

Remarks at the National Conference on Mental Health

June 3, 2013

The President. Thank you so much. Everybody, please have a seat. Thank you so much. Welcome to the White House. And thank you, Janelle, for that introduction and sharing your story and making such a difference through your organization. We're really proud to have you here.

I want to thank Secretary Sebelius, Secretary Arne Duncan, Secretary Ric Shinseki for their leadership and helping to organize this event. And I also want to acknowledge some outstanding Members of Congress who are here and who care deeply about this issue.

And finally, I want to thank all of you for participating in this National Conference on Mental Health. We wanted to bring together folks who've suffered from mental illness and families who've supported them. We wanted to bring together advocates and educators, faith leaders, veterans, local officials.

All of you have shown an extraordinary commitment to what is a critical goal, and that is to make sure that people aren't suffering in silence and that we have the capacity to pull together all the resources and support and love that's out there to go after an extraordinary challenge in our society.

The main goal of this conference is not to start a conversation; so many of you have spent decades waging long and lonely battles to be heard. Instead, it's about elevating that conversation to a national level and bringing mental illness out of the shadows.

We want to let people living with mental health challenges know that they are not alone, and we've got to be making sure that we're committed to support those fellow Americans, because struggling with a mental illness or caring for someone who does can be isolating. And I think everybody here who's experienced this—the issue in one way or another understands that. It begins to feel as if not only are you alone, but that you shouldn't burden others with the challenge, and the darkness, day in, day out—what some call a cloud that you just can't seem to escape—begins to close in.

The truth is, in any given year, one in five adults experience a mental illness—one in five. Forty-five million Americans suffer from things like depression or anxiety, schizophrenia or PTSD. Young people are affected at a similar rate. So we all know somebody—a family member, a friend, a neighbor—who has struggled or will struggle with mental health issues at some point in their lives. Michelle and I have both known people who have battled severe depression over the years, people we love. And oftentimes, those who seek treatment go on to lead happy, healthy, productive lives.

So we know that recovery is possible, we know help is available, and yet, as a society, we often think about mental health differently than other forms of health. You see commercials on TV about a whole array of physical health issues, some of them very personal. [*Laughter*] And yet we whisper about mental health issues and avoid asking too many questions.

And the brain is a body part too; we just know less about it. And there should be no shame in discussing or seeking help for treatable illnesses that affect too many people that we love. 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 still suffering in silence rather than seeking help, and we need to see it that men and women who would never hesitate to go see a doctor if they had a broken arm or came down with the flu, that they have that same attitude when it comes to their mental health.

And we see it in veterans who come home from the battlefield with the invisible wounds of war, but who feel somehow that seeking treatment is a sign of weakness, when in fact it's a sign of strength. We see it in parents who would do anything for their kids, but who often fight their mental health battle alone, afraid that reaching out would somehow reflect badly on them.

We see it in the tragedies that we have the power to prevent. And I want to be absolutely clear: The overwhelming majority of people who suffer from mental illnesses are not violent. They will never pose a threat to themselves or others. And there are a whole lot of violent people with no diagnosable mental health issues. But we also know that most suicides each year involve someone with a mental health or substance abuse disorder. And in some cases, when a condition goes untreated, it can lead to tragedy on a larger scale.

We can do something about stories like these. Many cases, treatment is available and effective. We can help people who suffer from a mental illness continue to be great colleagues, great friends, the people we love. We can take out some pain and give them a new sense of hope. But it requires all of us to act. And there are a few ways we can do our part.

First, we've got to do a better job recognizing mental health issues in our children and making it easier for Americans of all ages to seek help. Today, less than 40 percent of people with mental illness receive treatment—less than 40 percent. Even though three-quarters of mental illnesses emerge by the end of—by the age of 24, only about half of children with mental health problems receive treatment. Now think about it: We wouldn't accept it if only 40 percent of Americans with cancers got treatment. And we wouldn't accept it if only half of young people with diabetes got help. Why should we accept it when it comes to mental health? It doesn't make any sense.

But the good news is, there are plenty of groups that are stepping up to change that. So a former colleague of mine, Gordon Smith, a former Republican Senator, lost his son to suicide 10 years ago. And I remember him speaking so eloquently about it. Gordon is now the head of the National Association of Broadcasters, and today the National Association of Broadcasters is announcing a new campaign designed to change attitudes about mental illness through TV ads and social media, because Gordon doesn't want other parents to go through the agonizing loss that he's endured. So we thank you, Gordon, for that great work.

