

The Trauma of War: MHA Seminar, Task Force Address Issue in Hawai'i

“Mary,” a former member of the National Guard, describes vividly how she fell to the ground, petrified and shaking during a 4th of July



Panelists Dr. Michael Faran and Lt. Col. Laura Wheeler

celebration with her friends. The fireworks had started and her anxious and injured mind raced back to her days of combat in Iraq. “I sat huddled in the doorway of a building with my hands over my ears for nearly an hour. My friends didn’t know how to help me.” During a therapy group at the local VA, Mary inquired of one of the oldest veterans in the group, a man who had served during the Second World War, “How often do you still think about it?” He stood up slowly, looked at her apologetically, and said, “Every single day.”

Because Hawaii’s population includes so many active duty soldiers, reservists, and veterans, MHA’s most recent Brown Bag Mental Health

Seminar focused on *The Trauma of War: Impact on Hawaii’s Soldiers and their Families*. Some 170 mental health advocates, members of the military, their spouses, and interested citizens gathered on October 3rd to hear presentations on how war experience affects Hawaii’s soldiers when they return home and how services can be improved to address their needs. The seminar touched on post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide, effects on child behavior, domestic violence, sexual assault, and homeless vets.

The seminar was designed to kick off the formation of a statewide task force to address these issues. Marya Grambs, MHA executive di-

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Teen Suicide Prevention: Learning from the Youth

“You don’t want to know about my depression. It’s too deep.”

Over the course of the last six months, MHA staff member Antonia Alvarez, MSW, has conducted ten focus group discussions with more than 100 youth from all over Hawai'i about depression and suicide. The youth were between 13 and 24 years old, represented diverse races and ethnicities, and were involved in either faith-based organizations or community-based services for “at-risk” youth.

The discussions covered thoughts, feelings, attitudes and knowledge about depression, suicide and mental illness; coping strategies; risk factors; factors that build resilience; the impact of religion or spirituality on their beliefs; the

influence of culture or ethnicity; and potential effective intervention strategies.

In Their Own Words: Teens Speak Out On Depression and Suicide

➤ “I think that everybody has their own problems. . . . You just have to try to get through it. There’s a lot of stuff that I never thought that I could get through, but I did. And now I don’t have those same problems.”

➤ “When I really know that my depression is kicking in, I want to die.”

➤ “They [suicidal teens] feel like there are no solutions.”

➤ “I’ve thought about it [suicide]. Just sometimes that is how I’m feeling. Like I wish I wasn’t here.”

➤ “Being unhappy is like little things—you can get over it. Depression sticks with you. Maybe it has been happening for a long time. Maybe it is about what goes on in your family. It is very hard to get over.”

Many of the young people shared stories that we weren’t surprised to

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Executive Director's Report

Marya Grambs



Social Connections Are Strong Source of Emotional Support During Stressful Times

A survey by Mental Health America earlier this year showed that while many Americans are routinely overwhelmed by stress, most view their relationships with family and friends as important sources of emotional support and stress-relief, which can have positive effects on their mental and overall health by providing a sense of belonging, self-worth and security.

In today's climate of financial upheaval and loss, people are experiencing more stress and so such social relationships are even more important. Holidays, too, are difficult for many of us. The study showed that individuals who feel valued and cared for are better equipped to deal with stress and adversity and even experience less severe illnesses than those with little social support. The survey also showed that most Americans do, in fact, have supportive relationships and that they recognize the vital role these relationships play in protecting them from depression and other illnesses.

Of those surveyed, 40 percent were concerned about their current

stress levels and one-third characterized themselves as "routinely overwhelmed by stress," especially African Americans (45%) and women (39%).

Despite high stress levels, the vast majority (97%) of respondents have people in their lives they trust and can turn to when in need of support. Forty-three percent have as many as five people; over half have more than 5; and only three percent of respondents report having none. Men (40%) are more likely to turn to significant others, while women (55%) are more likely to turn to family members.

So, the take-home message is: develop and maintain your social support network, and turn to those you care about, particularly in these stressful times, and as the holidays loom. If you don't have family and friends nearby, focus on finding or generating social support, such as by joining or starting a book or movie group, a hiking club, a support group, a regular sports activity, a neighborhood clean-up group, or a faith-based community.



