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Social Media Campaign Targets Science, Stigma

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Last May, in observance of Mental Health Awareness Month and to help combat the associated stigma, the New York City-based Brain and Behavior Research Foundation launched the “Know Science. No Stigma.” social media campaign, accessible through popular outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Pinterest, because “one way to combat the stigma and prejudice is to educate people,” says Jeffrey Borenstein, MD, the foundation’s president and CEO. “From my perspective, stigma is too soft of a word; it’s really prejudice.”

The campaign’s initial run proved successful and was met with “lots of enthusiasm, lots of engagement, and lots of likes and retweets,” according to Laura Wells, MBA, the foundation’s vice president of marketing and communications. A second run now is planned for this year.

Breaking Down Complex Research

“We have been significantly increasing our activity in social media over the past several years and are really gaining traction and growing our presence and activity. Part of a proactive strategy on our part is to increase engagement with a broader audience,” Wells explains of part of the impetus behind the Know Science. No Stigma. campaign, which she believes “encapsulates perfectly who we are. While stigma isn’t the crux of our mission, getting to the biological causes of mental illness and developing better treatment is.

“The foundation funds cutting-edge research to understand, treat, and ultimately prevent and cure mental illness,” she continues, “and we’re seeing great strides in basic research, new technology, next-generation therapies, and early intervention. Everyone has a family member, friend, or coworker who lives with a psychiatric illness. We feel research is the path to progress and really what offers the best hope.

“Social media lets us get the word out in a less formal way,” Wells notes. “Social media is the playing field where we break down science for an audience beyond our weekly e-newsletters and publications geared to existing donors. It’s about participating in the dialogue about mental illness and bringing new people into the fold rather than just disseminating information about our research.”

Concise, Crisp, and Clear

To create graphics that social media users could share on Facebook, retweet on Twitter, or pin on Pinterest, for example, the campaign organizers sifted through research and related information from the scientists connected to the foundation, according to Wells, noting that this includes more than 3,700 scientists around the world.

The organizers ultimately picked quotes and perspectives “that were articulated cleanly and would work well in social media,” Wells explains. “They needed to be concise, crisp, and clear.”

One of the messages noted that research by Rachel G. Klein, PhD, a professor of psychiatry at the NYU Child Study Center, showed that early intervention, diagnosis, and monitoring of boys with ADHD helped them lead more productive adult lives. A second message explained that 10% of U.S. high school students have experienced suicidal thoughts, which may result from serotonin disruption, according to research, and that David Shaffer, MD, the Irving Philips Professor of Child Psychiatry in the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, developed a screening tool schools can use to identify youths most at risk.

“Social media permitted us to use these powerful messages to engage people and inform them about research that changes lives,” Wells says of the campaign.

Ultimate Goals

Borenstein says he hopes to ultimately see three outcomes from the Know Science. No Stigma. campaign. “First, to eliminate the prejudice,” he says, noting that society today no longer tolerates prejudice based on characteristics such as race, gender, or ethnic background. “But there are still too many people who accept prejudice when it comes to psychiatric illness, and that needs to end.”

Second, Borenstein would like to see an increase in the number of people getting treatment for mental illness. “Many people who have psychiatric illness don’t get treatment because of the stigma,” he explains. “I don’t want to see people suffering in silence; I want to see them getting treatment because with treatment, they do get better.”

Finally, he would like to see a significant increase in support for research to help address mental illness concerns. “We’re now at a point in time when we can make tremendous advancements in treating these conditions if we have the resources to fund scientific research.”

— Tracy Denninger is the senior production editor at **Social Work Today**.