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## Fact Finder: Life in Recovery

By Linda White



You don't have to look far to find examples of mental illness and/or substance abuse on the big screen. It's so common the Justice Department pays for training seminars like this one for local law enforcement in Tuscaloosa.

90 percent of prisoners have a mental disorder. Because of that, law enforcement are taught how to deal with people who have mental illness.

"The education of the training helps them to understand mental illness in a different way," said Rebecca Skillern of the Houston, Texas Police Department. "It helps them to recognize that the folks we are dealing with are just a small percentage and the idea is to try to get rid of some of the stigma attached with mental illness."

**Fact:** It's estimated one in four people will experience some kind of mental health problem in the course of a year. 22 million Americans ages 12 and over were classified with substance abuse disorders in the past year.

Daniel Williams is one of those people.

"I suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. At one time, I didn't like to go out in public. I stayed at home all the time," Williams said. "I was staying up all night, sleeping during the day."

"At times, he wouldn't talk at times he would be angry," his wife, Carol, added. "It was almost like having another child, being on point all the time, to make sure there was nothing there to harm him."

During all of this, Daniel's life nearly took a tragic turn.

"I was drinking anywhere to a half a gallon to a gallon of Jack Daniels every night to sleep and cope with everything even to the point that I tried to commit suicide," he said.

Daniel had hit rock bottom. With his life spiraling out of control, Daniel realized he needed to change and sought help, turning to therapy and medication. His family also had to play an active role in his treatment.

"If you don't have a family support, you don't have a support network, whether it be family or friends, you're not going to make it, you're just not," Carol explained. "When you have a mental illness, you're not strong enough to make it. You have to have someone around you to help you when you get weak, to help you be strong."

That's what Carol did for Daniel.

Dr. Norman Huggins is the Medical Director of "Treatment Alternatives for a Safe Community" or TASC. It's an alternative to jail for non-violent offenders. Huggins said there are several approaches to treating those with both mental health and substance abuse disorders, called "co-occurring" disorders.

- **Fact:** The Sequential Approach - that's the treatment of mental health then substance abuse.
- The Parrellel Approach - treatment of both disorders but in different locations.
- The Concurrent Integrated Approach - treating both disorders at the same location. This model, Huggins said, is the most successful.

With more than 45 million people diagnosed each year with some sort of mental health issue, you may never know if the person walking past you is suffering from mental illness and/or substance abuse.

Jeff Shackelford is with the Alabama Department of Mental Health which is focusing on educating the public about these co-occurring disorders.

"You'd be surprised to know how many people you work with, live next door with, go to church with that have dealt with these things and are great contributors to society," Shackelford said.

**Fact:** There are 12 types of mental illness, ranging from anxiety, to disassociative to tic disorders.

While the stigma for mental and substance abuse disorders continues, Huggins said it's getting better thanks to education.

"As patients, families and the community educated about mental illness, they're much more accepting of that and the individual is much more willing to get treatment and to get help for it," said Huggins.

With proper treatment, those suffering from these chronic disorders can live a normal life, like Daniel, but they'll always have to stay on top of symptoms and continue treatments. So, Daniel focuses on that and helping others.

"Continuing of therapy and continuing of medications and continuing helping others, has been my treatment and continues to be my treatment and that's what keeps me going," Daniel said.

And he has this message for those who may be struggling with any disorder.

"No matter how far they think they're down, that there's always, always time to get back up," he said.

Back up, life on track, continuing to conquer his demons daily - this is Daniel's life in recovery.

Alabama is also celebrating recovery with a first time challenge. The Department of Mental Health is asking the public to host events that best promote the prevention, treatment and recovery from mental illnesses and substance use disorders. A winner will be announced Oct. 16.

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