Risks Found for Youths in New Antipsychotics

A new government study published by *The American Journal of Psychiatry* on September 15, 2008, found that a new class of medicines, called atypical antipsychotics, that are most often prescribed for the one million children and adolescents with schizophrenia, are no more effective than older, less expensive drugs and are more likely to cause some harmful side effects, such as rapid weight gain.

The standards for treating the disorder should be changed to include some older medications that

have fallen out of use, the study's authors said, although these medications can have other negative side effects that have to be addressed.

Prescription rates for the atypical antipsychotics, have increased more than fivefold for children over the past decades and a half, and doctors now use them to settle outbursts and aggression in children with a wide variety of diagnoses, such as autism, bipolar disorder, or attention-deficit problems.

See *New York Times*, 9/15/08, 11/19/08.



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MHA of Hawai'i promotes mental health, reduces stigma, prevents problems associated with mental illness, and improves the care, treatment, and participation of children, adults, and elders with mental illnesses.

An Aloha United Way Agency

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hear—most of them knew at least one person who had attempted or completed suicide (one had two cousins who had killed themselves). An even larger percentage of them had experienced a serious depression in their lifetime or had a family member who had.

The youth also described practicing many different types of strategies for coping with stress and conflict, including some that would be considered protective or positive coping strategies (exercising, spending time with family, writing in a journal, listening to music) and others that could be considered negative or destructive (cutting or self-mutilation, abusing alcohol, tobacco or other substances, acting out or getting in fights).

How Do Teenagers Cope When They are Depressed?

➤ “Thinking about my daughter, my mom. I’m really trying not to hurt myself anymore. I’m really trying to kick myself from that habit. I walk, I swim...”

Most of the youth interviewed knew at least one person who had attempted or completed suicide . . .

➤ “Some people fight or act out—it is a way to cool off. But it isn’t going to get rid of the depression.”

➤ “Getting closer to my family, talking with them about it. They helped.”

➤ “I don’t talk at all. I don’t feel comfortable sharing that kind of stuff.”

➤ “I don’t want to put my problem on my dad. He already has too many of his own.”

➤ “I write down all of my emotions—it eases your mind. All the things that you were dwelling on

in your head.”

➤ “I used to cut myself—6th and 7th grade. I was just trying to get it out. I was so mad. I was taking it out on myself.”

➤ “Sometimes it’s not that easy to talk about your problems. You no trust.”

➤ “Go into my room, close the door, put on a song and dance hula.”

➤ “Not having to listen to anything but the next wave.”

Family conflict is known to be a major contributor to the suicide attempts by youth in Hawai‘i,¹ and the youth confirmed that stress at home, separated/divorced parents, or a parent(s) abusing substances greatly contributed to their stress and depression. However, youth who felt supported by their families, and who had adults in their life to whom they could speak openly, believed that they were at less risk.

Faith and spiritual beliefs, including prayer and meditation, seemed to be overwhelmingly supportive to many of the youth. One said, “God can make the

100% of the youth had never spoken about these issues before and were grateful for the opportunity . . .

impossible possible. It gives you something to believe in.” Another said: “I used to do 911 prayers. You know what that means? It’s like—911—let me just do this tonight and tomorrow I’ll do better. I won’t do it anymore... You know. Like 911 calls. Just get me through this.” However, most rejected the church and other religious institutions, with many saying that they wouldn’t recommend it to other youth struggling with depression or suicidal thoughts.

The major recommendation from all of the youth involved in this study has been that **teenagers need someone who is willing to really listen to them**. Almost 100% of the youth had never spoken about these issues before and were grateful for the opportunity to do so through the groups MHA convened.

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MHA's 8th Annual "Beyond the Blues" Festival a Success

On Saturday October 25, shoppers at PearlRidge Shopping Center were for the first time treated to four hours of fantastic blues music accompanied by presentations on mental health and informational materials provided by local mental health organizations. There were also opportunities to complete a depression self-screening questionnaire. The Festival relocated from Ala Moana Shopping Center to PearlRidge.



