

STAMP OUT MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA

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What do you think of when you hear the words that someone is "mentally ill"? What about the terms "alcoholic" or "schizophrenic"? Do you have an impression in your mind of a person stumbling around, making funny noises, talking to themselves? That the person looks disheveled or is smelly? Do you envision that when they talk, they don't make sense? We may have known someone like this, or seen someone in public who acts oddly or in an unfamiliar way. Our danger sensors get activated, whether consciously or unconsciously. Those with behaviors different than "average" are not always easy to deal with, but are easy to spot.

Aside from those high or inebriated, or those with schizophrenia, most people experiencing mental illness look like the "average" person. In fact, according to the CDC, about half of us experience symptoms of mental illness at one time in our life. And maybe half of us have an addiction to something, especially when you consider food, shopping, sex, and video gaming addictions in addition to addictions to illicit substances.

The fact is that our brains are wired for addiction, and there's a genetic component or genetic predisposition to mental illness. Add in a few ingredients like stress, a loss, financial problems, loneliness, and then you've composed a recipe for mental un-wellness.

Addiction often starts as a way to self-medicate. It starts as a way to cope with anxiety, depression, stress, or more complex mental illnesses. At first, this self-medication works. But then, it doesn't. Did you know that repeated exposure to substances or behaviors can change the brain or biochemistry through time?

We are afraid to admit to others that we are feeling down or anxious or having a problem staying away from alcohol or pornography. We don't want others to stay away from us. We don't want to be labeled as someone undesirable.

What does stigma look like? Are you willing to be friends with someone who is struggling with a mental illness? Are you willing to work with someone with a mental illness? Do you avoid the person who appears to have a problem? Do you assume they won't have something to contribute? Do you even think they are unsafe to be around? How about thinking that the person is immoral or sinful? Stigma even lurks around in our language. We use the word crazy to describe a person, which isn't helpful. We use words like alcoholic instead of "a person experiencing problems with alcohol". That's a little longer to say but kinder to the person.

Even if we don't want to be friends, how can we be more respectful to those who are struggling WITH substances, persons struggling WITH a mental disorder? Or a person struggling WITH a gambling disorder or shopping or pornography? Think about how you want to be described. Do you want someone to summarize you in one word? We often use summarizing words for a person, like "diabetic" and "schizophrenic" and "narcissist." Persons WITH (name the disorder) does not mean that this disorder defines them. Everyone has something they are dealing with. We are so much more than our illnesses!

We need our community to nurture our wellness. We need the resources of the people, of the earth, of meaning for life. We need to feel supported, and to have a sense of belonging. We need to feel like we are contributing. And we need to be accepted, even when we are struggling. In fact, that is our best chance for healing, when we know we are loved or cared for in spite of our struggles. Individual health is a community issue. Likewise, community health is improved by healthy individuals.

All of us can help reduce the stigma of mental health by using appropriate language, reaching out to help our family, friends, and neighbors, and educating ourselves on the struggles that others may be facing. There are many agencies who partner with our community to provide resources, support, and assistance. Reach out for yourself. Reach out for your community.



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