

Belk: 'You are not alone'

Mary Belk | Columnist | Posted: Wednesday, September 23, 2015 3:12 pm

Our world has become overpopulated and complicated. Add 24-hour “news,” Facebook and Twitter to the mix. We’ve turned into a nation of stressed individuals, influenced by meaningless sound bites. Too often, we’re given simple one-line solutions to complex, multi-layered problems.

As more and more Americans are gunned down by out-of-control shooters, we hear the cry, “Do a background check on everyone who wants to buy a gun.”

I’m all in favor of background checks, but I know you can search the livelong day and never find out if the person is mentally ill. It can’t be done. Mental illness is a privacy issue.

After a shooting by a gunman who has mental health problems, the family is usually blamed for not stepping in to prevent the tragedy. And while folks have heard of mental illnesses including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression and post-traumatic-stress-disorder, most aren’t familiar with the struggles of the family members. They suffer from chronic worry, frustration, sadness, anger, embarrassment, confusion, worry, guilt, hopelessness, isolation, grief, sleeplessness and shame.

The wonderful news is that there’s help. NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, is made up of consumers of mental health services, family members and professionals working together toward a common goal. It’s also for anyone who wants to join in its mission, eradicating the stigma of mental illness as well as the myths, and improving the quality of life of all whose lives are affected by mental illness. Its method? Support, education, awareness, advocacy and research.

There are a lot of myths about mental illness, such as:

“If I have a mental health problem, I should be able to take care of it myself.”

“If I have a mental illness, it is a sign of weakness — it’s my fault.”

“If I seek help for my mental health problem, others will think I’m ‘crazy.’”

“People diagnosed with mental illness are always ill and out of touch with reality.”

The fact is, many never show signs of their illness to others, and most live productive, active lives. That’s why, more often than not, family members who aren’t living with the mentally ill relative don’t believe he or she has a mental health problem.

While NAMI works to improve the lives of individuals and families affected by mental illness, the Alabama Department of Mental Health has been level funded. But we can help by joining the NAMI Alabama mental health walk to raise awareness and to help change perceptions about mental illness. It’s Saturday, Sept. 26, in Montgomery’s Wynton Blount Cultural Park on Museum Drive. Check-in at 8 a.m. Walk at 9 a.m.

Using sound bites might simplify our hurried, worried lives for a moment, but in the end, those convenient words usually cause all kinds of problems. There's just no quick fix to a serious, complex situation.

But it's critical to remember NAMI's message. "Find Help. Find Hope." And a lot of lives can be saved if we spread the NAMI motto: "You are not alone."

Mary Belk lives in Auburn and writes a column for the Opelika-Auburn News.