



IMAGE: AGENCIA BRASIL

## How Tragic Events Impact Mental Health

Many people are experiencing mental health challenges as the result of the tragic shooting in Buffalo on May 14, other national tragedies, and continued repercussions from the COVID pandemic. Mental Health America reports that that over half of adults with a mental illness do not receive treatment, totaling over 27 million adults in the U.S. The percentage of adults with a mental illness who report unmet need for treatment has increased every year since 2011.

According to Laura Kelemen LCSW-R, director, Niagara County Department of Mental Health & Substance Abuse Services, some people are finding it challenging to get back to a typical routine and find themselves not motivated to get day to day tasks like cooking, cleaning and shopping accomplished.

“The mental and emotional weight of worrying about safety especially when engaging in routine activities such as running errands takes a toll that people often don’t recognize,” she said. “Relaxation and rest can be difficult to find as individuals and communities are experiencing the sensation of when is the next shoe going to drop?”

Stigma continues to be a barrier for people seeking treatment. Often the biggest challenges people with mental illnesses face aren’t their illnesses at all. The stigma—or negative feelings, attitudes, and stereotypes—that surround mental health can make getting help scary and leading a fulfilling life difficult. Stigma prevents people from seeking help, restricts resources from being allocated, and it discourages others from lending their support.

*Continued on Page 2*



The mission of the Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition is to educate people about mental illness. Separating the truth from the stigma can help increase awareness, understanding, and acceptance for those living with mental health challenges.

The Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition will host a Facebook Live on August 24 from noon to 1 p.m. titled State of Stigma: Current State of our World—How Tragic Events Impact our Mental Health.

The discussion will focus on why individuals experience anxiety, depression, and/or vicarious trauma as well as offer information about resources in the community. This back-to-basics discussion will include information about

how to seek help and why it's okay to reach out when feeling helpless and hopeless.

Panelists are Melinda DuBois, executive director, Mental Health Advocates of WNY and chair of the Anti-Stigma Coalition; Laura Kelemen, and Rachel Morrison director of 24-Hour Crisis Counseling Program, Crisis Services. Frank Cammarata, director, Erie County office for People with Disabilities.

The event is free and open to the public; participants will be invited to ask questions of the panelists.

The mental health reactions that people are experiencing related to recent tragic events in our community and in the world seem to be more complex as they are "layered" on top of the extended stress and life disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to Kelemen, frequent reactions include an increase in anxiety, restlessness, sadness, and anger. Typical trauma reactions include difficulty concentrating, making decisions, and sleeping. Because we have been living at elevated stress due to the pandemic, reactions seem to be more pronounced. Some people have expressed a feeling of numbness, shutting down or further disconnecting in reaction to being overwhelmed. Physical reactions, including headaches and stomach aches are also quite common.

"We know that there is something called vicarious trauma,"

explains MHA executive director Melinda DuBois, "so even if you are not a person that's been directly impacted by a traumatic event you can still experience trauma just by watching things happening on the news or hearing interviews about an event. It may be too much, too stressful for some. For a society that is already struggling with high rates of depression and anxiety, all of what's happening right now in our community and the world can be really triggering. I can't stress enough how important it is, if you are struggling, to reach out for help."

Continued on Page 3

Wellness includes emotional and physical health. Prevention and early treatment are the most effective form of care for all health-related ailments.

Because of stigma—people delay seeking help, often denying or not recognizing the need for help, and are much more distressed when they finally do seek care.

“We have internalized stigma. For example, it is not uncommon for people to minimize their own circumstances, stating others have it worse than I do. Seeking help is so important.” Kelemen said. “A friend of mine described their recent “emotional rollercoaster” ranging from being sad/ crying to being much more short-tempered and intolerant of minor frustrations and day-to-day inconveniences. It helped them to recognize the connection between these emotions and recent events—recognizing that the reaction is an expected response to such extraordinary circumstances.”



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**LAURA J. KELEMAN**

LCSW-R, DIRECTOR, NIAGARA COUNTY  
DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH &  
SUBSTANCE ABUSE SERVICES



## BECOME A MEMBER OF THE ERIE COUNTY ANTI-STIGMA COALITION

Does your organization, church, temple, or community group want to combine forces with our organization? Do you individually want to engage with us to stop the stigma of mental illness? Please consider becoming a member of our Coalition by completing our membership form at [letstalkstigma.org/membership](http://letstalkstigma.org/membership).



[letstalkstigma.org/membership](http://letstalkstigma.org/membership)

### Peaceprints of WNY

Peaceprints of WNY (PPWNY) is a non-profit organization offering comprehensive reentry services to men and women involved in the criminal justice system. Our Reentry and Housing Programs are designed to offer provisions and guidance along each step of an individual's transformation.

