

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. Research is showing that negative perceptions about severe mental illness can be changed by:

- **Providing information based on reliable research** that refutes the mistaken association between violence and severe mental illness and that presents the scientifically-based causes of mental illness.
- **Effective advocacy and public education programs** can help to shift attitudes and contribute to the reduction of stigma.
- **Proximity or direct contact with people with mental illness** tends to reduce negative stereotypes.
- **Programs that help people to become better integrated in the community** through school, work, integrated housing, or interest-based social groups not only serve to promote the individual's mental health by reducing exclusion, but also can play a part in gradually shifting commonly-held negative attitudes.
- **Treatments and supports** that work to help people recover.
- **Better mental health literacy** is important. Understanding mental illness and their treatments is an important counterbalance to uninformed opinion.

LEARN MORE ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS

If you are well-informed about mental illness, you will be better able to evaluate and resist the inaccurate negative stereotypes that you come across.

LISTEN TO PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED MENTAL ILLNESS

These individuals can describe what they find stigmatizing, how stigma affects their lives and how they would like to be viewed and treated.

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

Most of us, even mental health professionals and people who have mental illness, use terms and expressions related to mental illness that may perpetuate stigma.

RESPOND TO STIGMATIZING MATERIAL IN THE MEDIA

Keep your eyes peeled for media that stigmatizes mental illness and report it to any number of organizations. Get in touch with the people - authors, editors, movie producers, advertisers responsible for the material. Write, call or email them yourself, expressing your concerns and providing more accurate information that they can use.

SPEAK UP ABOUT STIGMA

When someone you know misuses a psychiatric term (such as Schizophrenia, Bipolar Disorder, OCD, etc.), let them know and educate them about the correct meaning. When someone says something negative about a person with mental illness, tells a joke that ridicules mental illness, or makes disrespectful comments about mental illness, let them know that it is hurtful and that you find such comments offensive

MODULE 1

Activity #6 Handout

and unacceptable.

TALK RESPONSIBLY ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS

Don't be afraid to let others know of your mental illness or the mental illness of a loved one. The more mental illness remains hidden, the more people continue to believe that it is a shameful thing that needs to be kept hidden. However, remember that not all talking is useful. Talk in an informed way. TALK SMART!

DEMAND CHANGE FROM YOUR ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES

Policies that perpetuate stigma can be changed if enough people let their elected representatives, like city councilors, members of Provincial and Federal Government know that they want such change.

PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR ORGANIZATIONS THAT FIGHT STIGMA

Join, volunteer, or donate money. The influence and effectiveness of organizations fighting the stigma surrounding mental illness depend to a large extent on the efforts of volunteers and on donations. You can make a contribution by getting involved. But, before you join make sure that what the organization is doing has been proven to be helpful. Ask your teacher for information to help you with this decision.

GET ACTIVE

Changing stigma is important but it is not enough. Our health systems are often structured or funded in such a way as to make rapid access to effective mental health care difficult for those who need it. So, here is an evidence to action activity that you can apply.

- 1) Find out how long the wait list for mental health care is in your community
- 2) Find out who the politicians are in your community
- 3) Write a class letter to your local politicians pointing out the need to improve access to effective mental health care for young people who need it