

## Mental Health Matters ... But Why Focus on Stigma?

People living with a mental health challenge can face many obstacles, including misdiagnosis, limited access to quality treatment and unwanted side effects from medication.

But many people say that the **stigma and discrimination** they experience in their families, communities and places of work actually pose a greater challenge to their quality of life.

### Defining Stigma

- ❖ Stigma is defined as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting and that reduces [an individual] from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one.”<sup>i</sup>
- ❖ *Stigma* is a Greek word that originally referred to a kind of mark that was cut or burned into the skin. It identified people as criminals, slaves, or traitors to be shunned.
- ❖ At its core, stigma is caused by three root problems: ignorance, prejudice and discrimination.<sup>ii</sup>

Stigma related to mental illness is often based on a number of **false stereotypes**, such as:

**FALSE:** People are responsible for their mental illness.

**FALSE:** People who have a mental illness are dangerous.

**FALSE:** People who have a mental illness should be avoided or isolated.

### Stigma Hurts

Stigma and discrimination due to a mental illness diagnosis can take many forms:

- ❖ A teacher treating a student who has been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) differently in front of her classmates.
- ❖ A mother not wanting her children to grow up next to a neighbor who has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder.
- ❖ An employer turning down an otherwise qualified job applicant due to real or perceived symptoms of obsessive compulsive disorder.
- ❖ A middle-aged man refusing to talk to a doctor or therapist about his own persistent thoughts of sadness and hopelessness.

Although **one in five adult Californians report needing help** with a mental or emotional health problem<sup>iii</sup>, most people still think mental illness is something that happens to “other people.”

Stigma associated with a mental illness is one of the primary barriers to people seeking and receiving treatment for themselves or for a loved one.

Fear of being hurt or judged because of stigma keeps family members from sharing their needs with each other, leading to isolation and mistrust in our closest relationships.

### Speak Against Stigma

Whether you are onstage sharing your story with an audience or having a casual conversation with a friend, you have the power to help put an end to stigma. Your thoughts, words and actions matter to the people around you; use them to promote acceptance over ignorance, compassion over discrimination.

Learn more about how to speak out against stigma at [\[website coming soon\]](#).

<sup>i</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Prentice-Hall, 1963.

<sup>ii</sup> Thornicroft G, Rose D, Kassam A, Sartorius N, *Stigma: ignorance, prejudice or discrimination?* Br J Psychiatry, 2007.

<sup>iii</sup> UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. *Adult Mental Health Needs in California*, November 2011.