

WELCOME TO OUR

Monthly Newsletter

we're so glad you're here!

#MORETHANENOUGH

May is Mental Health Awareness Month



Happy Mental Health Awareness Month! With the busyness and stress of everyday life, managing good mental health can be difficult. According to [Mental Health America](#) 19.86% of American Adults are experiencing a mental health problem, and 15.05% of youths aged 12-17 have reported having a Major Depressive Episode in the last year. Idaho is unfortunately doing worse than average compared to America as a whole, ranking 44 out of 50 (1 being the best, 50 the worst) for youths experiencing depressive episodes, and 39 out of 50 for adult prevalence of mental illness. In this newsletter we will talk more about the complications that occur with poor mental health, and some helpful tips to try and manage stress.

Community News

MOSCOW HUMAN RIGHTS PANEL

The first week of April a board of panelists met in Moscow to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: the declaration that laid the groundwork for future treaties to uphold the ideas that every human, no matter age, gender, sex, ethnicity, or economic status has certain unalienable rights.

The panelists discussed several facets of human rights, including the right to liberty (civil/political ideas), equality (social/economic), and brotherhood (cultural/group rights). The discussion ended with examining where we currently are in the United States with upholding human rights and what to do in the future. The panel also discussed issues faced by minorities and marginalized peoples, issues with access to and quality of healthcare, adding more human rights curriculum to history classes in Idaho, and addressing autonomy and tribal sovereignty for Native Americans.

It finished with a call to action: to cross political parties to come together to support human rights, amplify the voices of those typically not heard, support the marginalized, and use data to hold individuals and organizations accountable for their actions.

Although not specifically discussed in the panel, this topic also brings to mind human rights over housing. The Fair Housing Act makes it illegal to discriminate against race, sex, religion, disability, national origin, or familial status, but what about criminal history, credit history, and ability to pay? Don't those who have made past mistakes or cannot afford a dwelling also deserve the human right of access to shelter? And if so, how can we take the advice of the panel and support the marginalized in their quest for housing in our community?

Stress Management Techniques

Stress can be triggered by a variety of factors. The stress response can be helpful in avoiding a life-or-death situation, as it triggers physiological response for fight or flight, but even though in today's world we are unlikely to encounter the same life-or-death situations our ancestors did, our bodies still react the same way to the feeling of stress. Long-term stress can cause hyper-activation of the nervous system which can lead to chronic physical, psychological, and behavioral problems including changes to the immune system, sleep disturbances, anger issues, and increased heart rate and blood pressure.

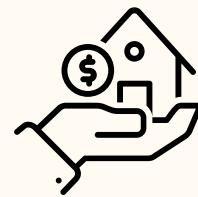


Although life circumstances are not easily changes, there are several stress management techniques that can be used to help manage stress. One is the S.O.B.E.R. technique. S.O.B.E.R. is a mindfulness technique that has 5 steps to try and interrupt the stress response. **S**top what you are doing. **O**bserve what is happening around you. **B**reath. **E**xpand awareness. And **R**espond with awareness. This technique helps reduce reactive behaviors and encourages intentional thinking and mindfulness.

Some other recommendations include making sure you get adequate sleep, eat healthy meals, and exercise regularly. Pets are a great form of stress relief. Mindfulness activities like meditation and yoga can also be quite helpful for reducing feelings of stress. Spending time in nature has been proven to reduce symptoms of stress as well, so going for a walk or even laying in the grass can help ease feelings of stress.

State News

Idaho House Bill 545



Much to the disappointment of affordable housing advocates, Idaho House Bill 545 was passed into law by governor Brad Little in early April. This bill prohibits city and county governments from regulating rent, application fees, and deposits. Boise may be especially impacted by this as the city currently has a maximum charge for rental application fees set at \$30. With the bill going into effect in July, companies and prospective landlords will be allowed to charge whatever they want for application fees. It also limits city government control in being able to set rent caps or maximum rental price increases, or insist rental properties participate in a Federal Housing Assistance Program (accept section 8 housing vouchers).

