

Mental Health Crisis in Rural Southwest Virginia Culture

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Input Exercise

Working with the mental health challenges in our field, and especially our culture is a _____ task.

History of Mental Health and Violence in Rural SWVA

First Mental Health Facilities

The first mental health facility in SWVA was founded in 1883, and known as the “Southwestern Lunatic Asylum” This inception came from a pressing need of appropriate mental health care, and was quickly overrun with clients. Currently known as The SWVA Mental Health Institute located in Marion, VA

Source:
<https://swvmhi.dbhds.virginia.gov/swvmhi/about-us/brief-history-of-swvmhi.pdf>

Recognition & Law

In 1920, “wife-beating” became illegal in every state.

In the 1970s, it became more recognized as a serious crime

Finally, in 1994, the Violent Crimes Against Women (VAWA) Act was commissioned and became recognized as a federal crime.

Culture of SWVA

Several studies show that mental health concerns in the culture of Appalachian heritage are significantly higher than other metropolitan areas. This dates back over 100 years. This includes: Keeping things “in the family,” such as mental illness, violence, or sexual assault.

Challenges Of The Culture

Challenge 1

Not Trusting

While this is seen worldwide, the Appalachian culture is especially adamant about not letting “outsiders” know their business. This includes health care professionals - especially **mental** health care.

“I don’t know his people,”

It is kept as a family problem.

Challenge 2

Keep it in the Family

While this is yet another worldwide phenomenon, not telling anyone what is going on is a very strong cultural way of thinking and doing in rural SWVA.

“No one needs to know our business,”

“That would embarrass the family”

“What would the church say?”

Challenge 3

Religious Expectation

While this is another worldwide phenomenon; religion is deep rooted in Appalachia culture with very old fashioned teachings

Many of these “old timey” religions are still relevant in today’s culture, such as primitive Baptists and Holy Ghost Pentecostals.

Individuals will go to a pastor before anyone else.

Challenges Of The Region

Challenge 1

Lack of Resources

The ratio of mental health professionals to population of Southwest Va is 1:1,555. National ratios average 1:550.

Due to this gross disadvantage, individuals are forced to wait in the ER for hours, even days, during crisis; and up to several weeks for an appointment.

Challenge 2

Lack of Transportation/Lack of Technology

Our area has only one public transit system, that only runs during the day Monday-Friday and a ride must be scheduled 24-48 hours in advance.

In many areas, they are so far out, WiFi service isn't available, cell phones won't work - making reaching out for help seemingly impossible.

Challenge 3

Lack of Insurance

Even with the increasing healthcare plans made available to adults in Virginia, there are still hundreds of households without insurance.

Without this resource, people don't even attempt to access the necessary care due to inability to pay an out of pocket expense.

Roundtable Discussion Activity

WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER AN EASY/COMMON MENTAL HEALTH CONCERN TO SPOT IN INDIVIDUALS??



OTHER MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS TO ADDRESS EVEN WITHOUT A DIAGNOSIS...

The Easy and Not-So-Easy To See

Depression, anxiety and PTSD are the common diagnoses for those that have experienced Domestic Violence. HOWEVER –

Even without a formal diagnosis, there are mental health concerns and continued stigma....

- Gaslighting (mental health coercion) - always questioning your sanity, choices....
Using mental health concerns during child custody - creating further stigma in Seeking out help.
- Creating new and healthy relationships in the future, not trusting your own judgement.
- Inability to cope with difficult situations due to “shutting down,” or not being able to handle feelings such as being overwhelmed, frustrated, etc. - Unable to make choices
- Lack of comfort or safety, always in a “fight, flight or freeze” frame of mind.

The Long Term Effects on the Children

Often times, the mental health of the children in these violent situations aren't addressed, this is what you may see:

- Shorter attention spans, decline in school performance
- Acting out with violent behavior and/or attitudes (mirroring what is their lived experience)
- Those that witness abuse have a higher risk of being in trouble either as a juvenile or adult criminality.
- Those that witness abuse have a higher risk of being abused themselves

Most of these issues won't be addressed due to the "we don't talk about it" way of dealing with things.



