

## Empowerment Over Shame for Mental Health Awareness

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***Many Wisconsinites are struggling with the negative effects of mental health challenges and accessing care. What can we do to increase the support we provide?***

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BRUNSWICK, WI - Since 1990, the first full week of October has been celebrated in the U.S. as Mental Illness Awareness Week. This year, the theme is “What I Wish I Had Known.” Advocates are encouraging people to share their experiences about things they wish they had known earlier in their path to healing.

While serving in the State Assembly in 2008, I was proud to pass the Mental Health Parity Bill, which required mental health treatment be covered by insurance. This was a good step forward for ensuring all Wisconsinites have access to mental health care, but shockingly little has been done since then.

Mental health struggles affect folks in every phase of life, from early childhood to old age. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), mood disorders are the most common cause of hospitalization for all people in the U.S. under the age of 45, and mental illness and substance abuse disorders are involved in one out of every eight emergency room

visits. One in six children between the ages of six and seventeen experience a mental health disorder each year, and heartbreakingly, suicide is the leading cause of death among ten through fourteen year olds.

Whether someone is born with a propensity toward mental illness or undergoes a traumatic event, they battle a negative stigma when they attempt to access care. A 2019 national poll from the American Psychiatric Association found that mental health stigma is still a major challenge in the workplace, with over half of workers concerned about discussing mental health issues at their jobs. More than one in three workers were concerned about retaliation if employers found out they sought medical attention.

Mental healthcare is just that – healthcare. Stigma continues to deter people from seeking life-saving care. Each of us can do our part to talk openly about mental health. Choosing empowerment over shame will save lives.



As your State Senator, I'm here to listen. People share their joys and their grief with me because they want to make a difference in others' lives. When neighbors use their advocacy skills, it helps legislators like me understand the concerns and needs of our community.

Access to care remains a top-concern for battling mental health throughout western Wisconsin. Rural areas in particular face challenges, from hiring shortages to transportation. Even before the onset of COVID-19, workforce shortages created significant mental health coverage gaps across the state.

The extended pandemic presented additional challenges to those seeking any kind of treatment, including mental and behavioral healthcare. Even when a patient can find a provider, it can sometimes be challenging to receive care. Telehealth was expanded during Governor Evers' emergency declaration, but these measures were not made permanent.

