

## Mental Health Stigma

Mental illnesses are among the most common health conditions in the United States (National Institute of Mental Health). When it comes to kids, 1 in 6 youth aged 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year, yet it is estimated that less than half of those with diagnosable mental health conditions receive help (JAMA Pediatrics). While there are varying factors that may contribute to this lack of treatment, such as inadequate insurance coverage and access to care, we can't ignore the role that stigma may play. Stigma comes from negative or incorrect beliefs, or stereotypes.



Despite advances in the awareness of mental health, stigma surrounding mental health is still common. Attitudes toward mental illnesses tend to be more negative than those toward other medical conditions. This can result in a lack of understanding from family, friends, and other support systems. For those living with a mental illness, stigma can erode the confidence that mental illnesses are real, treatable health conditions. In fact, research has shown that stigma is one of the leading risk factors contributing to poor mental health outcomes as it is one of the major reasons people, including children, adolescents, and families, do not seek mental health care, delaying treatment.

The stigma associated with mental health conditions can be divided into two types:

- Social stigma- involves the negative and prejudiced attitudes others have around mental illness.
- Self-perceived stigma- involves an internalized stigma the person with the mental illness suffers from.

Mental health stigma can be attributed to several different factors including lack of awareness and understanding, negative media depictions of people with mental illness, and generalized and discriminatory stereotypes about people with mental illnesses. Despite the cause, both social stigma and self-perceived stigma can result in feelings of shame, embarrassment, distress, and hopelessness. A key component in reducing mental health stigma begins with the way in which we address mental health as a society.

Countering mental health stigma starts with education. Education includes providing accurate information about mental health conditions and treatment, as well as responding to misperceptions and myths about mental health. Framing mental health as part of our overall health is a great way to engage in educational conversations.

Below are some additional suggestions that we can do as individuals to help reduce the stigma of mental health (National Alliance on Mental Illness):

- Talk openly about mental health- this is one way that we can use social media for good by sharing positive messages about mental health awareness and treatment.

- Encourage equality between physical and mental illness- provide perspective by drawing comparisons to how we treat someone with cancer, diabetes or other physical health conditions.
- Normalize mental health treatment, just like other health care treatments.
- See the person, not the condition.
- Show compassion for those with mental illness- offer support if you think someone is struggling.
- Be conscious of language- words matter; use respectful language to talk about mental health conditions.
- Be a mental health advocate- search for creative ways to increase mental health awareness in your school and community.

On a final note, research shows that one of the most effective ways to reduce stigma is by connecting with others who have lived experience with mental health conditions. For those who may be hesitant to open up about their own mental health and seek help, messages of mental health management and recovery can be especially impactful and inspire hope.

References: American Psychiatric Association; JAMA Pediatrics; Mayo Clinic; National Alliance on Mental Illness; National Institute of Mental Health; The Mental Health Literacy Library