

# Mental Health

## Overcoming the Stigma of Mental Illness

**Progress is being made to remove the stigma of mental illness and mental health disorders. You can take positive steps to combat stigma.**

Stigma is a very real problem for people who have a mental illness. Based on stereotypes, stigma is a negative judgment based on a personal trait — in this case, having a mental health condition. It was once a common perception that having a mental illness was due to some kind of personal weakness. We now know that mental health disorders have a biological basis and can be treated like any other health condition. Even so, we still have a long way to go to overcome the many misconceptions, fears and biases people have about mental health, and the stigma these attitudes create.

Stigma may be obvious and direct, such as someone making a negative remark about your mental health condition or your treatment. Or it can be subtle, such as someone assuming you could be violent or dangerous because you have a mental health condition. These and other forms of stigma can lead to feelings of anger, frustration, shame and low self-esteem — as well as discrimination at work, school and in other areas of your life. For someone with a mental illness, the consequences of stigma can be devastating. Some of the harmful effects of stigma include:

- Trying to pretend nothing is wrong
- Refusal to seek treatment
- Rejection by family and friends
- Work or school problems or discrimination
- Difficulty finding housing
- Being subjected to physical violence or harassment
- Inadequate health insurance coverage of mental illnesses

### Steps to cope with stigma

Learning to accept your condition and recognize what you need to do to treat it, seeking support, and helping educate others can make a big difference. Here are some ways you can cope with stigma:

- **Get treatment.** Don't let the fear of being "labeled" with a mental illness prevent you from seeking diagnosis and treatment. Diagnosis and treatment can provide relief by identifying what's wrong in concrete terms, and reducing symptoms that interfere with your work and personal life.
- **Don't let stigma create self-doubt and shame.** One of the most important ways to minimize the stigma of mental illness is to come to terms with your illness. Others' judgments almost always stem from a lack of understanding rather than information based on the facts. Feeling ashamed, embarrassed or humiliated because of something beyond your control can be very destructive. Psychological counseling may help you gain self-esteem and cope with your reaction to others' bias or your own self-judgment.
- **Seek support.** If you have a mental illness, it can be hard to decide who to tell, if anyone, and

how much to tell. You may not be comfortable telling anyone anything about your condition. On the other hand, if you tell people you trust, you may find much-needed compassion, support and acceptance. Because stigma can lead to social isolation, it's especially important to stay in touch with family and friends who understand. Isolation can make you feel even worse.

- **Don't equate yourself with your illness.** You are not an illness. So instead of saying "I'm bipolar," say "I have bipolar disorder." Instead of calling yourself "a schizophrenic," call yourself "a person with schizophrenia." Don't say you "are depressed." Say you "have depression."
- **Use your resources.** Stigma can have effects on your education, career, housing and other areas of your life. Take advantage of federal, state and nonprofit resources available to you. A number of agencies and programs support people who have mental health conditions — examples include state agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation, Veterans Affairs (VA), and nonprofit organizations such as NAMI, which have national and local chapters as well as Internet resources.
- **Get help at school.** If you or your child has a mental illness that affects learning, find out what plans and programs might help. Discrimination against students because of a mental health condition is against the law, and educators at primary, secondary and college levels are required to accommodate students as best they can. Talk to teachers, professors or administrators about the best approach and available resources. If a teacher doesn't know about a student's disability, it can lead to discrimination, barriers to learning and poor grades.
- **Join an advocacy group.** Some local and national groups, such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) have programs that watch for and correct stereotypes, misinformation and disrespectful portrayals of people with mental illnesses. Organizations like NAMI also offer support groups and information to help you cope with your condition.
- **Speak out.** Speaking at events can help instill courage in others facing similar challenges and also educate the public about mental illness. Until you gain confidence, you may want to start at small events, such as talks at a support group or church community. If you spot stigmatizing stories, comic strips, movies, television shows or even greeting cards, write letters of protest that identify the problem and offer solutions.