Background: There is a widely recognized lack of services for siblings of children with mental illness. They live in a world of unpredictability, “walking on eggshells,” are often subjected to physical and verbal aggression, and are at risk for developing maladaptive behaviors. The Sibling Support Demonstration Project, developed at the Eunice Kennedy Shriver Center of UMass Medical School, is a mental health care initiative that aims to fill the gap in service for these siblings and their parents/caregivers. The project is ongoing at Cambridge Health Alliance, a safety-net hospital in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Evaluation is provided by the Institute for Community Health in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The Sibling Experience: Siblings of children with mental health needs may experience a range of dysfunctional behaviors from the brother/sister, including rapidly shifting moods, explosiveness, and withdrawal. The sibling experience can include: Confusion, Safety Concerns, Anger and Resentment, Shame, Competing for Attention, Parentification, Independence, Overprotection, and Love/Hate Relationship.

Project Goals:
1. To increase sibling resiliency and decrease trauma during and after a brother/sister’s psychiatric hospitalization
2. To increase parental awareness of how siblings may be affected and facilitate effective coping strategies
3. To increase family stabilization during and following psychiatric hospitalization
4. To attempt to reduce hospital readmission rates
5. To increase awareness of family-centered mental health care among medical practitioners

Interventions conducted at inpatient Psych Unit:
- Peer support/education groups for siblings aged 5-18, offered 2x/week for 90 minutes, using the Sibshops model adapted for mental illness and led by medical trainees
- Parent/caregiver education groups offered 2x/week for 90 minutes, focusing on strategies to support siblings, led by parent mentors who share the experience of a child’s psychiatric hospitalization
- Post-hospitalization interventions to help restore family stability and potentially reduce readmissions are in development

Select Survey Data: Siblings (N=145, results in %)

Select Survey Data: Parents (N=196, results in %)

Research Questions:
1. Does the intervention increase sibling and parental caregiver knowledge about coping strategies and resources related to the patient’s mental illness?
2. Does the intervention increase the ability of parental caregivers and siblings to connect to a support network?
3. Does the intervention increase parents’ understanding of the impact of mental illness on siblings, and increase the likelihood of them sharing specific strategies and resources about coping with mental illness with siblings?
4. Does the intervention increase trainees’ knowledge of how siblings and families are affected by mental illness?

Quotes from Siblings: Siblings describe why their brother or sister is in a locked psychiatric unit:
- “He threatened to kill me with a knife.”
- “One day she was out of control and an ambulance took her to this hospital. I was scared.”
- “He was thinking about hurting himself—about trying to kill—he had been cutting himself.”

What was the most helpful part of today’s group?
- “Saying what is happening to my sister and being understood.”
- “Getting out trapped feelings.”
- “It was helpful to know that there were other people going through the same thing.”

Now that the sibling group is over, I feel...
- “Relieved because I let out my feelings and like all these emotions have been lifted off.”
- “Happy that I know more about my sister’s problem.”
- “Scared, because I’m leaving a safe place.”

Quotes from Parents/Caregivers:

What did you learn at today’s group?
- “We thank our funders: Sidney R. Baer, Jr. Foundation, John Leopold Weil and Geraldine Rickard Weil Memorial Charitable Foundation, and an anonymous foundation. Thanks to Cambridge Health Alliance, the Eunice Kennedy Shriver Center of UMass Medical School, and the Institute for Community Health for a successful collaboration. Lastly, many thanks to all of the families who contributed by sharing their experiences.”