

Contact: **Mary Schlegel, Executive Director**
Mental Health Association of Fauquier County
mhafc1@gmail.com
www.Fauquier-mha

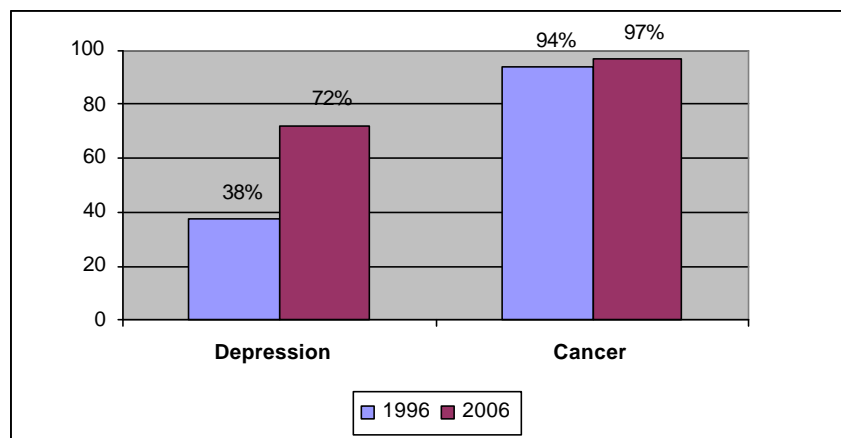
10-Year Retrospective Study Shows Progress in American Attitudes About Depression and Other Mental Health Issues

Public Understanding and Comfort with Mental Illnesses Still Lag Behind Other Major Diseases

ALEXANDRIA, Va. (June 2007) — The Mental Health Association of Fauquier County, together with Mental Health America and its 320 affiliates nationwide, released a 10-year retrospective study showing significant progress in Americans’ attitudes about mental health problems, but also continued shame and discomfort around these health problems. Mental Health America (formerly known as the National Mental Health Association) released these findings nationally at the opening of its 2007 Annual Meeting, *Bringing Wellness Home*, in Washington D.C., June 6-9, 2007.

“Ten years ago, a Mental Health America survey showed that only 38 percent of Americans viewed depression, a serious medical illness, as a health problem versus a sign of a personal weakness,” said David L. Shern, Ph.D., president and CEO of Mental Health America. “Our new survey shows significant progress. Today, nearly three-quarters know that depression is a real health problem. That’s an 89% improvement over 10 years. We’ve come a long way.”

While the survey data shows that Americans are much more knowledgeable about the seriousness of mental illnesses, public acceptance of depression and – even more so for other mental health problems (i.e., bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, alcohol and drug problems and suicide attempts) – still lags behind that of other health issues, such as diabetes and cancer.



Given the seriousness of mental illnesses – and their ability to wreak havoc on a person’s life, family, community and society as a whole – a significant need continues for more public understanding about mental health and mental illness, particularly related to suicide.

Americans are split down the middle on their views of suicide: 46% see it as a personal or emotional weakness and 46% see it as a health problem. However, suicide deaths (over 30,000 each year) consistently outnumber deaths attributable to homicide (18,000) by a ratio of three to two – with most suicides attributable to untreated depression. Yet, most Americans greatly underestimate the occurrence of suicide. 63% of Americans believe homicides vastly outnumber suicides, according to the survey.

“It is clear from vast amounts of research and personal experiences that mental illnesses are very serious – every bit as serious as other illnesses, such as diabetes and cancer,” said Shern. “Our nation needs to treat them as such – through better mental health promotion, increased research and health insurance equity that would enable Americans to get mental health services when and if they need them.

Americans’ Understanding of Mental Health Conditions vs. Cancer, Diabetes

Americans are more likely to view mental illnesses and other behavioral health problems as personal or emotional weaknesses – rather than real health problems – more often than they do other illnesses.

- Alcohol or drug problems (57%) and suicide attempts (46%) are mostly often seen as weaknesses.
- Among mental illnesses, nearly a quarter of Americans (22%) see depression as a weakness, followed by bipolar disorder and schizophrenia (7%).
- Nearly all Americans see cancer (97%) and diabetes (96%) as health problems – not weaknesses.

Americans’ Comfort with Mental Health Conditions vs. Cancer, Diabetes

Though Americans’ understanding of mental health conditions has improved over the years, their comfort level with discussing personal mental health issues and interacting with people with mental illnesses still lags behind their ease with diabetes and cancer.

- The majority of Americans would feel comfortable sharing the fact that they or someone close to them has diabetes (85%) or cancer (82%) with friends or co-workers. In comparison, over two-thirds (67%) would feel comfortable sharing experiences with depression, followed by alcohol and drug problems (62%), a suicide attempt (60%) and – with the least amount of comfort – bipolar disorder or schizophrenia (58%).
- Americans feel more comfortable interacting with individuals who have health conditions, such as diabetes or cancer, than with those receiving treatment for mental health conditions. For example, while 94% feel comfortable interacting with someone with diabetes and 92% are comfortable with someone with cancer. In contrast, 63% felt the same way about someone with depression, 45% for someone with bipolar disorder or

schizophrenia, 48% for a person who attempted suicide and 43% for someone struggling with alcohol or drugs.

In general, Americans are comfortable being friends, living next door, or working with people with mental health issues. However, they are much less comfortable with the idea of these individuals being a significant other, a teacher of school-age children and elected official.

- Americans are comfortable having a friend (91%), next-door neighbor (91%) or coworker (68%) with depression, but are less so with having a teacher (39%), romantic partner (47%) or elected official (51%). The same pattern was evident with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, only more so, as people are only comfortable with someone with this condition as a teacher 20% of the time, as an elected official 29% of the time and as a date 23% of the time. Americans are similarly uncomfortable in their relationships with people receiving treatment for an alcohol or drug problem or a suicide attempt – 19% and 21%, respectively, were comfortable having a teacher, 26% and 32% an elected official and 27% and 30% as a date.
- Comparatively, the overwhelming majority of Americans are comfortable having relationships with people with cancer or diabetes. Comfort levels for having a friend (98% for both), a next-door neighbor (98% for both) or coworker (93% and 95%, respectively) with cancer or diabetes, were very similar to having a teacher (92% and 94%) an elected official (90% and 93%) or as a date (78% and 87%).

“While attitudes about mental illnesses and the people who live with them have improved over the years, it is still troubling how many Americans continue to misunderstand these illnesses,” said Mary Schlegel, Executive Director, Mental Health Association of Fauquier County, a Mental Health America affiliate. “To a person living with mental illnesses, societal acceptance and support is vital to recovery – and to their ability to enjoy a healthy, fulfilling life in our community.”

Optimism and People with Mental Illnesses

While most Americans are highly optimistic, individuals who have personally experienced a mental health condition are much less hopeful or optimistic. Only 45% (versus 63% of those without such experiences) are hopeful about their future, only 23% (versus 32%) are hopeful about future generations and only 33% (versus 46%) are hopeful about aging healthily.

“People who live with mental health conditions, such as depression, bipolar disorder or substance abuse, are less optimistic than the general population, in part, because of America’s climate of misunderstanding of mental illnesses and the barriers that exist to accessing treatment and supports in the community,” said Shern. “With continued understanding, Americans can ensure positive futures for all those who face health conditions of all types.”

About the Survey

The “Mental Health America Attitudinal Survey” was conducted by International Communications Research, an independent research company. Interviews were conducted via telephone and the Internet from October 10 to November 1, 2006 among a nationally representative sample of 3,040 respondents age 18 and older. The poll has a margin of error of +/- 1.75%.

