

DISCUSSION STARTERS: Stigma and Mental Illness

What does stigma mean?

- ❖ “An attribute that is deeply discrediting and that reduces the bearer from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one.”ⁱ
- ❖ *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.ⁱⁱ

What does stigma look like?

- ❖ Stigma can exist within societies, institutions and individuals, including people who are living with mental illness themselves. This is called self-stigma.
- ❖ Internally, stigma is caused by mistaken thoughts and beliefs that lead to prejudiced attitudes.
- ❖ Stigma often takes the outward form of discrimination, when people are treated differently or denied rights because of their mental illness.

What words come to mind when we think or talk about mental illness?

“crazy” “nuts” “insane” “weird”
“strange” “schizo” “bipolar”

How many of us know someone who has experienced a mental illness?

- ❖ If necessary, prompt with: post-partum depression, anxiety disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression after losing a job or a loved one, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, obsessive compulsive disorder, etc.
- ❖ One in 5 California adults report needing help with a mental or emotional health problem.ⁱⁱⁱ So, statistically speaking, in this room of 50 people (for example), 10 of us are struggling with a mental health challenge.

What does stigma feel like to those experiencing mental illness?

painful isolating frustrating unfair upset
angry lonely misunderstood

DISCUSSION STARTERS: Stigma and Mental Illness (continued)

Has anyone here experienced stigma or discrimination, related to mental illness or some other condition?

- ❖ If necessary, prompt with conditions (such as depression or anxiety) resulting from: loss of employment or insurance, loss of friends or other relationships, divorce, death of a loved one, traumatic experience, disability, etc.
- ❖ Symptoms may be a more useful way to address this question: has anyone suffered from intense sadness, feeling tired all the time, extreme nervousness, etc.

What false myths and misunderstandings does stigma perpetuate?

- ❖ The myth that people living with a mental illness are mostly different, or “other” from me.
- ❖ The myth that a person is defined by their mental illness, that it is the most important thing about them.
- ❖ The myth that people are responsible or to be blamed for their mental illnesses.
- ❖ The myth that all mental illnesses are the same.
- ❖ The myth that mental illnesses are permanent and can’t be treated or managed to allow for a happy, productive life.
- ❖ The myth that mental illness is not our problem and does not affect our lives.
- ❖ The myth that we can’t make a difference for people living with mental illness.

Because stigmatizing people with mental illness has such negative consequences, what can we do to end stigma and discrimination against people living with a mental illness?

- ❖ Learn more about mental illness, choose facts over myths.
- ❖ Recognize that many of us will experience a mental illness at some point in our lives, and someone who has been diagnosed with a mental illness isn’t so different from you.
- ❖ Speak and act from a place of compassion and acceptance, rather than fear and ignorance.

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

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

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