

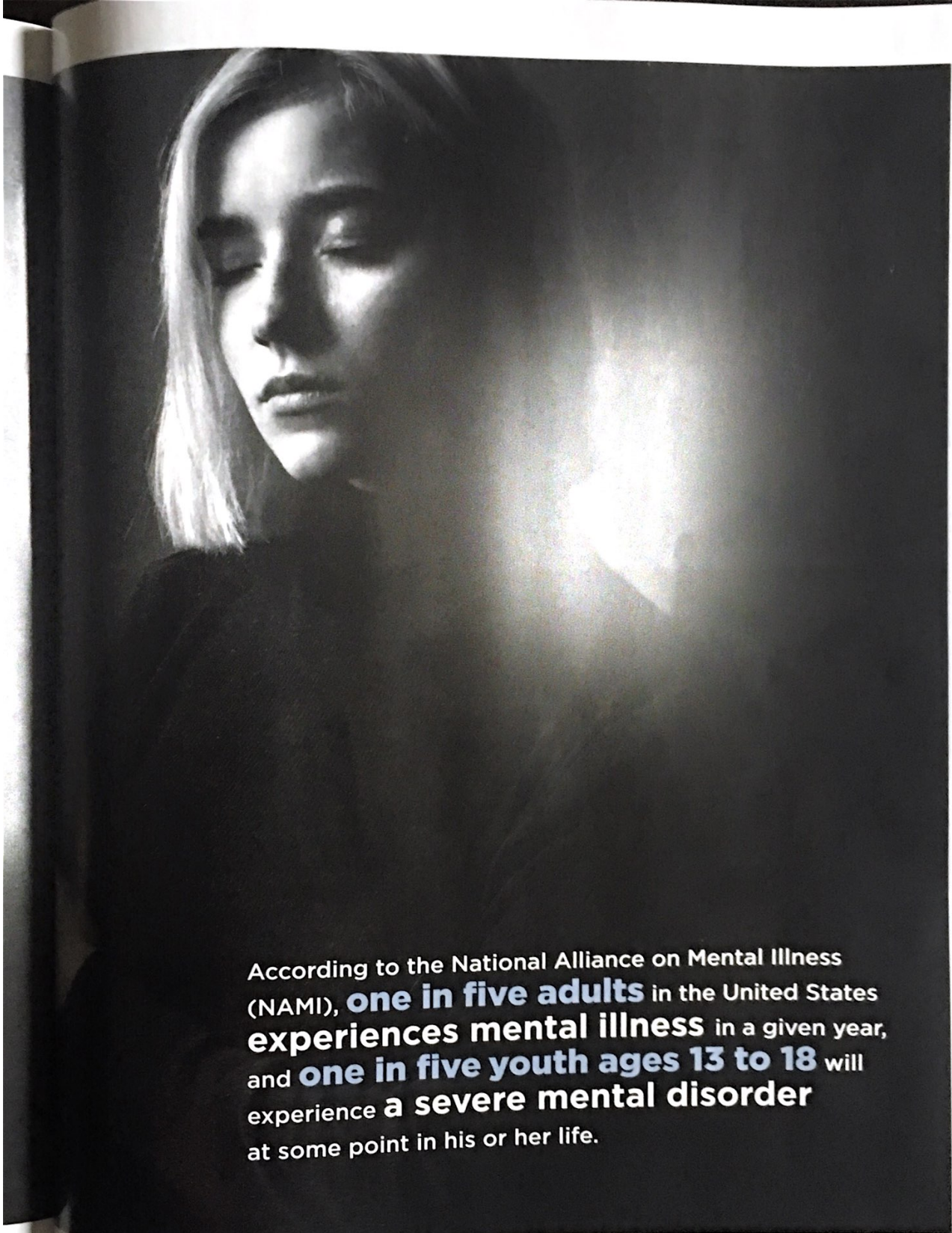
BY ELIZABETH KELSEY

ENDING THE STIGMA OF MENTAL ILLNESS

UPPER VALLEY ADVOCATES WEIGH IN

A competent mother, unable to care for her children during an episode of mental illness, struggles to regain custody once she's in remission and doing well. An individual with mental illness doesn't want to tell his boss about his illness because he fears he'll lose his job. Another individual experiences microaggressions regarding her mental health challenges.