#### Why did your organization become a member of The Anti-Stigma Coalition?

Peaceprints of WNY became a member of the Coalition because of the increase in correlation of mental health and justice involved individuals. Approximately 45% of justice-involved people have a diagnosed mental illness and unfortunately most of those became diagnosed late in life and not until they've become incarcerated. Additionally, mental health and crime have become disturbingly related. Most recently, people with mental illness are 9x more likely to be incarcerated than hospitalized and approximately 75% of people in state prisons are not receiving mental health care while incarcerated. The trauma of incarceration can further perpetuate the cycle of mental illness and often does not address some of the causes that lead the person to be incarcerated in the first place. By removing the stigma and speaking openly about mental illness we are encouraging everyone to seek treatment and counseling that could be preventative in mitigating the cycle of incarceration which is the mission and vision of the Coalition.

To find out more about our members visit  
[LETSTALKSTIGMA.ORG/  
CURRENT-MEMBERS/](http://LETSTALKSTIGMA.ORG/CURRENT-MEMBERS/)



#### How are people with mental health challenges impacted by stigma?

Individuals with a mental health history are often faced with an unthinkable amount of trauma and backlash when their history or diagnosis is advertised. When we break our arm, we wear a cast—a clear indicator that we have a wound we are working to heal. We typically don't have to hide our cast for fear of losing our job; most employers would understand that we have a condition that prohibits us from performing some tasks and would help compensate for the loss of our arm while we heal. We aren't shamed for going to a doctor to reset the bone. In fact, our friends and loved ones would rally around us, visibly marking their support by signing our cast with expressions of love and wishes to get well soon! No one tells us to simply "get over it."

Those of us who struggle with mental illness seldom have the visible markers to signal to others that we need compensation, support, and help healing. Further, the stigma surrounding mental illness is immense, with a diagnosis seen by many in our communities as a failure, as weakness, or something shameful. The result is that while many of us are feeling our most vulnerable and alone, we keep our struggle to ourselves, unwilling to ask others for help and unsure of where to seek it out for ourselves. This is the exact stigma that Peaceprints and the Coalition are dedicated to shattering for those millions who struggling with their mental health each day.

## Does your organization provide mental health support/programming for your clients, volunteers, and employees?

In addition to PPWNY being a part of this coalition, we infuse mental wellness into our weekly routine. Every Wednesday our employees are given an activity that focuses on self-care, mental wellness/health which reserves a time in our busy schedules to ground ourselves and focus on our wellbeing. Additionally, Peaceprints provide an employee assistance program to all employees of the organization!

As for our clients, we have built great relationships with organizations such as Evergreen and Best Self to refer and connect our clients who are struggling with a mental health diagnosis. We understand that getting connected with such services can have barriers and we've trained our team to assist in eliminating barriers as much as possible for our clientele.

## What impact is the Anti-Stigma Campaign having in the community?

The Anti-Stigma Campaign has impacted the residents of Erie County more than I think anyone could have imagined. You often see the green marketing materials throughout the community and the conversations surrounding mental health have become more and more common and less of a taboo topic. The Campaign has done a wonderful job of including agencies serving individuals from all walks of life, and that's SO important because it does not matter your history or story- everyone is impacted by mental health.

ERIE COUNTY  
**ANTI-STIGMA**  
COALITION

### ERIE COUNTY ANTI-STIGMA COALITION FOUNDING MEMBERS

BryLin Behavioral Health System • Children's Mental Health Coalition of Western New York, Inc.  
Community Partners of Western New York • Compeer • Crisis Services of Erie County  
Erie County Department of Mental Health • Erie County Office for People with Disabilities  
Fellows Action Network • Fuerst Consulting Corporation • Jewish Family Service of Buffalo & Erie County  
The Mental Health Advocates of WNY • Millennium Collaborative Care • Patrick P. Lee Foundation  
Preventionfocus, Inc. • Telesco Creative Group • The Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation

## UPCOMING EVENTS

AUGUST 24, 6 PM – 8 PM

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT: YOUTH MENTAL ILLNESS  
VIEWING EVENT

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 31, 4 PM – 7 PM

NOT ONE MORE....STAND TOGETHER TO END  
OVERDOSE

ONGOING DATES

EAT AND MEET – A COMMUNITY ROUNDTABLE  
INITIATIVE

Visit [letstalkstigma.org/events](http://letstalkstigma.org/events) for more

## NEWEST MEMBERS



BAR ASSOCIATION  
OF ERIE COUNTY

Visit [letstalkstigma.org/current-members](http://letstalkstigma.org/current-members)  
for more information on our current members.