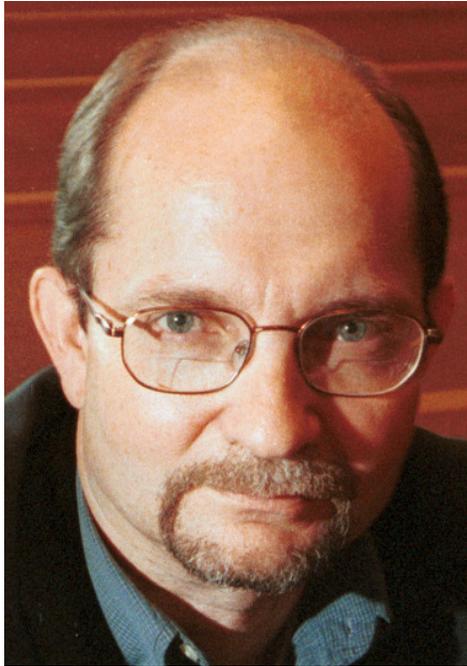


Group provides spiritual support for those affected by bipolar disorder

Richard Craver Mar 25, 2012



Mills

Photo by David Sandler -- Bob Mills was diagnosed with a form of bipolar disorder relatively late in life (in his forties) and has found help through medication and by becoming more spiritually involved in his church, First Presbyterian. DIT FEA 19 MENTAL HEALTH SAN4__J 10-06-03, A9, Guest Columnist.

A Winston-Salem bipolar disorder support group has been wrapping its arms around people with the condition and their loved ones for 11 years as of this month.

The grass-roots effort, led by Wake Forest University administrator Robert Mills, has helped more than 1,300 people by connecting the spiritual side of recovery with medicine and counseling. Some of the people have come from as far as 90 miles away.

The group holds confidential biweekly sessions at First Presbyterian Church, one for those with bipolar disorder and the other for loved ones.

A person with the disorder will swing — sometimes out of control — from manic behavior to deep depression. All too often, marriages and families disintegrate when the person with bipolar disorder denies his or her illness or refuses treatment.

"We formed the group because it was the presenting disorder that was causing so much of a problem," said Mills, who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 1997.

"We're a community of people whose lives are affected by these illnesses and who either need the encouragement of others or who want to give back by providing that encouragement."

Mills said the sessions have produced several success stories, including a young adult who began to manage her disease well enough to graduate from college and land a job in social work.

About 6 percent of the U.S. adult population deals with a severe mental illness disorder daily, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. About one in four U.S. adults are diagnosed each year with a mental illness.

Bipolar disorder affects about 5.7 million adult Americans, or about 2.6 percent of those 18 and older, according to the institute. Mills estimates about 400 of the support group's participants have had bipolar disorder.

"For every person with the disease, there are likely two to six people close to them who also have to deal with it," Mills said.

Though there are drugs available for treating the disorder, finding the right medicinal mix is challenging for a disease that can be debilitating. Some advocacy groups say about 60 percent of those with bipolar disorder become addicted to alcohol or drugs as they attempt to dull their pain.

"It is a hard disease to put into a box because it appears differently in most people," Mills said. "It's a hard disease to share because of fears of how loved ones, co-workers, bosses, the community will react to the news."

Andy Hagler, executive director of the Mental Health Association in Forsyth County, said the group "fills in a much-needed service gap in the community."

"It blends in the traditional support group/group process facilitation processes along with a faith-based, spiritual emphasis that may include prayer, Scripture, etc., to provide welcome, warmth, comfort, help and hope," Hagler said.

"The outreach Bob does is innumerable and is a fine example of how Bob strives to eradicate the stigma associated with mental illness."

Prayer is a component of the group's support because "medicine is not a cure-all for bipolar, but just a patch," said Laura Gardner, who serves as a group facilitator as part of her recovery from bipolar episodes that once left her incapacitated for 18 months. "People want to go to a place that is not judgmental, and where expressing their concerns is considered normal."



"They come here and they feel the Holy Spirit's presence. As they feel led, they ask for prayer. But anyone is welcome, and we have had several atheists and agnostics attend for the sake of feeling the support of a community."

Bruce Barton, one of the newest group members, said participants can be loved ones trying to help a bipolar person in denial. "But it can also be the person who recognizes they have bipolar and are trying to get assistance in dealing with loved ones in denial of the diagnosis," he said.

Group members acknowledge there's a challenge dealing with the perception that churches either aren't welcoming to people dealing with mental health issues or they emphasize prayer to the exclusion of medicine and counseling.

Amy Holloway, associate pastor at First Presbyterian, said the church hosts the group because of the spiritual element of its support efforts and as an educational tool.

"I know God is doing some pretty amazing things through their ministry and meeting people's needs where they are," Holloway said.

Angie Cooper, a facilitator who has bipolar disorder, said the biggest challenge is dealing with feelings of isolation from family and society.

"When I was diagnosed with bipolar, there was a sense of relief that I now understood why I thought like I did and acted like I did," Cooper said. "I've since educated myself about the unknowns to the point I believe God has led me to help others."

The group and other local advocates, such as Associates in Christian Counseling, are considering forming a national consortium for a Christian response for mental health recovery.

"I can think of nobody in the world that can make a greater difference in changing attitudes about the problem and how to support the mentally ill and their loved ones than can the body of Christ," Mills said.