

Substance use disorder: A family disease

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NORWAY — As the opiate crisis is transcended by fentanyl contamination, more and more Mainers are at risk for addiction and fatal overdose. In western Maine, recovery advocates know that the most effective way to help those struggling with substance use disorder (SUD) is to create safe avenues for them to seek treatment.

With the Sixth Annual Western Maine Recovery Rally set for this Sunday, the Advertiser Democrat recently participated in a round table discussion with Jennifer Small, director of Common Ground Counseling in Norway, Dr. Lisa Miller, a physician with Western Maine Health specializing in addiction medicine and Kari Taylor, director for the Western Maine Addiction Recovery Initiative, about the delicate and difficult path for loved ones and friends of those who have SUD.

Judgment of those with addictions has long been the norm but as more understanding of addiction as a chronic disease becomes known, so too, must the mindset change from judgment to empathy. Drug or alcohol addiction is often the consequence of trauma. It is important to look beyond the behaviors surrounding SUD to its causes as a means of providing support and encouragement to seek recovery.

“We don’t look at people who carry around needles because they have diabetes the same way we look at people with SUD,” Miller said. “If someone has cancer and walks into a treatment center, it’s no different then a person walking into a methadone center.”

“Those judgments have a real effect on whether or not someone gets help,” Taylor, who is in recovery, added. “Stigmatization has a very direct, negative affect on the people who need the help. Someone with SUD deserves recovery as much as someone with any other disease.”

“It’s important to encourage people to look at where people are coming from,” Miller said. “What has happened in their past? So often it’s trauma. Neglect, poverty, factors that occur years and years before substance use even begins.”

According to Small, one difficulty loved ones have as they support a person in addiction is finding a way to talk about it without coming off as judgmental.



The Sixth Annual Western Maine Recovery Rally will be held on Sunday starting at 11:30 am at Longley Square in Norway. *Supplied photo*

“Start by talking about the concern you have for someone you suspect has SUD,” she said. “If I notice symptoms of it, I might ask if everything is okay. They may say they’re fine, but I tell them that if things are not okay, it will always be okay for them to talk to me about it. As soon as you throw drugs or alcohol or whatever into the conversations their walls immediately go up.”

To put themselves in the best position to help someone with SUD, Small said that family members should not be afraid to seek their own help, whether through one-on-one counseling or through support groups like Al-Anon.

“The message I have for people, who have someone with SUD in their life that they love and care about, is it’s okay for them to get help,” she said. “It’s okay for someone who is affected by substance use disorder to find help.

“It’s almost like there should be affected other recovery coaches as well. To help guide family, friends, significant others through the process to not be angry or judgmental, but be loving and supportive.”

“How I was approached, by my family the last time before I got sober, was exactly what I needed,” Taylor recalled. “It’s important to say, how do we interact with someone who has substance use disorder? In my case it was loving, it was nonjudgmental and supportive.”

The Sixth Annual Western Maine Recovery Rally will start this Saturday at 11 a.m. at Longley Square at 413 Main Street. Attendees will march, with police escorts, to rally at Moore Park in South Paris. There will be free food served, resources for help available, family activities, and speakers will share their stories of recovery starting at 1 p.m.

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