

By Lacy Wolff, ERS Health Promotion Administrator



When a 21-year-old student at Texas A&M University lost her friend to suicide, she fell into an emotional state unlike anything she had experienced. She stopped attending classes. She knew she needed help and called the student counseling center to schedule an appointment. On the morning of her appointment, she drove to the student center and... never got out of her car. She just didn't have the energy to act – a telltale sign of depression. That young woman was me.

Because I eventually did experience healing through counseling, I know my recovery from that painful loss would have come sooner if I had kept that appointment. But that morning I didn't feel like sharing something so personal and confusing with someone I had never met.

My hesitation to seek counseling was not unusual. There are many reasons why we don't access mental health treatment when we need to. One big reason is that when we experience a crisis, we may not have the capacity to ask for help. Here's why: our mental state influences our decisions, energy levels and our ability to sleep. When we need to talk to someone or seek treatment, we often can't actually see it ourselves, or don't know where or how to access the care we need. Furthermore, we may not feel up for the challenge of finding a provider or resource during a mental health crisis. Making complex decisions is especially difficult when you are experiencing high levels of anxiety or depression, two of the most common mental health conditions.

Because of this and my own experience, I now strive to help our health plan participants better understand their mental health options and the ways they can support family members experiencing a mental health crisis BEFORE a crisis hits.

We will all face trauma and mental health challenges in our lifetimes. We will experience sickness, death, loss, loneliness, anxiety, and sadness. Because these struggles are part of life, it's a good idea to be prepared by knowing where we can turn and what resources are available to help support us. After all, we wouldn't hesitate to go to the doctor with a broken bone, chest pain or a gaping wound. Why should we wait to go to

the doctor if we are experiencing mental and emotional pain? We have made great strides in understanding that our mental health drives our physical health and vice versa. Our mental state affects our energy levels, relationships, our health habits, and our ability to sleep.

If you have ever thought about seeking treatment but weren't sure if you needed to, here are a few signs and symptoms of mental health conditions:

- 1. You aren't sleeping well.** Anxiety and stress can affect our ability to sleep. If you are experiencing sleepless nights you may want to consider talking to a mental health provider about the underlying source of stress that is keeping you up.
- 2. Changes in appetite.** Stress eating, or lack of hunger can also be signs of acute or chronic stress that you may want to address with a behavioral health expert.
- 3. Losing desire to do the things that give you joy.** If you notice that you have withdrawn from things you normally enjoy this could be a symptom of an underlying mental health condition.
- 4. You are drinking alcohol or using medications to numb your emotions.** This is a strong indicator that you could benefit from addressing the root cause of the desire for alcohol or drug consumption.
- 5. You consistently experience relationship challenges.** If you find you are consistently unable to communicate effectively and are having trouble with your relationships, you can benefit from talking with a professional to address these challenges.

Through your own understanding of mental health, you may be the bridge to help someone else access treatment when they don't have the capacity to do it for themselves. Have a conversation with your family members about mental health and develop a plan for recognizing and managing a problem, whether it's a serious crisis or feelings that get in the way of enjoying life. Just like having a fire escape plan, you can establish a plan for mental health crisis that will help you and your family members find your way out of a dark place.

This month we have great opportunities to talk about mental health and the types of resources that are available to you, your co-workers, and your family. We hope you will join us and help us promote the wellness webinars offered this month. Please check out the [ERS Wellness Events Calendar](#) for full details and registration links.