**Minding Mendocino**

By Jessica Maness, LCSW, Long Valley Health Center

**Accepting Anxiety**

A great book could be written on the human experience of anxiety, possibly filled with art, poetry and other metaphors. It is through this artistic expression that we generally are able to understand more of the experience of others. Those who struggle with anxiety, and all its various faces, typically feel a lack of understanding from those around them. Here is a short excerpt from a journal regarding anxiety:

*“This anxiety cripples me, binds me from expression, shames me for speaking out, speaking up, prevents me from going deeper in love or the woods. This anxiety grabs my chest like a robot and squeezes out my dreams with my breath. It has already caused me to imagine losing everyone I love fifty times at least, in fifty horrible ways. These feelings make me want to leave, while stealing from me the hope it will be better, or different elsewhere. It robs the world of me fully being able to ‘be’ in it, and robs me of connecting deeply even to myself. I have tried to change it, calm it, exercise it, heal it, talk to it, love it, ignore it, drug it, run from it, pray with it, therapize it. But, I did all of this with the expectation that it would disappear or change in some way. What I will try now, is something I have never tried. I am going to accept it with the understanding that it may always be this way. I am going to love it just the way it is.” –Anonymous*

This writer allowed her work to be used in order to create some understanding about this unique and difficult experience. Most of us can easily understand nervousness about a specific challenge, or fear of something tangible. People with anxiety disorders would like for us to know that this is so much deeper and obscure. For example, there may be weeks of constant anxiety over no known reasons whatsoever, just to suddenly shift and allow the glimpse of peace. When the feelings and thoughts are present, it can be nearly impossible to “just focus on something else”, “stop making a big deal out of everything”, or (my favorite), “just take a breath”. While tools can be learned to help the immediate symptoms, and eventually to change this chronic stress state of the brain, it generally takes support and time. Most people who have this experience do everything they know to change it, even if it is destructive or short-term. Some choose an escape route through suicide, after many attempts to feel better have failed.

All of this, to plea on behalf of those struggling with some anxiety disorder. Often, we do not know or understand why someone does not behave gracefully in social situations, relationships, or work stress. It is human to discern that which is different, as this comes from a place of protection. However, can we compassionately begin to engage those around us who are simply struggling to find a balance? We know that stress makes it difficult to focus, relax, remember some information, and often causes reactivity to others. People with anxiety disorders may lash out, seem distracted, clean frantically, or appear passive or quiet. They may be fearful of crowds, of leaving the house, or of having shallow conversations. They may have many unexplained illnesses or act oddly. Whatever the behavior is that we can see, it is nearly always certain that underneath lies extremely challenging and often persistent worry, fear, or panic. One caring person can make a large difference in the life of a person experiencing anxiety, and a compassionate community can do even better.

Thanks for reading, Laytonville, and if anyone can do it—we can. If you are experiencing difficulty with anxiety, give our Behavioral Health Team at the clinic a try. There are many therapeutic tools available that can be helpful with this experience. And everyone, feel free to write future article topics to: LVHC, ATTN: Jessi Maness, PO Box 870, Laytonville, CA 95454.