



STIGMA, DISCRIMINATION AND MENTAL ILLNESS

“The single most important barrier to overcome in the community is the stigma and associated discrimination towards persons suffering from mental and behavioural disorders.”

- The World Health Organisation

What is stigma?

- Three out of four people with a mental illness report that they have experienced stigma.
- Stigma is a mark of disgrace that sets a person apart from others. When a person is labelled by their illness they are no longer seen as an individual but as part of a stereotyped group. Negative attitudes and beliefs toward this group create prejudice which leads to negative actions and discrimination.

Stigma = stereotyping ➔ prejudice ➔ discrimination.

- Stigma brings experiences and feelings of:
 - shame
 - blame
 - hopelessness
 - distress
 - secrecy
 - loneliness, isolation and social exclusion
 - stereotyping and derogatory labels
 - misrepresentation in the media
 - being treated differently than the rest of society
 - discrimination in housing, employment or services
- Stigma worsens a person’s illness and can lead to a reluctance to seek and/or accept necessary help.
- Families are also affected by stigma, leading to a lack of disclosure and support.
- For mental health professionals, stigma means that they themselves are seen as abnormal, corrupt or evil, and psychiatric treatments are often viewed with suspicion and horror.
- A 2006 Australian study found nearly one quarter of people surveyed felt depression was a sign of personal weakness and would not employ a person with depression, around a third would not vote for a politician with depression and 42% thought people with depression unpredictable. One in five surveyed reported that if they had depression they would not tell anyone. The stigmatising attitudes were much higher towards people with schizophrenia. Nearly two thirds of people surveyed thought people with schizophrenia unpredictable and one quarter felt that they were dangerous.
- Furthermore, some groups of people are subjected to multiple types of stigma and discrimination at the same time, such as people with an intellectual disability or from a cultural or ethnic minority.

How can we challenge stigma?

- Research suggests that stigma may be reduced by protest, education and contact. Through protest, stigma is presented as a morally unjust and people are encouraged not to act in inappropriate ways. Education challenges inaccurate stereotypes about mental illness and replaces these with factual information. Contact, that is face-to-face interactions between a person with a mental illness and the general public, brings the greatest improvements in public attitudes.



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- Community wide social marketing campaigns, most often through mass media, bring these three approaches together and have been used around the world to shift public attitudes regarding mental illness. Successful campaigns are long term and involve people with experience of mental illness.
- We all have a role in creating a mentally healthy community that supports recovery and social inclusion and reduces discrimination. There are many simple ways everyone can help to reduce prejudice and discrimination towards people with experience of mental illness. These include:
 - Learn and share the facts about mental health and illness.
 - Get to know people with personal experiences of mental illness.
 - Speak up when friends, family, colleagues or the media use language and/or misinformation that perpetuates false beliefs and negative stereotypes.
 - Offer the same support to people when they are unwell whether they have a physical or mental health problem.
 - Don't label or judge people by their illness.
 - Treat people with a mental illness with respect and dignity, as you would anyone else. Don't discriminate when it comes to participation, housing and employment.
 - Talk openly of your own experience of mental illness. The more hidden mental illness remains, the more people continue to believe that it is shameful and needs to be concealed.

Common myths about mental illness

Myth: Mental illness only affects a few people.

Fact: Mental illness is common. One in five Australians will experience a mental illness. It affects people of all ages, educational and income levels and cultures.

Myth: Mental illness is caused by a personal weakness.

Fact: A mental illness is not a character flaw. It is caused by a complex interplay of genetic, biological, social and environmental factors. Seeking and accepting help is a sign of strength.

Myth: People with a mental illness never get better.

Fact: With the right kind of help, most people do recover and lead healthy, productive and satisfying lives.

Myth: People with a mental illness can "pull themselves out of it".

Fact: A mental illness is not caused by personal weakness and is not "cured" by personal strength.

Myth: People with a mental illness are violent.

Fact: People with a mental illness are no more violent or dangerous than the rest of the population. People with a mental illness are more likely to harm themselves - or to be harmed - than they are to hurt other people.

Myth: People with a mental illness should be kept in hospital.

Fact: With appropriate treatment and support, people with a mental illness can live successfully in the community. In fact, the majority of people with a mental illness live independently in the community.



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Useful links

- [WA Mental Health](#) – WA's one-stop-site for mental health information.

Stigma

- [Canadian Mental Health Association](#) features Canadian anti-stigma work, including television adverts and other resources.
- The [Chicago Consortium](#) is dedicated to the research and understanding of mental illness stigma.
- [Like Minds, Like Mine](#) is a New Zealand public health project to reduce the stigma of mental illness and the discrimination that people with experience of mental illness face.
- [Multicultural Mental Health Australia](#) has multicultural anti-stigma tools.
- [Moving People](#) is a UK campaign to reduce the stigma and discrimination linked to mental ill health, and improve the physical and mental wellbeing of people with a mental health problem.
- SANE's [StigmaWatch](#) monitors the media for inaccurate and irresponsible representation of mental illness and suicide.
- [See Me](#) is a Scottish campaign to challenge stigma and discrimination around mental ill-health. The campaign encompasses multimedia with local and national action.
- [What a difference](#) is a US mental health recovery campaign to encourage, educate, and inspire people between 18 and 25 to support their friends who are experiencing mental health problems.

Human Rights

Australia has legislation and is a signatory to international conventions that protect the rights of people with a mental illness and address discrimination.

- The [Equal Opportunity Commission](#) is a WA government agency which promotes equal opportunity and provides redress to unlawful discrimination.
- The [Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission](#) is a Commonwealth government agency which promotes human rights, and deals with compliance and discrimination.
- The [United Nations General Assembly](#) has 'Principles for the protection of persons with mental illness and the improvement of mental health care'.
- The [World Health Organisation](#) has information on mental health and human rights.