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Top 10 Myths About Mental Illness Based on Nationwide Survey

(Great Neck, NY- September 05, 2007) — Misconceptions about mental illness are pervasive, and the lack of understanding can have serious consequences for millions of people who have a psychiatric illness, according to the **NARSAD**. The largest not-for-profit organization raising and distributing funds for psychiatric research, NARSAD surveyed mental health professionals nationwide to determine the most common myths about mental illness. NARSAD received 102 responses from the experts, who included members of NARSAD's Scientific Council and psychiatrists around the country.

"Misconceptions about mental illness contribute to the stigma, which leads many people to be ashamed and prevents them from seeking help," said **Constance Lieber, President Emeritus**. "Dispelling these myths is a powerful step toward eradicating the stigma and allaying the fears surrounding brain disorders."

Top Ten Myths about Mental Illness

Myth #1: Psychiatric disorders are not true medical illnesses like heart disease and diabetes. People who have a mental illness are just "crazy."

Fact: Brain disorders, like heart disease and diabetes, are legitimate medical illnesses. Research shows there are genetic and biological causes for psychiatric disorders, and they can be treated effectively.

Myth #2: People with a severe mental illness, such as schizophrenia, are usually dangerous and violent.

Fact: Statistics show that the incidence of violence in people who have a brain disorder is not much higher than it is in the general population. Those suffering from a psychosis such as schizophrenia are more often frightened, confused and despairing than violent.

Myth #3: Mental illness is the result of bad parenting.

Fact: Most experts agree that a genetic susceptibility, combined with

other risk factors, leads to a psychiatric disorder. In other words, mental illnesses have a physical cause.

Myth #4: Depression results from a personality weakness or character flaw, and people who are depressed could just snap out of it if they tried hard enough.

Fact: Depression has nothing to do with being lazy or weak. It results from changes in brain chemistry or brain function, and medication and/or psychotherapy often help people to recover.

Myth #5: Schizophrenia means split personality, and there is no way to control it.

Fact: Schizophrenia is often confused with multiple personality disorder. Actually, schizophrenia is a brain disorder that robs people of their ability to think clearly and logically. The estimated 2.5 million Americans with schizophrenia have symptoms ranging from social withdrawal to hallucinations and delusions. Medication has helped many of these individuals to lead fulfilling, productive lives.

Myth #6: Depression is a normal part of the aging process.

Fact: It is not normal for older adults to be depressed. Signs of depression in older people include a loss of interest in activities, sleep disturbances and lethargy. Depression in the elderly is often undiagnosed, and it is important for seniors and their family members to recognize the problem and seek professional help.

Myth #7: Depression and other illnesses, such as anxiety disorders, do not affect children or adolescents. Any problems they have are just a part of growing up.

Fact: Children and adolescents can develop severe mental illnesses. In the United States, one in ten children and adolescents has a mental disorder severe enough to cause impairment. However, only about 20 percent of these children receive needed treatment. Left untreated, these problems can get worse. Anyone talking about suicide should be taken very seriously.

Myth #8: If you have a mental illness, you can will it away. Being treated for a psychiatric disorder means an individual has in some way "failed" or is weak.

Fact: A serious mental illness cannot be willed away. Ignoring the problem does not make it go away, either. It takes courage to seek professional help.

Myth #9: Addiction is a lifestyle choice and shows a lack of willpower. People with a substance abuse problem are morally weak or "bad".

Fact: Addiction is a disease that generally results from changes in brain chemistry. It has nothing to do with being a "bad" person.

Myth #10: Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), formerly known as "shock treatment," is painful and barbaric.

Fact: ECT has given a new lease on life to many people who suffer from severe and debilitating depression. It is used when other treatments such as psychotherapy or medication fail or cannot be used. Patients who receive ECT are asleep and under anesthesia, so they do not feel anything.

"These misconceptions can do irreparable harm to people with legitimate illnesses *who should and can* be treated," said **Herbert Pardes, M.D., President of NARSAD's Scientific Council.**

"Research in brain disorders is flourishing, and we expect to see new and better treatments that will have the power to change lives and bring hope to many," said **Lieber.**

The Toll of Mental Illness

One in five Americans suffers from a diagnosable mental illness in a given year. But statistics show that only one-third of these individuals seek treatment.

Four of the 10 leading causes of disability worldwide are mental disorders. Among developed nations, including the United States, major depression is the leading cause of disability. Also near the top of these rankings are bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

The direct cost of mental health services, which includes spending for treatment and rehabilitation, is over \$69 billion in the United States. Indirect costs, which refer to lost productivity at the workplace, school, and home, are estimated at almost \$80 billion.