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.”
- 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.

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, 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].

---