression, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and bipolar disorder. It was inspired by a family member's experience with a mood disorder.

"It's so cool to see people realize that it is OK to go get help," Lynch said.

The song is part of Friendships Count, a new anti-stigma campaign produced by Mental Health Connection and Community Solutions of Fort Worth.

Mental Health Connection is a collaboration of area mental health professionals, consumers and other advocates who want to improve the mental health delivery system in Tarrant County. Community Solutions works to help families and children find the best mental health care and reduce stigma.

The campaign takes the message of empathy to teens via a Web site and a music video that is posted on YouTube. It also includes bookmarks and posters that will be distributed at area schools.

Defining mental disorders and how they affect teens can help reduce the stigma associated with illnesses, said Michael Steinert, a licensed professional counselor and executive director of student support services for the Fort Worth school district.

" he "Adolescence alone can make you feel like, 'No one understands me,' said.

Even though people are more comfortable discussing mental disorders today, many people still don't understand why they shouldn't label others as "weird, crazy or unstable," Steinert said. Teens struggling with mental disorders can be perceived as troubled and in need of discipline when they truly need medical help, he said. Medical advancements have helped to diagnose more youngsters, but education and understanding remain important.

Mental illness is not a behavioral choice and is rooted in a person's biochemical foundation, he said, adding, "Mental illness is a chronic disease just like diabetes."

Steinert said that once a teen is diagnosed, therapies and treatments can work. Schools have counselors, social workers and psychologists who can help families determine whether medical help is needed.

For example, in the Fort Worth schools, mental illness has been incorporated into the health curriculum in the sixth and ninth grades. At several family resource centers, families can meet with experts and develop a care plan for their child or teen.

Steinert said it is crucial for families to tap into the mental health services that are available.

Peer pressure and hormones make the teen years difficult. Adults may have a hard time understand why their kids feel sad or too scared to go to school.

"In a lot of people's minds, adolescents are like alien beings," Steinert said. "That's challenging enough."

But friends and relatives can make a difference.

Kay Barkin, social marketing director for Mental Health Connection and Community Solutions, said the anti-stigma campaign aims to reach young people who can encourage friends to lend emotional support and let their friends know it's OK to seek help.

Parents can learn how to help their teens better. "It's not bad parenting," Barkin said.

Barkin said the campaign tries to define several mental disorders from the point of view of teens who are experiencing them.

They also want to reach teens where they communicate, said Barkin, explaining why they created a Web site and a YouTube video and are working on a blog.

Lynch offered her musical talents to the effort. She performs duets with Barkin's 16-year-old son, Kevin.

"A little understanding and support from a friend can make life a lot easier," she said.

Friendships Count Mental Health Connection of Tarrant County and Community Solutions of Fort Worth are promoting an anti-stigma campaign, Friendships Count.

Check out the Web site: www.friendshipscount.com

Watch the video: www.youtube.com/friendshipscount2

To find local resources, check out links offered by the Mental Health Connection of Tarrant County: www.mentalhealthconnection.org/local_resources.php

Friendships Count is the second anti-stigma public service campaign aimed at teens. The first, "Open Minds Open Doors: I am not my mental illness," was presented in 2005 and included posters, bookmarks and a five-day curriculum in Fort Worth schools. It also included a supplement in the *Star-Telegram's* Newspapers in Education program and public service announcements on TV.

In 2006, Mental Health Connection of Tarrant County presented "Fine Line: Mental Health/Mental Illness" at the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History, which included pictures and stories of people with mental disorders.

Sources: Mental Health Connection of Tarrant County and Community Solutions of Fort Worth

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