Statistics From Wise County Sheriff's Office:

Deputy Natasha Chandler,
Domestic Violence Officer since
2021

- During 2020, 919 emergency protective orders and 811 preliminary protective orders were processed through WCSO.
- During 2020 WCSO processed 131 warrants for 18.2-57.2-domestic assault, 26 warrants/summons for stalking, 18 warrants for abduction, 19 warrants for malicious wounding, 5 warrants for preventing victims from calling 911.

Statistics From Wise County Sheriff's Office (Cont):



- During 2020, the Domestic Violence Investigator supplemented 162 cases of domestic violence that qualified under the V-STOP Guidelines.
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Case Study– Wise County Sheriff's Office

During the first 6 months of 2022, Wise County Sheriff's Office was involved in a case in which the offender (ex-boyfriend) abducted victim (ex-girlfriend) for three days, physically assaulted her, cut her, and strangled her. The offender was located and arrested after the victim's mother called in a welfare check on the female. Offender was charged with domestic assault, strangulation, malicious wounding, and preventing her from calling 911.

Statistics From Family Crisis Support Services:

Numbers from Lee, Scott, Wise,
Dickenson Counties and the City
of Norton

Number of DV/SA Clients Served in 2020: **209**
Number of DV/SA Clients Served in 2021: **308**

Number of those with diagnosed mental health
illness in 2020: **43**

Number of those with diagnosed mental health
illness in 2021: **82**

Number of those that disclose mental health
concerns (i.e.> suicidal thoughts, panic attacks,
PTSD) in 2020: **137**

Number of those that disclose mental health
concerns (i.e.> suicidal thoughts, panic attacks,
PTSD) in 2021: **265**

In 2020, **65.5%** of our clients disclosed mental health
concerns.

In 2021, **86.03%** of our clients disclosed mental
health concerns.

Case Studies from FCSS

There have been several cases where the challenges mentioned previously have let down individuals. Of the 265 persons that received services through FCSS last year, there were several notable cases to share today that show the deep roots of Appalachian culture, the mental health struggle, and violent crimes in families:

A victim of domestic violence comes to our agency after her husband took her to a rural area “up in the mountains,” stating that he could kill her there and no one would ever find her. This was the moment that “Janie” sought help - after years of talking to her pastor, who continually advised her to “stand by your husband,” “just make sure you don’t get him upset,” and “keep praying for your marriage;” she made the difficult decision that this advice wasn’t helping her situation get better. She felt she was going to die if she stayed.

Case Study (Cont.)

She had gone to speak to a counselor after a car crash (unrelated to DV) and was diagnosed with anxiety and PTSD, but was looked down upon from her church members - saying that her faith should be stronger than taking medication. Thus making her give up something that was finally helping her to cope and live a more mentally healthy life. Leaving and coming to shelter caused her to be shunned by family and friends, told she wasn't welcome at the church. Her mental health was used against her in the custody battle for her children. For the first two months upon introduction, we had concern for her welfare and not getting the help she needed. She initially lost housing, her vehicle, and starting have more intense suicidal thoughts due to her feelings of helplessness. She returned to services worse than before. After several weeks of inviting and encouraging....

Case Study (Cont.)

She attended our support group. She made quick friends with other members and was invited to visit their church. This new church was accepting and welcoming. She started attending regularly. This church was very different from the church where she came from - they encouraged her to get back in with her counselor and offered extra support in the circumstances of custody and divorce. Janie also started working a job for the first time in twenty years. She is now in her own home, with a new truck, and is active in her new church with new friends.

“Janie” overcame obstacles that so many never do. It took over a year to get to point in her life where she recognized all things openly and felt comfortable talking about it and getting the help she needed.

*Names are changed for confidentiality. Permission to share story was given.

What Can We Do??

As professionals in the field of human services - learning the culture, the region, the barriers and the PEOPLE are one of the best things you will do for the services you provide.

A lot of times you will learn more from a conversation with an individual versus a long series of questions asked. While this may seem a cliché comment - gaining trust is one of the most important things to do in order to help clients.

KNOWING YOUR LIMITS. If you come across a situation or person that you aren't clicking with, acknowledge this and reach out to a co-worker or partnering agency. This isn't a failure! No one has a 100% likability rate! No one.



Thank you for all you do!

Working with the mental health challenges in our field, and especially our culture is a _____ task.

Encouraging quotes to get through the day:

“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” Mahatma Gandhi

“Don’t feel bad if people remember you only when they need you. Feel privileged that you are like a candle that comes to their mind when there is darkness.” Anonymous