



Stigma: Building Awareness And Understanding About Mental Illness

Mental illness can strike anyone! It knows no age limits, economic status, race, creed or color. During the course of a year, more than 54 million Americans are affected by one or more mental disorders. Medical science has made incredible progress over the last century in helping us understand, curing and eliminating the causes of many diseases including mental illnesses. However, while doctors continue to solve some of the mysteries of the brain, many of its functions remain a puzzle. Even at the leading research centers, no one fully understands how the brain works or why it malfunctions. However, researchers have determined that many mental illnesses are probably the result of chemical imbalances in the brain. These imbalances may be inherited, or may develop because of excessive stress or substance abuse. It is sometimes easy to forget that our brain, like all of our other organs, is vulnerable to disease. People with mental illnesses often exhibit many types of behaviors such as extreme sadness and irritability, and in more severe cases, they may also suffer from hallucinations and total withdrawal. Instead of receiving compassion and acceptance, people with mental illnesses may experience hostility, discrimination and stigma.

Why does stigma still exist?

Unfortunately, the media is responsible for many of the misconceptions, which persist about people with mental illnesses. Newspapers, in particular, often stress a history of mental illness in the backgrounds of people who commit crimes of violence. Television news programs frequently sensationalize crimes where persons with mental illnesses are involved. Comedians make fun of people with mental illnesses, using their disabilities as a source of humor. Also, national advertisers use stigmatizing images as promotional gimmicks to sell products. Ironically, the media also offers our best hope for eradicating stigma because of its power to educate and influence public opinion.

WHAT IS A MENTAL ILLNESS?

A mental illness is a disease that causes mild to severe disturbances in thinking, perception and behavior. If these disturbances significantly impair a person's ability to cope with life's ordinary demands and routines, then he or she should immediately seek proper treatment with a mental health professional. With the proper care and treatment, a person can recover and resume normal activities.

Many mental illnesses are believed to have biological causes, just like cancer, diabetes and heart disease, but some mental disorders are caused by a person's environment and experiences.

THE FIVE MAJOR CATEGORIES OF MENTAL ILLNESS:

Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illnesses. The three main types are: phobias, panic disorders and obsessive-compulsive disorders. People who suffer from phobias experience extreme fear or dread from a particular object or situation. Panic disorders involve sudden, intense feelings of terror for no apparent reason and symptoms similar to a heart attack. People with obsessive-compulsive disorder try to cope with anxiety by repeating words or phrases or engaging in repetitive, ritualistic behavior such as constant hand washing.

Mood Disorders

Mood disorders include depression and bipolar disorder (or manic depression) symptoms may include mood swings such as extreme sadness or elation, sleep and eating disturbances, and changes in activity and energy levels. Suicide may be a risk with these disorders.

Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a serious disorder that affects how a person thinks, feels and acts. Schizophrenia is believed to be caused by chemical imbalances in the brain that produce a variety of symptoms including hallucinations, delusions, withdrawal, incoherent speech and impaired reasoning.

Dementias

This group of disorders includes diseases like Alzheimer's which leads to loss of mental functions, including memory loss and a decline in intellectual and physical skills.

Eating Disorders

Anorexia nervosa and bulimia involves serious, potentially life-threatening illnesses. People with these disorders have a preoccupation with food and an irrational fear of being fat. Anorexia is self-starvation while bulimia involves cycles of bingeing (consuming large quantities of food) and purging (self-inducing vomiting or abusing laxatives). Behavior may also include excessive exercise.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS

Myth: *“Young people and children don’t suffer from mental health problems.”*

Fact: It is estimated that more than 6 million young people in America may suffer from a mental health disorder that severely disrupts their ability to function at home, in school, or in their community.

Myth: *“People who need psychiatric care should be locked away in institutions.”*

Fact: Today, most people can lead productive lives within their communities thanks to a variety of supports, programs and/or medications.

Myth: *“A person who has had a mental illness can never be normal.”*

Fact: People with mental illnesses can recover and resume normal activities. For example, Mike Wallace of “60 Minutes,” who has clinical depression, has received treatment and today leads an enriched and accomplished life.

Myth: *“Mentally ill persons are dangerous.”*

Fact: The vast majority of people with mental illnesses *are not* violent. In the cases when violence *does* occur, the incidence typically results from the same reasons as with the general public such as feeling threatened or excessive use of alcohol and/or drugs.

Myth: *“People with mental illnesses can work low-level jobs but aren’t suited for really important or responsible positions.”*

Fact: People with mental illnesses, like everyone else, have the potential to work at any level depending on their own abilities, experience and motivation.

HOW YOU CAN COMBAT STIGMA:

1 Share your experience with mental illness. Your story can convey to others that having a mental illness is nothing to be embarrassed about.

2 Help people with mental illness reenter society. Support their efforts to obtain housing and jobs.

3 Respond to false statements about mental illness or people with mental illnesses. Many people have wrong and damaging ideas on the subject. Accurate facts and information may help change both their ideas and actions.