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**PROFESSIONALS AND MANAGERS WITH SERIOUS MENTAL ILLNESS CAN
THRIVE IN THEIR CAREERS, BU STUDY SHOWS**

(Boston, Mass., June 2000) Contrary to popular belief, serious mental illness is not necessarily a career-limiting disorder. A study of 500 professionals and managers, all of whom have, or have had, a serious mental illness, shows that 73% were able to achieve full-time employment in occupations that ranged from semi-professionals; nurses, case managers and administrators, to executive and full professionals, such as; lawyers, professors and CEO's.

“While past studies have focused primarily on dysfunction, this is the first study of its kind to open a window on a previously unexplored area: how people, despite a disabling mental illness, have fashioned an enduring, well paying and meaningful professional or managerial career,” says Zlatka Russinova, Ph.D., senior research associate at BU's Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation and co-director of the study. “This research provides more hope for others who are combating personal and societal barriers as well as stereotypes about the impact of serious mental illness on careers.”

Sixty-two percent of the survey respondents held their current position for more than two years, 69% increased their responsibilities since starting their current jobs, and over 20% earned more than \$50,000 per year. The group had reported having mental illnesses such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, major depression and post traumatic stress disorder. Eighty-four percent of all participants are currently taking psychotropic medications; 64% of all participants have

been hospitalized in the past three or more times, and 34% received social security benefits for their disability at some time in their lives.

Participants reported a range of on-the-job coping mechanisms and supports. To deal with daily pressures, 62% take breaks. Flexibility to modify daily duties is important to 49%, and 33% fashioned flexible schedules. Getting back to work played a key role in the recovery process for many of respondents.

The professionals participated in the survey hoping that sharing their personal experiences would provide a deeper understanding of effective coping strategies and job conditions to help other people with serious mental illness learn to manage their illness and pursue professional careers.

“Thinking about suicide dominated my life and my weeks,” says Bob Boorstin, former advisor to President Clinton and current senior policy advisor to the Secretary of the Treasury Department. “When you are in that state, you don’t believe it is going to change, you don’t understand it’s a cycle and you are going to come out of it. I got drawn down as far as you can

Despite having a bipolar disorder, Boorstin’s former supervisor George Stephenopolis, describes his job performance in glowing terms. “Bob knew how to take care of himself and he knew his illness,” he explained. “We relied on him to be the main driver. I knew he could be counted on to do his job. I also knew that at the heart of Bob’s strength was his ability to know his own limits and take his medication and to know that if he was feeling stressed he would take an hour or two off. Beyond that I never thought about it.”

Tracy Thompson, *Washington Post* reporter and author of *The Beast*, had debilitating symptoms of depression before treatment. “I couldn’t think abstractly, I was writing in circles, unable to interview anyone because I could not hold the thread of a conversation,” she recalls.

She was able to return to work through a combination of strategies, including medication, control over daily job tasks, and flexible hours. And the work itself proved to be important therapy. “Performing at work is a huge boost to the self esteem,” she says.

The study also provides detailed information on the use of reasonable accommodations by participants and how they handled disclosure of their illness on the job. More information on the nature of participants’ vocational achievements, coping mechanisms, and supports is also available. To receive more information contact Project Director, Marsha Langer Ellison, Ph.D., and Zlatka Russinova, Ph.D., Project Co-Director both at The Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, 617/353-3549. The study was supported by a grant from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research and the Center for Mental Health Services.

The Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation is affiliated with Boston University’s Sargent College of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences. Founded in 1881, Sargent College is an international leader in education, research, and practice in the broad areas of communication disorders, health sciences, occupational therapy, physical therapy, rehabilitation counseling, athletic training and nutrition. For more information, visit the web site at: http://www.bu.edu/cpr/research/si_3.html.