**One million people whose voices are not heard / 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, and often prefer not to seek treatment than to admit identification with this stigmatized group. No less difficult to deal with are the feelings and acknowledgement that arise among close family members. Mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, romantic partners, and adult children of those with mental health disorders – all of them are forced to see their loved ones in mental distress and, oftentimes, in their eyes, there is no solution. They, too, are in need of information, assistance, professional tools, guidance and, most importantly, someone who will listen to them and their struggles and who will provide them with warmth and care.

One in every four people in Israel has experienced a mental health crisis. Coping with a mental health crisis within the family context is a rocky experience involving pain, confusion and helplessness, not only on the part of the afflicted individual, but also the family members.

In Israel, 250,000 people have a mental health disorder, and, for all of them combined, there are hundreds of thousands of close family members who are also in need of assistance. Almost one-million people are closely connected to the afflicted individuals and, they too, live with the sense of guilt, shame, and stigma that surrounds the family, alongside the emotional burden involved in treating the mentally ill individual. Some family members find temporary solutions 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 recognition of the issue, as well as inclusion of close social networks.

It is our responsibility as professionals to do everything we can to help family members break past the 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” as they are, and that together they can sail safely to shore.

It is with this goal in mind that Milam, the Center for Family Counseling Services, was founded. Milam is supervised and funded by the Ministry of Health, and it operates across 12 centers and branches in Israel. Milam provides mental health support, as well as assistance navigating the benefits to which families caring for those with mental health issues 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 that they and their loved ones are entitled. As such, we are making great efforts to help them cope with the struggles that come with supporting a loved one with mental health issues by providing assistance with navigating state institutions and support groups. Additionally, we connect family members to a national family conference, which is subsidized by the Ministry of Health. At this conference, they can find relief from their hardships and meet other individuals and families who are dealing with similar situations.

But 1,600 families are just a drop in the bucket. It is the responsibility of the Ministry of Health to develop a broader, specialized plan to ensure that the families of individuals with mental health disorders are aware that there are people out there who will support them and help them utilize their benefits, starting already from the early stages of coping.

Public discourse surrounding mental illness must be fostered and encouraged, as well as discourse on 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, at the same time, transforming their daily life and reality from one of suffering and pain to one of strength and acceptance.