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COULD YOU SPOT MENTAL ILLNESS?

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SUSAN GILLPATRICK
Mental health counselor

Program teaches attendees to identify symptoms, connects people with resources

By Claudia Pinto | THE TENNESSEAN

If somebody is having a heart attack, there's a good chance many of us will know what to do. The warning signs are well-publicized — the tightness in the chest, the shortness of breath. You know to call 911, to administer CPR if you know how.

But what if somebody you know is having a mental health crisis? Would you know what to do? Would you even know what to look for?

In the wake of the recent shooting spree in Arizona, in which 21-year-old Jared Loughner is accused of shooting 18 people including Arizona Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, it's a question many people are asking.

“Often after incidents like the one in Arizona, people who knew the accused ask themselves what they could have done to prevent the violence,” says Susan Gillpatrick, a licensed professional mental health counselor at Centerstone, a mental health services provider. “While no one knows what, if anything, could have been done to change the course of events in Tucson, there is a way for citizens here to take action and possibly prevent such tragedies from happening.”

Gillpatrick teaches a course at Centerstone called Mental Health First Aid.

>> **HELP, 3D**

MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID

Mental Health First Aid is a 12-hour course on how to recognize and respond to someone suffering from mental health issues.

Cost: \$50-\$100, based on class size. Grants are available.

Info: Susan Gillpatrick, licensed professional mental health counselor at Centerstone, 202-2580, susan.gillpatrick@centerstone.org.



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Early intervention is crucial

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The 12-hour program is intended to teach people how to recognize common mental health problems and to connect people with help if they need it. The hope is that knowledge will prevent tragedies from occurring.

So far, more than 12,000 people in the U.S. have become certified in Mental Health First Aid. The course was first launched in Australia, then brought to America by the National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare. Centerstone has offered the program since last summer.

Melissa Riley took the class as part of the training for her job, providing emotional support to flood survivors through the Tennessee Recovery Project.

Through the course, Riley learned to identify common symptoms of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, substance abuse, psychotic disorders and self-injury. She also learned what resources are available to help people with those issues.

"Every door we knock on, we are able to use what we learned," she says.

Even after eight months, Riley says the flood continues to wreck people's lives. She's seen multiple cases of alcoholism, suicide attempts, post-traumatic stress disorder and hoarding that were triggered by the flood. Having taken the class, she says, helps her recognize those problems and connect people with resources.

"We have people who said, 'This helped me find hope when I didn't have any,'" she says.

Reaching out

The course is especially helpful for police officers, nurses, religious leaders and people like Riley who commonly come into contact with people experiencing mental health issues. However, Gill-

ONE SET OF SIGNS

Schizophrenia is just one of the problems the Mental Health First Aid class addresses. Susan Gillpatrick, a licensed professional mental health counselor, says these are some of the warning signs:

■ **Delusions.** A person might think someone is after them.

■ **Random, unorganized speech** — or, as she calls it, "word salad:" words strung together that make no sense.

■ **Hallucinations.** These might be auditory or visual. The person may be talking to someone who's not there.

■ **Atypical behaviors** such as laughing hysterically for no reason.

■ **Social withdrawal.**

In general, if you think someone is showing psychotic behavior, Gillpatrick says:

■ **Tell the person you're concerned** and that you've noticed he or she been acting differently.

■ **Suggest that they see someone** or that you'll take them to see someone.

■ **If it's a family member,** share your concerns with other family members.

■ **If it's in public,** look for a supervisor to notify.

patrick says anyone can benefit from it because mental health issues are so rampant.

"About one in four adults suffers from a diagnosable mental disorder every year. That's a lot of people," Gillpatrick says, adding that she hopes the stigma will decrease once people understand how common it is.

Darlene Bobich, 46, of Smyrna, says she wishes

she could have taken a class like this five years ago, when her son first started exhibiting signs of schizophrenia. She had no clue what was wrong with him.

"I never once thought mental illness," Bobich says. "I just thought he was being a jerk."

Bobich says her son, who was 18, began laughing for no reason or yelling at her for saying things to him that she had never actually said. By the time he was finally diagnosed with schizophrenia, Bobich says he had become so delusional that he thought his dog was talking to him. She believes an earlier diagnosis and appropriate medication might have prevented his illness from escalating.

And even people who can recognize signs of mental illness may not know how to help.

"You're not going to conduct psychotherapy, just like you wouldn't try to perform open heart surgery on someone," Gillpatrick says. But she adds that it's critical to reach out to people with mental health issues and let them know you're concerned, because often when the brain is sick, the person isn't able to recognize that something's wrong.

If someone is exhibiting psychotic behavior, people may be afraid to reach out to them, and Gillpatrick says the shootings in Tucson could contribute to the myth that people with mental illnesses are violent. She says that people with mental health issues are actually more likely to be victims of violence than the perpetrators.

"No amount of training can guarantee that these horrific acts will not recur," Gillpatrick cautions. "But perhaps if Mental Health First Aid ever becomes as popular as First Aid or CPR, more people maybe able to step forward and intervene."

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