

SOCIAL STIGMA IN MENTAL HEALTH

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Mental illness continues being a social issue that affects the well-being of millions of individuals globally. However, individuals are reluctant to look for or obtain mental health treatment due to stigmatization of mental health in society.

Stigma is defined as a mark of disgrace associated to a particular circumstance, quality, or person. The medical definition is a mental or physical mark that is characteristic of a defect or disease. Synonyms of stigma are shame, disgrace, dishonor, ignominy, opprobrium, and humiliation. Stigma, in mental health, is considered the prejudice and discrimination against individuals who suffer burdens related to mental illnesses. Stigma continues to manifest due to the low rates of mental health literature for the general population, the negative attitudes toward individuals with mental illnesses, and the reluctance to seek professional help.

Individuals struggling with mental disorders deal with public stigma, self-stigma and label avoidance. Public stigma occurs when the

general population endorses stereotypes of mental illness and acts in a discriminatory manner. Self-stigma happens when a person internalizes the prejudice that they perceive to exist against them. In label avoidance, the individual avoids being labeled. Some people refrain from seeking services that may be helpful, or do not continue to use services once initiated due to the risk of being labeled. Hence, great amount of individuals who benefit from mental health care opt out, do not pursue it, or do not fully adhere to treatment.

Family and other members of society related to the individual with mental disorders also suffer the stigma themselves. Researchers have identified courtesy stigma, public stigma and vicarious stigma. In courtesy stigma, family suffers the negative impact that results from the association with a person marked by a stigma. Public stigma is observed with discrimination and prejudice by subsets of the general population towards individuals and family members with mental disorders, while the vicarious stigma occur when family members witness negative impacts of prejudice and this affects their stress levels and self-esteem.

Individuals and families face shame, blame, and contamination concerns. Parents have internal conflicts due to the general perception and blame for “causing” the mental illness. Siblings and spouses are blamed for not assuring that relatives with mental illness adhere to treatment plans, and children are fearful of being “contaminated” by mental illness of parents or siblings.

The way to fight stigma is through education, - books, movies, conversations with knowledgeable individuals and being in contact with programs and support groups. The first step is to speak up, start a conversation, to be involved in the treatment plan and research about the mental condition you or a family member experiences. Being well informed and speaking openly about mental disorders is the best way to end the stigma.

Food for thought:

Mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of, but stigma and bias shame us all.

- Bill Clinton



Reading Suggestions:

