

What is stigma?

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What is stigma? This is a question that is not easily answered.

When you look to the dictionary for a definition of stigma, these are some examples of what you might find:

Stig-ma: a mark of disgrace or infamy; a stain or reproach, as of one's reputation, a sign of social unacceptability.

Every word associated with the word stigma is negative. When you look at each word individually that's included in the definition of stigma it illustrates the point even more:

Mark: identifying feature or characteristic

Disgrace: (1) state of being disapproved of (2) cause shame or disrespect (3) cause feelings of shame to somebody

Infamy: Notoriety – famous for something bad

Stain: Character blemish

Reproach: (1) criticism (2) something disgraceful (3) discredit

Unacceptable: (1) offensive (2) intolerable

When you look at people with a mental health challenge it's not just the people but the illness itself been branded with depressing attributes which make it easy to brand the people as well. People can easily find their whole world colored by the critical views and attitudes of others. These opinions are based on things that the individual has little or no control over like their medical or physical condition, their gender, their ethnicity and cultural background. You may find your standing or reputation in the community diminished by no act that you have done.

Stigma also leads to labeling. People are labeled for many different reasons. Through the years man has gotten a deal of pleasure out of separating and judging people. Those people who find themselves on the "high end" of the spectrum can be very critical of those who fall "beneath" them. Once you label someone it's then easier to classify them, ignore them, deny them access to the most common of life's needs, and to allow them to be the scapegoats for everything that is "wrong" in society today. It also makes it easier for you as an individual not to be involved in their plight.

Many feel that the biased, inaccurate portrayals and sensationalized news coverage by the media also play a very important role in how the general public views people with Mental Health challenges. Despite the numerous accounts of violence that are allegedly perpetrated by those with mental illness, quite often the opposite is true. Statistics don't bear out a connection between mental illness and violence. More often those with a mental health challenge are the victims of violent crime.

We as a society need to examine ourselves to see where we stand in regards to stigma. What are the assumptions you make when you see someone on the street, unkempt? Do you automatically assume that there's a mental issue, a substance abuse issue, a homeless issue? Are people with Mental Health Challenges always the violent, poor, uneducated, and irresponsible? Do you believe that people with Mental Health Challenges have ever made any significant contributions to society? What are your answers to the above questions? Your answers may be very "telling."

Mental Illness and Substance Use Disorders are treatable diseases, very often with high recovery rates. These illnesses don't discriminate, people of all nationalities, all ages; and all economic levels can and will become affected by them. In order for healing to begin, we all need to search our hearts to see if we are part of the greater problem or a part of the even better solution.