

Breaking The Taboo

Depression and bipolar disorder were once off-limits subjects in the Orthodox community. Not anymore.

Debra Nussbaum Cohen - Staff Writer

On a cold April night two years ago, Alan Dutka stood on the roof of his Teaneck, N.J., apartment building and jumped.

The suicide of this bright, devout former Yeshiva University student who for eight years had suffered from schizophrenia belied the belief that religious Jews don't suffer from psychiatric illness, that it is a scourge of "the outside world."

In testimony given by Orthodox Jews at a first-of-its kind conference in Manhattan Sunday, it was clear that psychiatric illness including depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder (also known as manic-depression) are part of the human condition and life in the observant community.

Yet psychiatric illness has been a topic so taboo that it has not been openly discussed in the Orthodox community—even in the last several years, as subjects including teenage addiction and spousal abuse have been the subjects of major gatherings of rabbis and laypeople.

"Mental Health & The Orthodox Community: A Day of Education and Empathy" was held at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, which is housed at Congregation Ramath Orah on the Upper West Side. The conference was co-sponsored by the Orthodox Union and several neighborhood synagogues.

It was organized by Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot, who detailed his own struggles with major depression in an article in the fall issue of the Orthodox Union's magazine Jewish Action.

He confronted his first depression at about the same time that his friend Maida Katz was battling her own. The rising young star in the world of elite female Torah scholars lost her fight, and took her own life in 1996.

His goal now, Rabbi Helfgot said in an interview, is to help people learn about mental illness and talk about it as they might other kinds of illness — openly.

"It's almost like we're 20 or 25 years behind the general community," he said. "Thank God there's been greater openness in the last decade in talking about problems in the frum community. But mental illness has just not been talked about openly."

The issue is certainly not new to the observant. Chasidic texts address despair in a way that resonates strongly with those who have experienced depression. But there has been little guidance from within the Orthodox community, beyond getting more fervent in prayer to God. And medical advances of the past two decades in the treatment of psychiatric dysfunction have made few inroads into the more fervent sectors of the Orthodox community, where there is often reluctance to take medication for such problems.

A few unique factors are at work in the Orthodox community that can affect those with psychiatric illness, according to conference participants.

First is denial, which leads to a sense of shame and secrecy among those facing psychiatric disorders, leaving them in dangerous isolation.

When Rabbi Ron Yitzchok Eisenman, spiritual leader of an Orthodox synagogue in Passaic, N.J., first confronted the paralyzing anxiety that made him feel like he was suffocating and needing to flee, he turned to one of the rabbis who had mentored him in yeshiva.

"He said: 'Don't tell anyone,' " Rabbi Eisenman related at the conference. "He said it wasn't mental illness, it sounded like a thyroid condition."

The focus on religious fervency as a solution to all problems is another hurdle. It can lead to "masking" obsessive-compulsive behavior, for example, that is regarded as acceptable because it takes the form of observance, said Rabbi Shmuel Goldin of Congregation Ahavath Torah in Englewood, N.J.

"When I was in college, I put on tefillin five times a day," he said, rather than the once that is required of Orthodox men. "I was obsessive. Sometimes you'll see a young man standing in front of a mirror adjusting his tefillin just so, for 15 or 20 minutes or more. That should tell us that something is wrong."

"For too long there was an assumption that if we were good Jews, we'd live shielded from life's struggles," said Elana Katz, who is on staff at the Manhattan-based Ackerman Institute for the Family, which trains therapists. "This made it hard for people to get help."

The "shidduch factor" remains another serious obstacle to the treatment of psychiatric illness. The lives of single adults and their families' lives are scrutinized by the families of potential suitors. A psychiatric illness is thought to stain the reputation of an extended family.

"The kinds of questions now being asked before two people even meet" are ridiculous," said Rabbi Goldin. "As a community, we have become obsessive-compulsive," he said, to spontaneous applause. "In that environment, how can someone be expected to come forward and deal with their issues?"

When mental illness is severe and the patient requires residential housing, there are virtually no places where an Orthodox Jew can feel comfortable, said Rabbi Helfgot. He spoke with one woman who may place her teenage daughter in a supervised community run by Christians, because there aren't any Jewish options.

"Mental illness left untreated can lead to crime, addiction and even suicide," said Dr. Zipporah Tokayer, director of the mobile crisis team for adult mental health services at Ohel, the Brooklyn-based family-services organization.

When there is acceptance, however, the tight-knit nature of Orthodox families and communities can provide support for someone grappling with mental illness, participants said.

And for some, prayer is a powerful force for healing.

"One of the things that helped me through the fear and depression was tefillah," said Rabbi Eisenman. "My loneliness was made easier by the recognition of God in my life."

The conference attracted roughly 450 people, including mental health professionals, rabbis and laypeople. Many were eager for a forum where they could ask the questions that others in their communities are too uncomfortable to hear.

The gathering was such a success that Rabbi Helfgot says he hopes to spark similar conferences in other Orthodox communities.

As for Alan Dutka, a 5K walk to raise money for mental health research will be held in his

memory Sunday, May 19, on the grounds of the Kushner Hebrew Academy in Livingston, N.J.
For more information, or to donate, contact: alanswalk@yahoo.com.