Since she became medical director of West Central Behavioral Health in 2007, psychiatrist Diane Roston has witnessed these effects of stigma on people with mental illness. Where does such stigma originate? "When we don't know the cause or the cure of a condition, we fear it," says Dr. Roston. "We want to avoid people with these conditions, so we separate them from the rest of us."



According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), **one in five adults** in the United States experiences mental illness in a given year, and **one in five youth ages 13 to 18** will experience a severe mental disorder at some point in his or her life.

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Despite the high prevalence of mental health challenges, stigma persists. On an individual level, Dr. Roston says, "Stigma causes people to feel ashamed and marginalized, and can prevent them from seeking help." She adds that on a societal level, it results in bias in the workplace, a system that provides inadequate resources, and a lack of parity for mental health treatment and physical health treatment.

Anyone Can Be Affected

Mental illness, as well as the stigma and silence that often surround it, affects people from all walks of life. Mountain Valley, a Plainfield, New Hampshire-based residential treatment center for anxiety, OCD, and related disorders, treats adolescent clients from around the world. Clinical director Timothy DiGiacomo, PsyD, says, "Many of our residents come from high-performing schools and families. Even



Adventure programming, challenge courses, and team building can provide opportunities for augmenting treatment modalities for mental health disorders such as anxiety, OCD, and depression. Photo courtesy of Mountain Valley Treatment Center



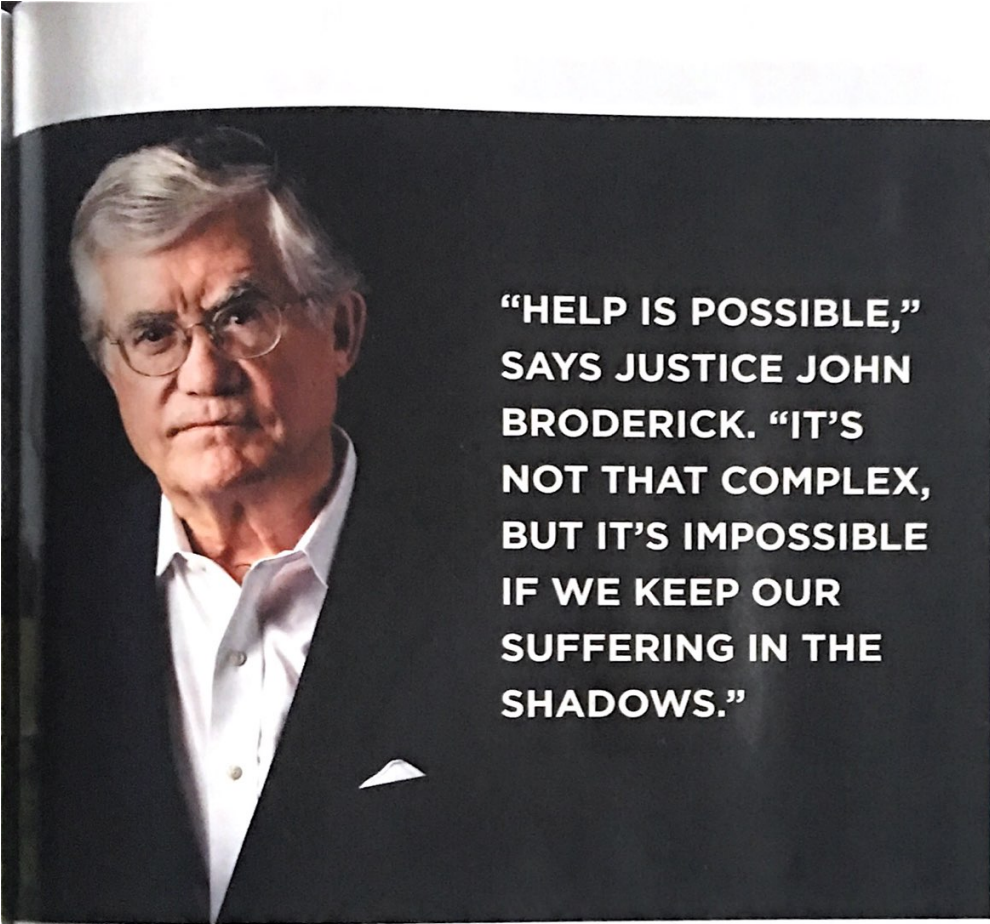
"Recovery is Possible": A Conversation with Angela Montano

Angela Montano has borderline personality disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and generalized anxiety disorder, as well as a substance-use disorder. While she has experienced discrimination from others who haven't understood her mental health challenges, she says she's also struggled with self-stigma. "There was a tremendous amount of shame and feeling very different than others," she says.