This comes as a blow to many low income individuals and families who already struggle with the recent housing cost increases and now have lost protections over their rights to housing in favor of the rights of property owners to make as much profit as they see fit. It again call to question 'is access to shelter a human right?' and if it is, what do we do with a system that treats housing as a profit making enterprise rather than an essential human need such as food? Is it ethical that the right to profit comes at the expense of someone's access to shelter? It is certainly something to think about.

Lived Experience Panel

In our April lived experience panel we discussed barriers to housing and housing bias. Housing bias can occur when people with criminal histories or bad credit histories are refused housing opportunities based on their past. Since most rental property agencies run a background check when someone turns in a rental application, it can be incredibly difficult to get housing if you have a criminal history, even if it was something that happened a long time ago.

One participant talked about their struggles finding housing with a drug felony charge on their record. Even though the incident happened 7 years prior to their described search for housing in Moscow, they were still rejected by every rental agency in Moscow and Potlatch.

Director Casey Bolt presented several ways to help mitigate the damage of a less-than-stellar history. First, know that overcoming barriers takes time. For those with a criminal history, make sure to emphasize the length of time since the charges occurred, stay in compliance with court orders, and get reference letters (especially helpful if from a judge or parole officer).

For bad rental/financial history: obtain a credit report to get a full picture of where you stand, and make payments to get rent/utility debts paid off and build a consistent payment history. Working with a group like MoneyFit Housing Counselors (<https://www.moneyfit.org/housing-counseling/> - 208-286-3282) or having a case manager from a local non-profit can also help you sort out and overcome any potential financial housing barriers you may have.

Most importantly: **Don't give up!** It can be a long process that feels very discouraging and unfair, but, as Casey says, "even when it feels impossible, it is possible to be overcome...you just have to keep at it!"



Team Member Spotlight Meet Rebecca!

Rebecca is the office manager and regional Access point specialist. She first became acquainted with Sojourners in 2010 when she lived in one of the family units with her son. During her stay at Sojourner's she started volunteering in the office, and found the experience fun and educational. After the previous office manager retired in 2016, Rebecca was offered the job, and when the Regional Access Point system was created to help people struggling with housing insecurity be able to find out what assistance they qualify for, she took on the lead for that role as well. Although the job can be incredibly stressful with so many people in need and not enough resources to help them all, Rebecca finds the most rewarding part of her job in watching people's faces light up when she lets them know they qualify for services.

Rebecca is the mother of four; three girls and one boy, and the grandmother of 6 with 1 on the way. She has a very busy life working both full time at Sojourner's and part time at a local liquor store. In the small amount of free time she has, Rebecca likes to watch TV shows and read. Her best loved genres are fantasy and sci-fi, and her favorite book is Neil Gaiman's The Graveyard Book



Mental Health Struggles at Sojourner's

With May being Mental Health Awareness Month it is important to touch on how mental health issues can affect people's struggles with housing security. Many people living in Sojourner's Transitional Housing Program have some form of a diagnosed mental health disability: depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, PTSD. It can be easy to shrug off the effects of mental health struggles as something that can be easily overcome if one just thinks positively enough to make it happen. Recovering from mental health struggles is a lengthy and intensive process that takes not only a great amount of individual dedication but also support from knowledgeable community members and trained professionals. It is not something easily overcome without a great deal of external care and support.

There is still a lingering mentality in the U.S. that people should 'pick themselves up by their bootstraps', and it's the individual who has ultimate control over their own destiny, regardless of societal barriers, structural inequalities, or past traumas. While individuals do have a lot of personal responsibility and control, it is not a burden that is only theirs to bear, and they should not be harshly judged or punished for needing additional help or accommodations. Many of our participants come from backgrounds of family abuse, trauma, and sexual assault. Not only can these impact mental health overall, but they can lead to problems making and retaining relationships and finding and keeping jobs.

