

Opening Our Eyes  
***The stigma of mental illness: It's worse than you think***  
by Nan Dickie

I wish I didn't need to write about the stigma of mental illness, because I wish that this stigma didn't exist. However, regrettably, it is alive and flourishing everywhere—including in each of our communities. Sometimes stigma is so subtle it escapes detection; sometimes it is so blatant it makes you shudder. Subtle stigma is arguably the more entrenched, as it hides underground in silent thoughts and whispers.

People who live with the mental illnesses of clinical depression or bi-polar disorder (that includes me) face major challenges throughout their lifetimes: debilitating episodes, careers derailed, relationships destroyed, hopes dashed, assaults to their self-esteem and feelings of self-worth, to mention a few.

It takes a great deal of courage for these people to live with their recurring episodes of a disorder and its consequences, let alone acknowledge their plight. It then takes more courage to address their illness by seeking treatment, and to do the inner and outer work necessary to manage the illness as well as possible. And even MORE courage is required to tell one or more others about their condition, let alone “come out” to the wider world.

And if this is not bad enough for one person to carry on his or her shoulders, and within his or her head, the pejorative public attitudes associated with mental illness are piled high on top of these already considerable weights. This is adding unjust and harmful insult to an unwelcome and devastating illness.

What do we mean by “stigma” as it relates to mental illness? Stigma is a set of negative and often unfair beliefs that society has about mental illnesses, whereby those who live with these illnesses carry a mark of disgrace, a strong feeling of disapproval from others.

How did this stigma arise in the first place? It originated at the time of the formation of our belief systems, the stories we tell ourselves to define our personal sense of reality. Each of us has a belief system that we live by, and through this mechanism we make sense of the world around us. When we were young (be that ten or sixty years ago), our culture taught us to believe that mental illness is a personal fault, something to “get over,” a weakness. These assertions are false. But if no one—parent, teacher, coach, the media, etc.—tells us otherwise, we hold fast to those beliefs. Other false beliefs pile up mercilessly on top of those.

Beliefs we hold range from being factually true to being blatantly false. Many beliefs are irrational, unfounded in facts—that is, they are absolutely wrong. These beliefs sometimes become deeply held prejudices, negative attitudes about people who are labelled as different and/or inferior. These prejudices include believing that people with mental illness can never

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recover, they are violent and unpredictable, and they can control their illness, if only they would try.

Prejudices are extremely resistant to change. Armed with these prejudices, some people exhibit discriminatory behaviours expressed toward people with mental illness, by acting out their prejudice.

Stigma...prejudice...discrimination—three destructive steps on a no good, barbed, slippery slope.

Many people who live with a mental illness say that the stigma they face is often worse than the illness itself. Due to stigma, they may lose friends and loved ones (the very people they need the most for support), be denied jobs and promotions, be ostracized by co-workers. They internalize public stigma (i.e., they self-stigmatize) and end up feeling unduly ashamed. They blame themselves for their ordeal, feel hopeless, embarrassed, diminished and demeaned. Self-stigma is not a choice. It is a cultural inheritance.

Individuals living with a mental illness may choose to deny their illness even to themselves, and hence conceal their illness from others. This may result in a reluctance to seek help for their condition (which is no less a medical condition than diabetes and cancer). They may then face recurring cycles of debilitating and untreated depression. This is a sad—indeed horrible—state-of-affairs.

In taking a close look at the stigma of mental illness for this article, I realized that for most of my life I self-stigmatized. For decades, I bought into the lies that I was to blame for my illness, that I should be able to “snap out of it,” that I was weak. I am changing my inner assessment so I won't carry this extra weight of self-judgment. It's difficult enough grappling with the challenges of living with depressive episodes.

What can we do about the sorry state of mental illness stigma in our community? What can YOU do to reduce the stigma of mental illness at home, at work, at school, in your organization(s)? It starts with each of us consciously and conscientiously examining our own stigmas (beliefs), changing any negative attitudes to more compassionate and less harmful ones. If you, you, you and I don't do this, we will only perpetuate the negative labelling of a very vulnerable segment of our community.

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