

# Breaking down the basics of mental health

**Publisher's note:** *This is one of several stories about mental health issues in the Lake Tahoe Basin that will be running through October.*

**By Lake Tahoe News**

Mental illness is a growing problem throughout the country, and Lake Tahoe is not immune to this trend.

Barton Health is taking an active role in bringing help to people in this area by hiring more specialists, adding services, and being a leader in getting people to be more aware about what mental illness is and what can be done to help people.



Kim Kilgore, a licensed clinical social worker at Barton Community Health Center and Barton Family Medicine, provides counseling services for adults experiencing mild to moderate mental health issues. Here she provides insight about mental

illness and health issues in the greater Lake Tahoe community.

## **Why should people care about mental health?**

**Kim Kilgore:** We all know and love people who are affected by a mental illness. The stats show us that mental health conditions shape the society we live in and affects us all.

For example, according to Barton's Community Health Needs Assessment, 10.3 percent of the population reported fair or poor mental health and 31.4 percent showed symptoms of

depression.

From a national perspective, the National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI) shares these facts:

- 43.8 million Americans experience a mental illness each year
- 26 percent of homeless adults are living with a severe mental illness
- 24 percent of state prisoners have a “recent history of a mental health condition”
- Depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide
- Serious mental illness costs the U.S. \$193 billion in lost revenue each year
- Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States, 90 percent who commit suicide have an underlying mental illness
- Nearly 60 percent of adults with a mental illness did not receive mental health services in the previous year and 50 percent of youth (ages 8-15) did not receive treatment.

### **Define mental illness.**

**Kilgore:** The National Alliance for Mental Illness defines mental illness as a “condition that impacts a person’s thinking, feeling, or mood and may affect his or her ability to relate to others and function on a daily basis.”

### **How common is it to have a mental health issue?**

**Kilgore:** Approximately one in five people have a mental illness, according to NAMI. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (SAMHSA) state that 18 percent of adults have a mental illness. Anxiety disorders are the

most common mental illness in the United States.

**What did this area's Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) reveal about mental health on the South Shore?**

**Kilgore:** According to the CHNA, the suicide rate in El Dorado County is higher than the California average and neighboring Douglas County. Two-thirds of participants surveyed believe mental illness is a major problem in our area, which has led to more community actions and cooperative efforts to address mental health.

**How is mental illness hereditary?**

**Kilgore:** Many mental illnesses have been linked to genetic components. For example, adults with relatives that have bipolar disorder are 10 times more likely to develop bipolar disorder. According to current research, bipolar disorder has the greatest genetic link of all mental illnesses. SAMHSA also breaks down other mental illness and the genetic component on their **website**.

**Is there a way to prevent mental illness?**

**Kilgore:** Mental illness can be caused by a variety of different events including genetics, environment, lifestyle choices, substance abuse, and traumatic incidents. One of these events, or combination of events, can create conditions which may lead a person to develop or be more susceptible to developing a mental illness.

Evidenced-based prevention strategies include:

- Destigmatizing mental illness.
- Education about common signs and symptoms of mental illness.
- Identifying signs/symptoms and providing early intervention when a person develops a mental illness.

- Abstinance or reducing use of drugs and alcohol.
- Increasing an individual's protective factors (which include: social support, self-esteem and self-control). Access to mental health and substance abuse treatment.

### **When should someone seek help? And where?**

**Kilgore:** If signs and symptoms of mental illness are lasting for weeks to a month at a time and are impacting everyday life and relationships, it is time to get help. Mental illness is treatable. A person should talk to his or her healthcare provider about the symptoms or request a referral for mental health counseling. You can also contact the health insurance company and request a list of mental health providers in your area.

If a person needs immediate assistance and having thoughts of self-harm or harming others, 24-hour help is available by calling 800.272.8255. The person can also call 911 and request a "welfare check."

### **What can a relative or friend do to support a loved one who may be suffering from a mental health issue?**

**Kilgore:** Some ways a relative or friend can show support for a loved one suffering from a mental health issue are:

- Help a loved one find resources for help where he or she lives.
- Learn more about mental illness.
- Listen empathetically and with compassion
- Contact your local NAMI chapter or get tips from **NAMI online**.