One participant noted "Sometimes I do have really bad mental health spells, and...it's questionable whether or not it's appropriate for me to be at work, even if it's best for the business for me to be there even, not just because I want to stay in bed and eat truffles, and you know, just mental health day in my bathrobe, or am I likely to panic and punch a man (because of a PTSD episode)... employers just don't understand it." and "I think it's really important that people who have mental health disabilities, like myself and lot of people, are able to go into a job interview and be like I cannot work nights because of this, because my nighttime medications need to be taken at night...those medications you're on, they're not meant to sleep through the day. ... It's really hard to find a job on an entry level if you're not willing to work all shifts...especially in the restaurant industry, or any hospitality industry."

Another participant said "I have good days, mostly good days.... I would say the real struggle with mental health is sometimes you can't...sometimes you can't just chose to be happy and have it stick instantly, you know, you have to work at it. And when things get overwhelming, if there is too many people, or something really triggering happens, you know, I might not be able to stay in a work environment, I might have to just step away. Otherwise I'll be crying on the floor under a table rocking back and forth like a crazy person. That doesn't make me able to be reliable. And I think that's the hardest part, is knowing the type of person I am on the inside, I can't be that all of the time anymore."

Struggles being able to work and hold a steady job can lead to struggles with housing security. With unsteady or intermittent pay, it is easy to get behind on bills and face eviction. Not having secure, stable housing adds pressure to already bad mental health, making those who struggle even more vulnerable. Not only can losing stable housing create worse mental health outcomes, it can also potentially create problems with being labeled an unfit parent. As one participant pointed out: "Can't keep your job, can't keep your house, can't keep your house, can't keep your kids, can't keep your kids...there's nothing left. If you can't keep your mental health together, nothing else stays together."

It can be easy to assume those with mental health problems should just grit their teeth and struggle on, but when the typical work environment causes undue stress and harm, and can potentially be unsafe for both the employee and those around them, leaving the workforce and getting on disability may become the only option. However, disability often pays a paltry amount, leaving individuals with mental disabilities to face a long term future of barely scraping out a living below the poverty line, struggling to keep up with exponentially increasing rental costs on an extremely limited fixed income. Several of the participants I interviewed mentioned the near impossibility of finding a rental they could afford on the average \$900 a month paid by disability. Not only that, but it can take years for a person to actually get accepted for SSI (social security for disability). One participant mentioned the process taking 2.5 to 3 years, another said it took 4 years to get on disability. The *shortest* amount of time current Sojourners staff have known a person to wait was 7 months, and that individual has several documented disabilities, not just one or two.

Added to the struggles of the low amount of money disability offers, the social stigmas still present a barrier to aid. Since mental disabilities are 'invisible' many people believe those who claim disability pay are just lazy fakers who could work if they really wanted to. Struggling with poor mental health may not always be obvious on the outside, but it is a very real problem millions of Americans face daily. Living with mental health issues can make even the most mundane seeming tasks, like getting out of bed or taking a shower, feel almost impossible. As one participant put it "If you don't have your left leg, most people aren't going to ask you to run, but they ask you to emotionally run through things when you don't have an emotional left leg... It's like you're being asked to run a race at the same time your foot's nailed to the floor."

Struggling with mental health issues can be difficult and complex and it looks different for everyone. While the stigmas associated with mental health are continuing to lessen, and the importance of good mental health is shining more and more brightly, there is still a long way to go. As one participant aptly stated:

"Mental health awareness is never going to change mental health...we have to make the changes for it... it's not going to just correct itself."

Donate today

CONSIDER BECOMING A MONTHLY DONOR TODAY!

Donations are a great way to show your support. Many people regularly come into our housing programs with no ability to pay for services. Your donations help us pay for their housing, supplies, and their case management.

[DONATE NOW!](#)



Supplies Needed

Sojourner's is always in need of frequently used household supplies for our office and resident apartments. If you are looking for an easy way to get involved consider donating some of our most needed supplies.

- Dish Soap
- Toilet Cleaner
- Toilet Paper
- Disinfectant Wipes
- Powdered Laundry Soap
- 13 and 30 gallon Trash Bags
- Pillows

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DROPPED OFF AT THE
SOJOURNER'S OFFICE AT
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Want more frequent updates on what's happening at Sojourner's? Check out our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/sojourners.housing or click on the link below!

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