Little Destini Steward groovin' to the music

The event was emceed by blues impresario Steve Stoddard, radio host of "Somethin' Blue" on Thursdays, 9:00 - 12:00 noon, on KTUH FM 90.3, and of "Special Edition of the Blues Revue" on the last Saturday of each month, 10pm-midnight, on KIPO FM 89.3.

The Festival featured outstanding local blues groups who perform for free because they believe in raising awareness about mental illness. This year the participating bands were **Boogie, Jeff Said No, Friends of Adam, and Coconut Joe.**


Participating community organizations and consumer groups included the **DOH Adult Mental Health Division; Argosy University; Hawai'i Families As Allies; Hawai'i Psychiatric Medical Association; Kahi Mohala Behavioral Health; Mental Health Transformation State Incentive Grant; Mental Health Services Research, Education, and Training; National Alliance on Mental Illness; and United Self Help.**

The event was generously supported by Eli



"Jeff Said No" playing at "Beyond the Blues"

Lilly Company and Bristol Myers Squibb.

The purpose of the event is to raise awareness of how mental health affects our lives and how to recognize the warning signs of mental illness, especially depression. The event also aims to reduce the stigma of mental illnesses by increasing understanding, and to communicate that recovery is possible. Special presentations were made about adolescent suicide and depression and the mental health challenges of returning military. 



"Coconut Joe" warming up the crowd



"Beyond the Blues" was enjoyed by all ages

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rector, said soldiers and their families are facing incredible stressors as they prepare for war and when they return. The stigma of mental health issues deters many from seeking help. The military and the greater community need to do more, she said, to make sure soldiers, spouses, and children have access to services — and can find the help they need.

“It is of critical importance that we as a community learn about what happens when our soldiers come home. We do not want to see a repeat of what happened to the Vietnam vets.” Nationwide reports show increased rates of mental illness, substance abuse, divorce, domestic vio-

don't experience problems until many months later. “Most of them minimize their problems,” she added. And when that happens, problems can spiral out of control, spurring domestic violence and other problems.

Children can also experience mental health and behavioral issues when a parent is at war and when that parent returns, which can show up both at school or at home. Dr. Faran, of Tripler, pointed out that since combat started in Iraq and Afghanistan, about two million children nationwide have seen parents sent into combat. About 700,000 children nationally have a parent deployed cur-



Panelists Clay Park, Ann Fisher, LCSW, and Dr. Michael Faran

at the hands of their fellow soldiers. Ann Fisher, sexual trauma and readjustment counselor at the Honolulu Veterans Center, pointed to a 2005 national report that showed 60 percent of women in the armed forces had experienced sexual harassment, and about 11 percent had been raped. Many women still feel too intimidated to come forward or experience repercussions if they do. “If you're sexually assaulted in the military, you can't get up and leave,” she said.

Clay Park, a veteran who works as a case manager and Veterans' Specialist at Helping Hands Hawai'i, spoke of the numerous veterans he works with to help them access the VA benefits to which they are entitled. Many are living in the parks, and don't realize they are entitled to help.

NOTE: MHA is convening a Trauma of War Task Force to identify who is falling through the cracks – soldiers, vets, reservists/Guard, children, spouses – and how we as a community can help. If you are interested in participating in this Task Force, or know of someone who might be interested, please contact Marya Grambs, 521-1846 or email at Marya@mentalhealth-hi.org.

By Susan Mrazek, M.A.

This article included excerpts from “Forum Studies Soldiers' Needs” by Mary Vorsino, Honolulu Advertiser, 10/4/08.



Audience listens attentively to the panelists

lence, child abuse, and suicide among Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.

The Brown Bag Seminar featured a panel of experts, including Lt. Col. Laura Wheeler, Hawai'i National Guard's state family program director, and Dr. Michael Faran, of the child psychiatry department at Tripler Army Medical Center. Wheeler, who served in Iraq, said the military is making strides in preparing soldiers before they deploy to combat and in screening them when they return. But she said many still fall through the cracks, have difficulty overcoming the stigma of mental health issues, or

rently. And making sure they get services is difficult. Faran said many children are not directly involved in the military community, since their parents are reservists; these families are often isolated and do not know where to turn to for help. In the Islands, Faran is trying to overcome that barrier by reaching out to schools statewide so the children of soldiers can get the help they need in a setting they feel comfortable in.

