

Harnessing the Power of Young People and Social Media: Today's Tools to Break Down the Stigma Surrounding Mental Illness and Substance Abuse.

Did you know that one in five young people will experience symptoms of mental illness, yet over half of young people with a diagnosable mental illness will not receive the care they need (www.hhs.gov)? Did you know that most mental illness and substance abuse symptoms first emerge in adolescence and young adulthood? Did you know that substance abuse and some mental illnesses can be prevented? Did you know that when mental illness and substance abuse are treated at their earliest stages that the progression of their illness can be less damaging and costly (Preventing Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Disorders: for Policymakers, March 2009)? Did you know that untreated mental illness and substance abuse can lead to significant consequences in relationships, education, employment, and even death? Did you know that suicide is the third leading cause of death for adolescents and the second leading cause of death for college students? Did you know that the prevalence of suicidal thoughts, suicide planning, and suicide attempts is significantly higher among young adults aged 18-29 years than among adults over the age of 30 (www.cdc.gov)? Did you know that young people are “particularly sensitive to the stigma associated with receiving treatment for their symptoms” (GAO report on Young Adults with Serious Mental Illness, 2008).

Yes, many young people are suffering in silence, often isolating themselves from those that care about them. Their peers have the most contact with them on a daily basis, often through texting and social networks, and could be a source of help for them, but they often do not know what symptoms to watch for, what to do, or where to go for help.

Breaking down stigma lies in bridging the communication gap between the healthcare providers and the young people who need access to the information that could save a life.

While we know that **Social Media** is how young people communicate and access information:
93% of teens have a computer or have access to one at home
98% of 18-29 year olds now use the internet
83% of 14-17 year olds now have a cell phone and almost half (47%) of them own smartphones
83% of 18-29 year olds are using social networking sites
97% of 18-29 year olds text and they average 109 texts per day
58% of all 12-17 year olds have downloaded apps to their cell phone or tablet computer.

We also know that today's healthcare administrators and policy makers are not keeping pace:
83% of the 50-64 year olds use the internet
52% of 50-64 year olds are using social networking sites
72% of 50-64 year olds text and they average 41 texts per day
(Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project 2012,2013)

Many parents, educators, and public health, primary care, and behavioral health professionals

have struggled to enthusiastically support **Social Media** as their communication and marketing tools. Even the word **Social Media** brings many administrators of health organizations to shudder and balk at a concept that can be so foreign to how they were trained to deliver healthcare. *“We don’t have time for that”, “Why don’t they just pick up the phone and call us”, “If they have questions, they need to see their healthcare provider” or “The liability issues inherent in the use of social media make it easy for us to ‘just say no’.*

Is it possible to bridge this growing health information and communication gap? Yes! By harnessing the power of the young people in our middle schools, high schools, and universities who are already on social media sites and have amazing skills for video creation, website design, photography, marketing, and tweeting that reaches their own generation. Healthcare organizations do not need to spend money and time training their current staff to learn to use **social media**, they simply need to recruit and welcome the younger generation to serve on their boards and committees as well as on their staff as volunteers, interns, and employees.

The Mental Health & Recovery Board of Stark County is working hard to harness the power of young people to help us share the stigma-busting messages of mental health and substance abuse prevention and recovery. We contract with young adult consultants, who are studying public health, to facebook, twitter, instagram and distribute information in young adult friendly ways on college campuses for our YOUng People Matter campaign. We have also focused the past 4 years on training our workforce in the Transition to Independence Process (TIP) Model to better engage and empower our youth and young adults to reach their full potential. We are excited about the possibilities with our recently awarded a regional Youth and Young Adults in Crisis grant from Ohio Mental Health & Addiction Services that includes funding for app development. Our agencies are beginning to hire young people to serve as peer mentors and are allowing their staff to text as a communication strategy. We admit that we still have a long way to go to close the growing generational gap, but we are beginning to harness the power of young people to help us break down the walls of stigma and get accurate information on mental health and substance abuse prevention and recovery to their own generation.

In the meantime, check out some sites that are working to reach young people with information about mental illness and substance abuse.

www.strengthofus.org

www.dosomething.org

www.reachout.com

Also, check out sites that will help healthcare organizations create social media policies.

www.samhsa.gov/children/social_media_policy.as

www.cdc.gov/socialmedia/tools/guidelines/