You've got secondary school principals who are holding assemblies on mental health. You've got organizations like the YMCA who are volunteering to train staff to recognize the signs of depression and other mental illnesses in our young people. You got leaders from different faith communities who are getting their congregations involved. And dozens of other organizations have today made similar commitments, so we're very thankful to all of you.

There are other people who are leading by example. My great friend, Patrick Kennedy, when he was running for reelection back in 2006, he could have avoided talking about his struggles with bipolar disorder and addiction. Let's face it, he's a Kennedy. You know. *[Laughter]* He was—his seat was pretty safe. Everybody loved him. And yet Patrick used his experience as a way to connect and to lift up these issues, not hide from them.

And one day, a woman came up to Patrick at a senior center and told him she was afraid to tell her friends she was taking medication for a mental illness because they—she was worried they might treat her differently. She told Patrick, "You're the only one who knows aside from my son." And so Patrick started realizing how much power there could be for people to speak out on these issues. And Patrick carried these stories back with him to Washington, where he worked with a bipartisan group of lawmakers, including his dad, to make sure the mental health services you get through your insurance plan at work are covered the same way that physical health services are. A huge victory. So—[*applause*].

So because of Patrick's efforts and the colleagues who worked with him, it's easier for millions of people to join him on the road to recovery, which brings me to a second point. It's not enough to help more Americans seek treatment, we also have to make sure that the treatment is there when they're ready to seek it.

For years now, our mental health system has struggled to serve people who depend on it. That's why, under the Affordable Care Act, we're expanding mental health and substance abuse benefits for more than 60 million Americans. And new health insurance plans are required to cover things like depression screenings for adults and behavioral assessments for children. And beginning next year, insurance companies will no longer be able to deny anybody coverage because of a preexisting mental health condition.

We're also investing in science and basic research to make it easier to diagnose and treat disease early. And earlier this year, I announced an ambitious initiative to develop tools for mapping the human brain, which could help scientists and researchers unlock the answers to conditions that affect mental health.

We're also doing more to support our troops and our veterans who are suffering from things like traumatic brain disorder—or traumatic brain injury or PTSD, posttraumatic stress disorder. Today, we lose 22 veterans a day to suicide—22. We've got to do a better job than that, of preventing these all too often silent tragedies. That's why we've poured an enormous amount of resources into high-quality care and better treatment for our troops.

And today, under Ric Shinseki's leadership, the VA is going even further. They're partnering with 24 communities in 9 States to help reduce wait times for veterans seeking mental health care. And they're—they've met their goal of hiring 1,600 new mental health providers, which means this summer, they're going to hold more than 150 summits like this one in communities all across the country so that every one of our servicemembers and veterans understand: Just like you take care of yourselves and each other on the battlefield, you've got to do the same thing off the battlefield. That's part of being strong.

For many people who suffer from a mental illness, recovery can be challenging. But what helps more than anything, what gives so many of our friends and loved ones strength, is the knowledge that you are not alone. You're not alone. You're surrounded by people who care about you and who will support you on the journey to get well. We're here for you.

And that's what this conference is about. That's why these issues are so important. So if there's anybody out there who's listening, if you're struggling, seek help.

Audience member. Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. You're welcome. If you know somebody who is struggling, help them reach out. Remember the family members who shoulder their own burdens and needs our support as well. And more than anything, let people who are suffering in silence know that recovery is

possible. They're not alone. There's hope. There's possibility. And that's what all of you represent with the extraordinary advocacy and work that you've already done.

So thank you all for being here. Let's do everything we can to help our fellow Americans heal and thrive. And now I'd like to turn it over to Secretary Sebelius, who will be leading our opening panel. All right?

Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Janelle Montano, speaker, Active Minds, Inc.; and former Rep. Patrick J. Kennedy.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Mental Health, National Conference on.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Duncan, Arne; Kennedy, Patrick J.; Montano, Janelle; Obama, Michelle; Sebelius, Kathleen; Shinseki, Eric K.; Smith, Gordon H.

Subjects: Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), treatment efforts; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Traumatic brain injuries, treatment efforts; Education, Department of : Secretary; Health and Human Services, Department of : Secretary; Health and medical care : Health insurance reforms; Health and medical care : Mental health programs and services; Health and medical care : Research and development; Mental Health, National Conference on; Veterans : Suicide rate; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Secretary.

DCPD Number: DCPD201300382.