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HOT TOPIC MENTAL HEALTH

# Women can take the lead addressing mental illness

By Rita Thrasher

Efforts to effectively address mental illness are moving beyond the purview of courts, gun lobbyists and law enforcement. State officials, local school boards, workplaces, colleges, homeowners associations, places of worship and city halls are now paying attention.

Here, in Palm Beach County, mental health was declared a priority in 2011 by four women who led National Alliance for the Mentally Ill-Palm Beach County, Boca Raton's Promise, Association of Caregiving Youth and the Mental Health Association of Palm Beach County. Together, they founded the Palm Beach County Action Alliance for Mental Health, to identify priorities and take actions on behalf of citizens. Membership has grown to include service providers, educators, mental health professionals, clergy and advocacy groups. That's

because mental illness has an impact on our entire community, and needs community action.

Women have used their collective voices effectively for years, on nursing, voting rights, education equality and ending violence against women. Women are now being called to action to help end the stigma associated with mental illness and "breaking the silence" they may have inadvertently helped to create. Throughout generations, women have tried to protect their families by warning, "We don't talk about those things," or "We don't question God's work." As a result, families were told to keep the silence. Yet, when you read the daily newspaper headlines or turn on television news, it's easy to see that it's high time to end the "deafening" silence.

Although mental illness is more common than most of us think, it is not



Rita Thrasher advocates more discussion about the issue.

commonly talked about. It is rarely discussed at the office water cooler or in the company boardroom, or in the school classroom or the Parent-Teacher Association. It's rarely spoken about at the family dinner table, either.

Women are uniquely positioned to spark the change of attitude needed to bring about conversations to promote understanding, compassion, education, treatment and hope. They are the chief caretakers in families, often while also holding professional positions in the workforce. Women have experienced firsthand the pain of first hearing a loved one's diagnosis. They've subsequently experienced the fear,

shame and frustration while searching for help, struggling in silence and maybe planning a funeral for a talented or gifted child. Some have found it therapeutic to speak out. And they are brave, vulnerable women who deserve to be supported.

Women have sparked conversations in Boynton Beach, inspiring Mayor Jerry Taylor and former Mayor Woodrow Hay to initiate the Boynton Beach Mental Health Committee. In Boca Raton, women led conversations with human resources directors to create more enlightened workplaces, helped five schools introduce conversations on mental illness, and opened discussion with spiritual leaders. Women at FAU's School of Nursing are encouraging mental health training for students and staff. Five other Palm Beach communities are considering initiatives.

A primary challenge is education. Decades of

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silence has created a deeply ingrained resistance in society. Progress is being made. Basic education has been provided to 1,200 residents in Palm Beach County through Mental Health First Aid, a nationally developed training program, and coordinated by Alpert Jewish Family and Children Services.

Perhaps the greatest challenge lies with the schools – both public and private. Students deserve facts and understanding, as do teachers, administrators and parents. This requires a brave, new approach that compels educators from PreK-12 to respond to an engaged/informed community. Universities and colleges should adjust curriculum

to accommodate mental and emotional needs of staff and students.

Our next generation of teachers must be informed and equipped to address the mental and emotional needs of youth.

Women in our community, and those who support them, can make this happen. On Oct. 2, women from across the county will gather at the "Women Breaking the Silence" luncheon at the Broken Sound Club in Boca Raton to begin answering this call to action.

Rita Thrasher is founder of the Palm Beach County Action Alliance for Mental Health, and president/CEO of Boca Raton's Promise. She wrote this for The Palm Beach Post.