Meanwhile, women soldiers can face a host of other traumatic issues in combat. In many cases, they endure sexual harassment or sexual assaults



Maui County

What's Cookin' at MHA-Maui?


- On September 2nd, MHA-Maui presented a Brown Bag on "Anxiety" with Dr. Kelly Bass, psychologist. Nearly 60 attended, including some high school students and counselors.
- The Family-to-Family Class by support group leaders Bob and Harriet Collopy (cosponsored with NAMI), began on September 3rd. Eight family members are participating.
- On October 7th, MHA-Maui sponsored a public forum entitled, "Aikea: Youth Suicide Prevention," featuring a proclamation by Mayor Charmaine Tavares and presented by Dr. Al Arensdorf, former Medical Director of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Division of DOH, and the following presentations:
 - MHA-Maui Advisory Board member Suzanna Dee, APRN, staff member at the Youth Psychiatric Unit at Maui Memorial Hospital, shared her professional work with teen suicides in Alaska, as well as a personal experience.
 - Lou Kepler, Maternal Child Health Coordinator from Maui County Dept. of Health, described risk

factors obtained from the Child Death Review.

- Bud Bowles of United Self Help gave a Power-Point presentation, emphasizing youth suicide prevention from a consumer perspective.
- Iris Xiao from Horizons Academy shared some of her experiences, which were mostly due to excessive school bullying in the public schools.
- Dr. Jason Andrus, the new Medical Director of the Molokini units at Maui Memorial Medical Center, explained the procedures at the Youth Psychiatric Unit and their strategies to prevent suicides.
- JoAnn Ahuna from Hana concluded the Forum, summarizing her brief survey of 32 youth and families in Hana. These young people reported having attempted suicide because when they have tried to talk about their troubles, or asked an adult to listen, the responses they got were, "That's normal for your age," or "You'll grow out of it," or, sadly, "I'm too busy now to listen."

- On October 14, MHA-Maui coordinated a full day of training for 20 Maui County police recruits and 20 police dispatch workers, including information on dealing with people with Alzheimer's, children/youth and adults in mental health crisis, and families with autism.
- The 14th annual Maui Disabilities Alliance Legislative Forum was held at the Wailuku Community Center on October 22nd. Fifteen legislators and candidates attended, with nearly half of the featured speakers being parents or consumers who shared their concerns about mental health needs on Maui.

Highlights of Upcoming Events:

- 3rd annual MHA-Maui Chicken Hekka sale on February 14th. Buy chicken hekka for all your valentines while contributing to the sustenance of MHA-Maui! \$10 a quart. Call 242-6461 for tickets.
- MHA-Maui's first Brown Bag of 2009 will be held on February 3rd on "Communications in the Family" by Mitch Berman, Marriage and Family Therapist. Will be held at noon in the Cameron Center Auditorium (1 CEU available for small fee). 

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In fact, one of the most striking findings from the entire project has been the realization that merely having these discussions was experienced as an intervention by the youth involved.

What Do Teens Suggest?

➤ "...I think that you know when you are happy, people can feel it, they can tell and it affects them too... I try to give, you know- as much as I can."


➤ "I would have said, 'If you feel sad sometimes, you could talk to me.'

➤ "Don't rush into things—take your time. Let them talk about whatever they want."

➤ "Listen first."

Overall this has been a remarkable learning experience for everyone involved. The next step of the process is to review the data and co-create prevention and educational

materials with an Advisory Board of teens and adult service providers.

If you would like to become involved, or would like more information about preventing teen suicide in Hawai'i, please contact: Antonia Alvarez, MSW, Director, Teen Suicide Prevention, 521-1846, antonia@mentalhealth-hi.org 

By Antonia R.G. Alvarez, MSW

¹ Scott Shimabukuru, PhD, Best Practice Specialist, CAMHD, "Teen Suicide," 411 Conference on Today's Youth, Oct. 30, 2008.

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Mahalo for your support. Together, we can enhance the lives of those who experience mental health problems.

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