Understanding Mental Health Stigmas



This resource defines stigma and explains the effects that stigma has on people, as well as how to reduce it.

What is Stigma?

Mental health problems are more common now than ever, and there are more ways to treat them. But stigma, negative beliefs and attitudes about mental health can stop people from getting help or make them quit treatment.

Stigma is the set of beliefs people hold about those with mental health issues. For example, some people might assume that those with mental illness are weak, dangerous, or that it is their own fault.

Fear and not understanding mental health often lead to stigma. So does wrong or misleading information. Stigma does not just affect people with mental illness — it also affects the people who love and care about them.

Forms of Stigma

- **Public:** This is what society thinks. People with mental health conditions are looked down on through stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. They are made to feel less valuable because of their struggles.
- **Self:** This is what people believe about themselves. Someone with a mental health condition might start to believe the negative things others say. They may feel they do not deserve help and avoid getting it.
- **Structural:** This comes from systems and institutions. Things like a lack of good policies, resources, or support can put people with mental illness at a disadvantage. Instead of helping them, the system ends up punishing them.



Effects of Stigma



Here are four ways that stigma impacts mental health:

- **Avoid or delay treatment:** People avoid or delay treatment. They may not ask for help in the first place. Or they might quit treatment early or only follow parts of it instead of the whole plan.
- **Increase isolation and shame:** Fear of being judged or treated unfairly can make people pull away from friends, family, and activities they used to enjoy. They may also avoid work and other parts of everyday life.
- **Worsen mental health outcomes:** When someone is afraid of being judged, they are less likely to get help. Over time, their condition can get worse instead of better.
- **Discriminate against individuals and their families:** Stigma can mean fewer services, resources, and mental health providers are available. People may also face unfair treatment when it comes to getting hired, keeping a job, getting accommodations, or being promoted.

Reducing Stigma

- **Education and awareness:** Public education should focus on promoting mental wellness and busting common myths. The more people understand mental health issues, the less stigma there will be, and the more empathy people will feel.
- **Open conversations:** Talking honestly about mental health — at home, in your community, or at work — creates safe spaces. These conversations help people understand each other and break through the wall of silence.
- **Advocacy and support:** Support groups can help people feel understood and give them a sense of community. It is also important to make mental health services easier to access and to push for good insurance coverage.
- **Cultural competence:** When mental health providers understand and respect their patients' backgrounds, it builds trust. People from different cultures are more likely to reach out for help when they feel respected.
- **Role models and public figures:** When famous people talk openly about their own mental health, it makes the issue feel more human. It also encourages others to seek help.
- **Policy changes:** Passing laws that protect people from discrimination and making sure everyone can get care and insurance coverage helps reduce stigma at a system-wide level.

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