

Well-Being

July Article: Revisiting Mental Health Awareness Month

Perspective. How often do we stop and re-evaluate the way we see the world? In the month of June, it may be time for us to pause and take some time to look at those in the world around us in a new light. A wonderful graphic may be of significant service in doing so:



By the time this graphic was entered into this article, it had already been reposted hundreds of times. But why? It's something we already know: we make judgments and draw quick conclusions every day. But what we don't often do is actively remember the impact of that habit. This graphic serves to remind us of that impact, as well as something we often forget: that what we see from our short interactions with other people is but a fraction of who they really are.

It is easy to generalize. According to a study conducted by Princeton University, when we see a new person, it takes but a tenth of a second to form an opinion of them (Hotchkiss, 2017). Taking only a tenth of a second to judge someone and form an entire opinion on them from such a small vantage point is incredibly detrimental, not just because it leads to untrue and often poor opinions of people, but because it discredits the complexity and beauty of human life. In judging people so quickly, we strip them of the reality that they have vivid lives, social networks, thoughts, hobbies, and feelings.

These are but many reasons why the month of May is Mental Health Awareness Month, a time we have set aside as a country for over 74 years (since its founding in 1949), to not only practice personal wellness, but to also stop for a moment and re-evaluate how we treat the people around us. Yet over 4,000 people in the U.S. lost their lives to suicide this May (CDC). We have become so wrapped up in our preconceptions, generalizations, feelings and struggles that it is hard for us to truly see that the people we are judging may very well be doing the best they can. It is time to start thinking in a new way.

It is important – vital, even – to care for ourselves, and to take the time we need to practice self-love and compassion. But if we were to extend our compassion even further to those around us, we would truly be all the better for it. Because buried in those small yellow dots aren't just the strangers, we see in our lives day-to-day: the driver that cut us off on the highway, or the parent with the screaming child in a store. It extends to our loved ones and those we encounter far more often: a family member who has made an unpopular decision; a friend who seems distant; a colleague who comes into work grumpy or poorly dressed. These are the people who matter so much to us in our lives – people we can make such a profound impact in – yet we catch these snapshots of their days, and we draw strong conclusions about them that we continue to hold onto, even if they aren't true. We bicker and snap at our family

members, knowing that we would do better; we ignore our distant friend, claiming that 'if they wanted to hang out, they'd call.' We complain about our grumpy colleague or gossip about the introvert of the group. But as time goes by, we become more distant with that family member. We stop talking to our colleague. And our friend never calls.

This is a cycle we have the power to stop, because we know how detrimental it is to our society. We may not know the reasons people have for being the way they are in our .10-second windows of time, but we have the power to empathize with them despite it. In the month of May, 4,000 people in our country lost their lives from mental illness. Why not begin to conquer that number today? Why not approach our frustrations with compassion, to peel back our yellow stickers of conclusions? Because we know now more than ever that underneath them lie a wide and beautiful array of colors that were there all along, just wanting to be seen and heard.

Next time you see another person acting or looking a way that you don't find appealing or correct, I implore you to pause for a moment and remember the graphic above. Regardless of what we see in others, we truly have no idea what is going on inside their heads and within their lives. This month, take a moment to appreciate the work that people all around us are doing just to get through every day. You may even find that the next time someone pauses to re-evaluate and provide a person with compassion, the recipient might just be you.

If you'd like to learn more about mental wellness, attend any one of our Webinars.