"I have actively self-harmed—something that I used as a negative coping skill for many years," she adds. "I started doing it at a young

age." Now 59, Angela says it wasn't until she was hospitalized in her 40s that she realized other people had similar experiences. "It was then that I felt less isolated."

Angela has continued to walk the path of recovery. She goes to therapy, attends a support group, and works with her doctor to make sure she's taking the right combination of medications. "I was not put on the face of this earth to suffer the whole time," she says. "I often thought that things would never change. It takes a great deal of courage, but people can live very



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productive lives and represent the good that can come out of an illness.”

Angela is a peer support specialist in West Central Behavioral Health’s Common Ground program, where she and her colleagues help clients realize they’re part of their own treatment. She wants clients to know that recovery is possible. “It’s important to reach out to support systems, friends, and professionals and to know that life is to be lived.

“People with mental-health challenges are no different than any-

body else on the face of this earth,” Angela says. “We see things a little differently. We may experience things differently—frequently, it’s a result of trauma. We are human beings like the rest of the people on this earth.

“I missed the boat on how to take care of myself,” she adds, “but through many years of therapy and being brutally honest—and a lot of blood, sweat, and tears—I realized there’s a lot of beauty in the world. There’s stigma and negativity, but I feel blessed. I feel like I was given a second chance.”

RESOURCES

NATIONAL

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
(800) 273-8255

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)
nami.org

NAMI New Hampshire
naminh.org

Change Direction
changedirection.org

NEW HAMPSHIRE

West Central Behavioral Health
wcbh.org
Emergency Number
(800) 564-2578

Mountain Valley Treatment Center
mountainvalleytreatment.org

OTHER NH COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTERS

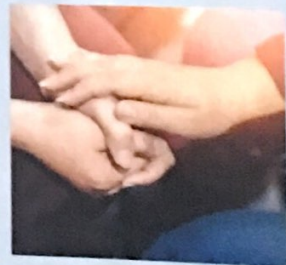
New Hampshire Community Behavioral Health Association
nhcbha.org

211 NH
211nh.org

VERMONT

Health Care & Rehabilitation Services (HCRS)
hcrs.org

Vermont 2-1-1
vermont211.org





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“When open communication about lived experience increases, stigma decreases. It is particularly influential when influential people such as leaders, actors, and athletes, speak out.”

—Dr. Diana Roston

when schools and families are not so much pressure on them to perform.” He says anxiety and OCD are additional barriers to success, and can be difficult for those with the conditions to discuss their experience in supportive environments.

Whitney Hussong, MSW, a social worker employed by Vermont’s Health Care and Rehabilitation Services, is embedded full time in the Ferrisburgh Police Department, where she works with the town’s residents struggle with mental health issues.

“The word I hear most often when describing someone with mental health challenges is that someone is ‘crazy,’” she says. “I find that people tend to use this word without much basis to describe someone who might do or say things that are different from their own perception of the world. There tends to be a lack of acknowledgement that someone who is struggling with a mental health issue did not ask to have these challenges brought upon them and that there is true difficulty in addressing the cause of the issue.”

Change Is Coming, but Slowly
According to Dr. Roston, stigma surrounding mental illness is decreasing as science reveals genetic, biological, and



Dr. Diane Roston

biosocial causes and correlations—and as we see more people living full lives while managing mental health conditions. She says it's also important when people share their struggles. "When open communication about lived experience increases, stigma decreases. It is particularly influential when influential people, such as leaders, actors, and athletes, speak out."

Retired New Hampshire Supreme Court Justice John Broderick is one of the prominent individuals who is speaking up. In 2002, Justice Broderick's older son Christian assaulted him as a result of an undiagnosed mental illness. John ended up in the ICU for several days. Then 30 years old, Christian went to prison for three years, where he received the diagnosis and treatment he needed for the anxiety and depression that had remained hidden since adolescence.

Justice Broderick says that, as difficult as the crisis had been, it put his family on the path to healing; they became aware of Christian's struggles, and he received help and is now thriving.

"I grew up at a time when no one talked about mental illness," Justice Broderick says. "I was affected by stigma in the sense that, from an early age, you never talked about it, and because no one talked about it, I knew nothing

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