

Obama calls for national debate on mental health

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Photo: The White House

End the stigma, he urges at special White House conference.

(HealthDay)— The United States must bring the issue of mental illness "out of the shadows" with a more vigorous national discussion, President Barack Obama said Monday in opening a one-day White House conference on mental health.

People affected by mental illness need to know that they should not suffer in silence, Obama added, according to an *Associated Press* report.

"There should be no shame in discussing or seeking help for treatable illnesses that affect too many people that we love," the president said according to *CNN*. "We've got to get rid of that embarrassment. We've got to get rid of that stigma. Too many Americans who struggle with

mental health illnesses are suffering in silence rather than seeking help."

The conference is part of Obama's response to last year's shooting massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Conn. While he stressed that most people with mental illness are not violent, Obama also noted that untreated mental health problems can lead to tragedies such as the Sandy Hook shooting, the *AP* reported.

"We can do something about stories like this," he said. "In many cases, treatment is available and effective."

The agenda at the conference includes recognizing signs of mental illness in young people, improving veterans' access to [mental health services](#), and insurance coverage for [mental health care](#) and substance abuse. The general objective is to reduce the stigma of mental illness and to encourage people with [mental health problems](#) to seek help, the *AP* reported.

Dr. Carol Bernstein, past president of the [American Psychiatric Association](#), called the conference "an important initial step in the effort to insure that persons suffering from mental illness and substance abuse disorders receive the treatment they need and deserve."

She added, "Major organizations committed to guaranteeing appropriate mental health care will be working closely with President Obama and his team on this important initiative."

Dr. Alan Manevitz, a clinical psychiatrist at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City, was also enthusiastic in support of Obama's intent.

"This is wonderful news," he said. "The prescription of 'national discussion in mental illness' is the medicine for mental health in this country."

He added, "Mental illness impacts all of us. One out of four people in the U.S. lifetime suffers from mental health disease (which translates into one out of every two families having a family member with a mental illness), but only one in five receives treatment. Untreated mental illness results in increased costs to society: missed school and work, increased disability, increased risks of other medical conditions."

There are about 150 invited attendees at the White House conference, including actors Bradley Cooper and Glenn Close, mental health patients and advocates, health care providers, top administration officials, lawmakers and local government officials from across the country.

Obama also announced that the Department of Veterans Affairs will hold mental health summits nationwide to increase awareness of VA programs and connect veterans and their families with community resources, the *AP* reported.

The White House will also highlight improvements in [mental health](#) coverage under the new [health care](#) law, including the introduction next year of a ban on denying coverage to people with mental illness.

Bernstein, who is also a psychiatrist at NYU Langone Medical Center, New York City, believes that a "unified" effort to better define the symptoms of [mental illness](#) and point to the best available treatments "will go a long way towards eradicating the stigma faced by those suffering from these disorders."

More information: The National Alliance on Mental Illness has more about [mental illness](#).

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