

ON THE FRONT LINES

Taking the shame out of mental illness

According to the nonprofit organization Mental Health America, workplace mental health problems result in as much as \$500 billion of lost productivity annually. At the same time, MHA reports suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States and second among adolescents and young adults 10 to 24 years old.

Combatting these statistics are more than 500,000 mental health professionals who are on the front line. Count Dr. Valencia Agnew, owner of Adolescent & Family Behavioral Health Services in Grand Rapids, among those who have a calling to not only help others, but take the shame out of mental illness.

Working in the field for more than 18 years, Agnew is known as a therapist who offers hope to many of the more difficult cases in the Grand Rapids area. Corp! spoke to the Grand Rapids native about her practice and why she works in such a challenging field.

Corp!: What inspired you to get into the counseling field?

Valencia Agnew: It was what I was meant to do. It has always been my personality ... one of helping and nurturing and taking care of people.

Corp!: When did you start Adolescent & Family Behavioral Health Services?

VA: I was in private practice and, in 2012, I decided to start my own practice. It was something I knew that I would do at some point. Really, I had been hesitant about doing it on my own. It was in 2012 that my sister passed in January and my mom had a stroke in February. I realized if I wanted to do it, then do it. Life is fragile.

Corp!: How many patients are you treating?

VA: We saw 752 clients in 2018, of which 290 were new. We have three administrative staff and nine therapists. Two therapists will be joining this summer or fall.

Corp!: How is the clinic serving the community?

VA: We serve a wide gamut of ages and we do individual therapy, group therapy, family and marital therapy. While we have a specialty — Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) — we treat a variety of issues like grief and loss, behavioral issues with kids at school, depression and anxiety. Our specialty is working with people who have intense emotions and people who have suicidal or self-injuring thoughts. We use the Gottman Method for couples therapy.

We form a team and have a resource table for the Stomp Out the Stigma Walk sponsored by the Mental Health Foundation of West Michigan and the Out of Darkness Walk by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. If a school contacts us because they need someone to do an assembly on suicide prevention, we often do that at no charge for the schools.



Corp!: What can CEOs do to support mental health in the workplace?

VA: Just being aware of the culture and language that is used. There are subtle ways we can treat things like mental health as a dirty little secret. In particular with professionals, it is harder for them to be part of (therapy) groups because “what if” they run into someone who knows they are a professional and thinks less of them. That’s unfortunate. You can be a lawyer, a doctor, a CEO and you still may need some extra support or help, or your children may need it. There’s no shame in doing that.

You decrease the risk of suicide by asking and having conversations. If you notice something, say something.

Corp!: What advice do you have for other women business owners?

VA: I believe it is important to know why you’re doing what you’re doing. Surround yourself with people who are going to support that dream. Not everyone is going to support it. There will be times when you will say, “forget it, I didn’t sign up for this.”

Corp!: What is your guiding principle to live by?

VA: For me, to really operate with integrity. And be excellent. By excellence I don’t mean perfect, but I believe we can strive for excellence and integrity.

Corp!: Who was your mentor in life?

VA: What I did was start finding people who could help me. I didn’t initially have a mentor. I created an advisory board for my practice, so I would have a group of people who would support and mentor me in different ways. I have had many people who contributed to where I am today.

Corp!: What is your pet peeve in the office and why?

VA: When others don’t care to look beyond the surface of things. When it’s easy to be judgmental about someone, but you don’t know what got them there and you have to look beyond what you see.

Corp!: What is your favorite way to spend your free time?

VA: I love reading and going to the movies and things that are faith-based, like going to church or singing. If I could live out of a suitcase and work, I probably would (until I got tired of it). ■