



The elephant in the room



Stigma can seem invisible but its effects are not.

People with mental illness say that stigma can be worse than the illness itself.

Stigma. What is it?

Negative, disrespectful and untrue judgments about you based on what people *think* they know about you – and your situation.

Discrimination. What is it?

Negative and disrespectful actions against you. Examples are calling you names, ignoring your opinions, making cruel jokes about you, refusing to rent you an apartment or denying you a promotion at work – because of your illness. Discrimination is also *not* doing something such as not inviting you to a party or family gathering or not interviewing you for a job when you are qualified.

Self-stigma. What is it?

Self-stigma is when you begin to believe these negative opinions about you and start to think that you deserve to be called names and denied opportunities.

Stigma and discrimination hurt. Stigma makes you feel rejected, blamed and misunderstood. It can take away your hope and leave you feeling alone – at a time when you need help and support. Discrimination denies you opportunities that others have. It has a real impact on your ability to get and keep work. It can even affect where you live. Self-stigma makes you feel ashamed of yourself.

Stigma is dangerous. It can lead you to deny the symptoms of mental illness and hide the fact that you are suffering. It may delay you – sometimes for years – from getting the help you need. Stigma may mean you are left all alone when you need friends and family around you. It can make you angry and afraid. It can lead to problems in relationships, at school or at work – making your mental illness worse and further delaying your recovery.



What to do about the elephant in the room?

Taking action against stigma begins with you and your own recovery.

People with mental illness have found that dealing with their own self-stigma is an important step in their recovery.

For example, the Wellness Recovery Action Plan (you can visit the WRAP website at www.mentalhealthrecovery.com) suggests five actions that you can take:

1. ***Believe in yourself and your recovery*** – People with mental illness can and do get well and live full, productive lives.
2. ***Take personal responsibility*** – It may not seem fair but the reality is that you have to take control of your illness by participating fully in your own treatment and doing whatever needs to be done to regain your health.
3. ***Educate yourself*** – What are the symptoms of your illness, what are the treatments (traditional and alternative), what works for you and what doesn't. Know the early warning signs of relapse. Develop your own set of coping strategies.
4. ***Stand up for yourself*** - You know yourself best and you know what you need. Let your professional caregivers know that you are a full partner in your own recovery.
5. ***Learn how to both receive and give support*** – You can't do this alone. Let friends and family know how to help. Value what you have to give, as well. Offer support to others. Peer support and self-help work.



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What else can you do?

Educate others about mental illness. Many self-help and advocacy groups have speakers' bureaus dedicated to educating students, health professionals-in-training and community groups. Research has shown that *the most effective stigma fighting technique is the personal touch* - people with mental illness talking face-to-face with others about their experience.

Volunteer for a committee or Board of Directors. It is now commonplace to have people with mental illness and their families involved in developing, implementing and evaluating mental health services. People with mental illness often say that the services they used were, themselves, stigmatizing and that some health professionals behave in discriminatory ways. Being part of the leadership of these organizations means that you can make changes.

Join a media watch. The media is a powerful source of negative stereotypes for people with mental illness. But they can be persuaded to change. You can search out examples of unfair reporting and cruel characterizations – and let those who are responsible know that you and your group object to their work. These objections are most effective when made public – as in letters to the editor, or boycotts of products or films.

Be loud and proud. While not for everyone, many consumers and families are participating in mad pride parades or public protests. Some join theatre groups that tell their stories in ways that help the audience understand. A few (very) brave people learn how to be stand up comics and win people over with laughter.



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What can others do?

Employers can ensure that they have policies in place that support people with mental illness through disability benefits, return to work programs and accommodation. Anti-discrimination policies must also include mental illness. Employers are responsible for creating and maintaining a work environment where everyone's contribution is valued and where mental as well as physical wellness is supported.

Employees can ensure that they treat their colleagues with mental illness with as much care and support as they would give to those with physical illnesses.

Friends and family can offer understanding, support and encouragement. They can stand up for their loved ones when they don't feel strong.

Community leaders can ensure that their cities, towns and municipalities are places where everyone belongs.

Legislators can make sure their public investment strategies include mental health as well as physical health and that their laws protect the rights of ALL citizens – including those with mental illness.

What can YOU do about the elephant in the room?

One little word – but a VERY BIG IDEA - makes the elephant in the room disappear... ..

R E S P E C T

You can help us get the word out about **Stigma – the elephant in the room** by contributing to our “Elephant Fund” at CanadaHelps. For donations of \$20.00 or more we will send you your own elephant as a token of our appreciation.



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