

Living with disabilities can impact mental health

Michigan's community mental health agencies are here to help

JOANNE BAILEY-BOORSMA | TUESDAY, OCTOBER 3, 2023

People with a disability report experiencing frequent mental distress almost five times as often as adults without disabilities. The good news is Michigan's community mental health agencies have services tailored to these needs.



Jon Cauchi, inclusion consultant and trainer for Disabilities Advocates of Kent County

At age 12, John Cauchi lost his sight due to the rare disease [Leber's Hereditary Optic Neuropathy](#), a traumatic life change that certainly would impact anyone's mental health. Cauchi now serves as an inclusion consultant and trainer for [Disabilities Advocates of Kent County](#).

“There might have been issues with depression and anxiety beforehand,” he says. “The obsessive compulsive disorder, I feel that might have come on beforehand, but I definitely feel that those symptoms have been exacerbated because of the blindness.”

School life did not help with his mental health. Cauchi was bullied, accused of lying about his condition, and ridiculed by peers because the students and staff did not understand the barriers he was facing.

“I'd be competing against individuals who were sighted and getting comments from coaches of ‘You're going to let the blind kid beat you?’ and being really sad at being the low bar for others,” Cauchi says. “Those things wear on an individual.”

For Cauchi, those kinds of experiences persist.

“The comments that you hear on a daily basis such as when you are riding the bus and a lady says ‘Oh my god, I'm so impressed that you got out of bed today. If I was like you, I would just die.’ Like how do you take that as an individual when others are looking at you thinking they would rather die than be like you,” he says. “That kind of stuff really impacts a person's mentality and their mental health.”



People with disabilities reported having more mentally unhealthy days.

The need to accommodate all abilities

Living with a disability can definitely impact a person's mental health. According to the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), one in four adults in the United States — about 61 million people — have a disability. People with a disability report experiencing frequent mental distress almost five times as often as adults without

disabilities. The CDC's [Morbidity and Mortality Weekly](#) report stated that, in 2018, an estimated 17.4 million (32.9%) adults with disabilities experienced frequent mental distress, i.e., 14 or more reported mentally unhealthy days in the past 30 days.

“There's a common theme of being categorized as a group of others.” says Sean Field, clinical director at [Summit Pointe](#). “There also is the infantilization of it. I treat you as if you're a child because you're not fully functional or fully capable and so, from that perspective, [I might say] ‘Oh, congratulations you made it to the store today.’ You would never say that to anybody else but for this person it becomes a moment of congratulations. It's just minimizing his independence and abilities.”



Sean Field, clinical director, Summit Pointe.

Despite the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) striving to ensure accessibility to all, the world is not set up to accommodate all abilities. Field adds this can create another barrier causing significant impairment or challenge for some with a persistent or a notable disability.

“Everything around us is set up for people that don't have any challenges in those areas,” Field says. “Every time that that disability rears its head, there's a sense of defeat, a sense of loss, a sense of ‘I don't belong.’ It can cause a lot of feelings of remorse that they don't have something or they should have something. They feel like they're incomplete or not whole and often lead to symptoms or signs of depression, where they just don't feel worthy.”

Most of the barriers people with disabilities face are social constructs, Cauchi adds, and making places more universally designed would help all people feel welcome in a space.

“Imagine a person who is six-foot-four or six-foot-five,” he says. “We don't think of them having a disability, but put that person on an airplane and tell them to use the bathroom, and they're gonna run into some barriers in that situation. That's the environment emphasizing those differences.”



In the past 60 years, a lot of progress has been made for those with disabilities in both their physical and mental health.

The answer: Educating people

Prejudice against those with disabilities has a long history and is almost ingrained into human nature. In ancient Roman times, children perceived with disabilities were often left to die. Up to the 1970s, several American cities had [ugly laws](#) that made it illegal for “unsightly or disfiguring disabilities” to appear in public.

Field says in the past 60 years, a lot of progress has been made for those with disabilities, both physical and mental. Even though the ADA covers all disabilities, stigmas that need to be overcome remain.



Universal design helps all people feel welcome in a space.

Connecting with Others

Talking is an important key for people with disabilities, Field says. Finding those spaces to just talk when they are having experiences of not belonging or feeling not worthy is often the best way to build a foundation to address those challenges.

Field notes that programs are tailored to a person's needs and may involve working with a psychiatrist or meeting with peer support who have had similar life experiences and can assist in helping to implement strategies and techniques to navigate some of life's challenges. At Summit Pointe, a person might work with its Care Management Team. The person would meet with a care manager, who would help in determining goals and then assist the person in gaining access to medical, social education or other services to stay on track and achieve those goals.

In neighboring Allegan County, [OnPoint](#) provides case management along with a range of services for clients with disabilities. Those services include nursing, psychiatric, respite for caregivers, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, and clinic-based therapy as well as life skills such as making a budget, learning to live independently, employment, managing social security and other benefits, and self-advocate training and support. Many other [Michigan community mental health agencies](#) offer similar supports.

For Cauchi, his experiences as a child led him to his career as an inclusion consultant and trainer. In his role, he provides education on a variety of disability topics such as diversity, equity, inclusion, identifying and confronting ableism, and discussing laws, including the ADA. He also discusses the history of disabilities – the bad and the good – with the goal of making sure that information about disabilities is out there.

“As a society, we don't address disability enough,” Cauchi says. “We don't educate on it, we don't talk about it. Disability is often a subject we avoid.

“One story I often like to tell is a time that I was in a store, standing there with my white cane, and there's a mother with her child in front of me. As most people would imagine, this child was quite curious. He sees my cane and starts asking mom, ‘What's that?’”

The mother tried to quiet the child, but by doing that, Cauchi says, sent a negative message to the child, that a person with a disability is someone you ignore or “sweep under the rug.” Recognizing the child was only curious, Cauchi bent down and answered his questions.

Joanne Bailey-Boorsma has 30-plus years of writing experience having served as a reporter and editor for several West Michigan publications, covering a variety of topics from local news to arts and entertainment.

Photos by Tommy Allen.

Photo of Sean Field by John Grap.

The MI Mental Health series highlights the opportunities that Michigan's children, teens, and adults of all ages have to find the mental health help they need, when and where they need it. It is made possible with funding from the [Community Mental Health Association of Michigan](#), [Center for Health and Research Transformation](#), [Genesee Health System](#), [Mental Health Foundation of West Michigan](#), [North Country CMH](#), [Northern Lakes CMH Authority](#), [OnPoint](#), [Sanilac County CMH](#), [St. Clair County CMH](#), [Summit Pointe](#), and [Washtenaw County CMH](#).