
Stigma, discrimination and mental illness

Summary

- Stigma is when someone *sees* you in a negative way because of your mental illness. Discrimination is when someone *treats* you in a negative way because of your mental illness.
 - Social stigma and discrimination can make mental health problems worse and stop a person from getting the help they need.
 - Avoid stigmatising people with mental illness by seeing the person first and not labelling them by their mental illness.
 - You can help challenge stigma by speaking up when you hear people around you make negative or wrong comments about mental illness.
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Stigma is when someone sees you in a negative way because of a particular characteristic or attribute (such as skin colour, cultural background, a disability or a mental illness). When someone treats you in a negative way because of your mental illness, this is discrimination.

Stigma happens when a person defines someone by their illness rather than who they are as an individual. For example, they might be labelled 'psychotic' rather than 'a person experiencing psychosis'.

For people with mental health issues, the social stigma and discrimination they experience can make their problems worse, making it harder to recover. It may cause the person to avoid getting the help they need because of the fear of being stigmatised.

The harmful effects of stigma

Some of the effects of stigma include:

- feelings of shame, hopelessness and isolation
- reluctance to ask for help or to get treatment
- lack of understanding by family, friends or others
- fewer opportunities for employment or social interaction
- bullying, physical violence or harassment
- self-doubt – the belief that you will never overcome your illness or be able to achieve what you want in life.

Dealing with stigma

Here are some ways you can deal with stigma:

Get the mental health treatment you need. Try not to let the fear of being labelled with a mental illness stop you from getting help.

Do not believe it. Sometimes, if you hear or experience something often enough, you start to believe it yourself. Try not to let other people's ignorance influence the way you feel about yourself. Mental illness is not a sign of weakness and is rarely something you can deal with on your own. Talking about your mental health issues with healthcare professionals will help you on your road to recovery or management.

Do not hide away. Many people with mental illness want to isolate themselves from the world. Reaching out to people you trust – family, friends, coaches or religious leaders – can mean you get the support you need.

Connect with others. Joining a mental health support group – either online or in person – can help you deal with feelings of isolation and make you realise that you are not alone in your feelings and experiences.

You are not your illness. Do not define yourself by your illness as other people might. Instead of saying 'I'm

schizophrenic', say 'I have schizophrenia'. There is power in language.

It's not personal. Remember that other people's judgements often come from a lack of understanding rather than anything else. These judgments are made before they get to know you, so do not believe that their views have anything to do with you personally.

Discrimination - your rights

Australia has legislation against discrimination and agrees with international conventions that protect the rights of people with mental illness.

- The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission promotes equal opportunity and can help you address unlawful discrimination.
- The Australian Human Rights Commission is a Commonwealth Government agency that promotes human rights and deals with compliance and discrimination.
- At the international level, 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 Organization also has information on mental health and human rights.

Challenging stigma associated with mental illness

Everyone has a role to play in creating a mentally healthy community – one that is inclusive, rejects discrimination and supports recovery. Ways to help include:

- learning the facts about mental illness and sharing them with family, friends, work colleagues and classmates
- getting to know people with personal experiences of mental illness so you learn to see them for the person they are rather than their illness.
- not judging, label or discriminate when you meet people with mental illness. Treat all people with respect and dignity.
- avoiding using language that puts the illness first and the person second. Say 'a person with bipolar disorder' rather than 'that person is bipolar'.
- saying something when you hear people around you making stereotypical or inaccurate comments about mental illness.
- sharing your own experience of mental illness (if you have experienced it). This will help dispel myths and encourage others to do the same. Mental illness is not something shameful that needs to be hidden.

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