**One million unheard voices / Dr. Hela Hadas, Director of Enosh, The Israeli Mental Health Association**

It is no secret that those afflicted with mental health disorders suffer from severe social stigmas, often preferring not to seek treatment rather than identify with such a stigmatized group. The feelings and reactions among close family members are no less difficult. Mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, romantic partners, and adult children of those with mental health disorders—all must witness their loved ones in mental distress, and it can often seem like there is no hope. They, too, are in need of information, assistance, professional tools, guidance and, most importantly, someone who will listen to them and their struggles, to treat them with warmth and care.

One in every four people in Israel has experienced a mental health issue. Facing a mental health crisis in one’s family is a rocky experience that can be painful, confusing, and arouse a sense of helplessness—both in the afflicted individual and their family members.

In Israel, 250,000 people have a mental health disorder, and hundreds of thousands of their close family members are also in need of assistance. In the inner family circles of afflicted individuals, there are almost one-million people who also live with a sense of guilt, shame, and stigma. This occurs alongside the emotional burden involved in caring for a mentally ill individual. Some family members cope with this temporarily by concealing or dismissing the situation. Only a few dare to break the barrier of shame, to discover that the road to recovery begins with acknowledging the situation and sharing the struggle with one’s intimate community.

It is our responsibility as professionals to do everything we can to help family members break through this barrier—to help them realize that they are not alone, that there are people out there to listen to them, that there are other families who are “in the same boat,” and that, together, they can navigate the stormy waters.

It is with this goal in mind that Milam, the Center for Family Counseling Services, was founded. Milam is supervised and funded by the Israeli Ministry of Health, operating 12 centers and branches across the country. Serving the families of individuals with mental illness, Milam provides mental health support and helps them navigate the benefits to which they are entitled. In the past year, Milam’s centers have assisted 1,600 family members. Milam’s services are provided free of charge and are not tied to one’s social security benefits or package of rehabilitation services.

We were surprised to discover just how little families know about the benefits to which they and their loved ones are entitled. As such, we are making great efforts to help them cope with the hardships associated with supporting a loved one with mental health issues, by offering support groups and providing assistance to navigate state institutions. We also connect family members to a national family conference, subsidized by the Ministry of Health. At this conference, they can find relief from their hardships and meet other individuals and families who face similar situations.

But 1,600 families are a drop in the bucket. In order to raise awareness among families of the support available to them, and to help them utilize their benefits starting from the early stages of coping, the Ministry of Health must tailor a broad plan that reaches these families.

Public discourse surrounding mental illness must be fostered and encouraged. It is also important to discuss the implications that various life circumstances have on individuals’ mental health and on the quality of life of their family members. We envision that, with the right assistance, close family members of those afflicted with mental illnesses will succeed in standing by them and helping their loved ones improve their emotional and mental health, while transforming their own daily livies and reality from one of suffering and pain to one of strength and acceptance.