

SUBJECT: Mental illnesses & their stigma

Learning Objectives:

- You will understand the stigma surrounding mental health problems, and the impact of stigma and discrimination on help-seeking behaviour,
- You will become aware of the myths and the realities of mental illness,
- You will consider attitudes about mental illness and exhibit a realistic and positive understanding of mental illness.

Activity 1: Defining Stigma

Activity 2: Exploring Attitudes—Survey

Activity 3: Reducing Stigma—What Works?

Activity 1: Defining Stigma

1. What does the word “stigma” mean? – explain the word using your own words.
2. Get familiar with the following definitions taken from different sources & different historical periods:

“A mark or sign of disgrace or discredit; a visible sign or characteristic of disease.”

The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1990

“An attribute which is deeply discrediting.”

Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, 1963

“A distinguishing mark or characteristic of a bad or objectionable kind; a sign of some specific disorder, as hysteria; a mark made upon the skin by burning with a hot iron, as a token of infamy or subjection; a brand; a mark of disgrace or infamy; a sign of severe censure or condemnation, regarded as impressed on a person or thing.”

The Shorter Oxford Dictionary, Fourth Edition, 1993

Stigma is not just a matter of
using the wrong word or action.
Stigma is about disrespect.

The Stigma of Mental Illness

“Stigma refers to a cluster of negative attitudes and beliefs that motivate the general public to fear, reject, avoid and discriminate against people with mental illnesses. Stigma is not just a matter of using the wrong word or action. Stigma is about disrespect. It is the use of negative labels to identify a person living with mental illness. Stigma is a barrier. Fear of stigma and the resulting discrimination discourages individuals and their families from getting the help they need.”

SAMHSA, *School Materials for a Mental Health Friendly Classroom*, 2004

3. What is the relationship between stigma, stereotyping and discrimination?



Terms Related to Stigma

Stereotype

“A person or thing that conforms to an unjustly fixed impression or attitude.”

Stereotypes are attitudes about a group of people (e.g., “All people with mental illness are dangerous.”).

Prejudice

“a preconceived opinion”

Prejudice is agreeing with the stereotypes (e.g., “I think people with mental illness are dangerous.”).

Discrimination

“unfavourable treatment based on prejudice”

Discrimination is the behaviour that results: “I don’t want people with mental illness around me; therefore, I discriminate against them by not hiring them, not being friends with them, etc.”

The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1996

Discussion Questions

- 1) What are some of the negative things you have heard about people with mental illness? (Responses may include things like e.g. a link to violence, etc.)
- 2) What are some of the positive things you have heard about mental illness? (Responses may include things like e.g. a link to creativity.) *While this may be seen as positive, remember that generalizing can also be a form of stereotyping.*
- 3) Why do you think people with mental illness are stigmatized?
- 4) Can you think of any other health conditions or social issues that have been stigmatized throughout history?
- 5) What factors have contributed to changing public attitudes about some of these conditions or issues?
- 6) What do you think influences perceptions about mental illness?
- 7) How do you think stigma affects the lives of people with mental illness?

Activity 2: Examining Attitudes

1. Personal Attitudes Survey → complete the personal attitudes survey individually.

1 People should work out their own mental health problems.

☐ Agree
☐ Disagree
☐ Not sure

6 Adults are more likely than teenagers to have a mental illness.

☐ Agree
☐ Disagree
☐ Not sure

2 Once you have a mental illness, you have it for life.

☐ Agree
☐ Disagree
☐ Not sure

7 You can tell by looking at people whether they have a mental illness.

☐ Agree
☐ Disagree
☐ Not sure

3 Females are more likely to have a mental illness than are males.

☐ Agree
☐ Disagree
☐ Not sure

8 People with a mental illness are generally shy and quiet.

☐ Agree
☐ Disagree
☐ Not sure

4 Medication is the best treatment for mental illness.

☐ Agree
☐ Disagree
☐ Not sure

9 Mental illness only happens to certain kinds of people.

☐ Agree
☐ Disagree
☐ Not sure

5 People with a mental illness are generally violent and dangerous.

☐ Agree
☐ Disagree
☐ Not sure

10 Most people will never be affected by mental illness.

☐ Agree
☐ Disagree
☐ Not sure

2. Let's share some general observations about your results.

Activity 3: Reducing Stigma

1. What do you believe works or might work?
2. Reducing Stigma-What Works?

Reducing Stigma—What Works?

There is no simple or single strategy to eliminate the stigma associated with mental illness, but some positive steps can be taken. Remember the acronym “WALLS” to help reduce stigma.

Watch your language

Make sure you are not using language or comments that stigmatize people with mental illness.

Ask questions

A lot can be learned by asking questions of a mental health professional like a counsellor or doctor, or a person who has lived experience with a mental illness.

Learn more

Great resources are available online to help educate you on different mental illnesses. Increased education means fewer misunderstandings and less stigma.

Listen to experiences

Once you have learned a bit about mental illness, consider asking someone you know about their experience with mental illness. If you are considerate and respectful, they may be comfortable speaking about their experiences. If you have lived experience, consider sharing your story with others.

Speak out

Help reduce stigma by speaking out when others stigmatize people with mental illnesses or spread misconceptions.

What are mental health problems?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUWhdmKyOE8&feature=emb_logo

Personal stories about World Mental Health Day

<https://www.time-to-change.org.uk/get-involved/world-mental-health-day>

Based on: <https://canwetalk.ca>

<https://canwetalk.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/COOR-79I-2016-03-CWT-lesson-plans.pdf>

