

Stigma

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In December 1999, U. S. Surgeon General David Satcher issued the first Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health. In that report he singled out the stigma of mental illness: "... the nation has the power today to tear down the most formidable obstacle to future progress in the arena of mental illness and health. That obstacle is stigma. Stigmatization of mental illness is an excuse for inaction and discrimination that is inexcusably outmoded ..."¹

Stigma continues today as a major obstacle for people experiencing mental illness. Sometimes it is manifested as prejudice and distrust of people with mental illness. At other times stigma takes the form of fear of mental illness, or embarrassment and even anger about it. It leads people to avoid living, working and socializing with people with mental disorders. In turn, stigma reduces access to opportunities and resources like housing and jobs. It leads to low self-esteem, isolation, and hopelessness. It deprives people with mental illness of their dignity and interferes with their full participation in society. And it deprives everyone of experiencing another part of humanity.

Because of the stigma of mental illness people are very reluctant to seek help. It's OK to be seen going to a medical office for physical health treatment or a dental office for dental treatment, but it's definitely not OK to be seen going to a mental health office for treatment. How often have you heard a friend or colleague tell you about a medical doctor's appointment? On the other hand have you ever heard anyone talk about a mental health appointment?

It is estimated that 64,000 Pennsylvanians have a mental illness, but most do not seek treatment. Nationally, one in five people experience mental illness at some time in their lives. Stigma keeps two-thirds of all people with mental illness from seeking treatment.

In his landmark report on mental health, U. S. Surgeon General David Satcher also wrote that if anything should be learned from the report, it is that mental illness is not a character flaw or a personal weakness. Many mental illnesses have been proven to be biologically based disorders that need not be feared. So how can stigma be reduced?

Research demonstrates that negative perceptions about mental illness can be changed by furnishing empirically based information on how people with mental illness tend to act. Overall approaches to stigma reduction involve not only public education, but also programs of advocacy, and contact with persons with mental illness through schools and other societal institutions.

People with mental illness have said that they are more likely to want informal social supports such as self-help groups and formal support from counselors, psychologists, and social workers.

¹ The full report is available at <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/mentalhealth/home.html>

Perhaps the major theme of the U. S. Surgeon General's report on mental health was that there are treatments that do work.. The report in its entirety provides an up-to-date review of the scientific advances in the study of mental health and mental illness. In recent years scientists have identified specific treatment practices that work for an array of clearly defined mental and behavioral disorders, and have developed "best practice" guidelines. Best practice guidelines are evidence-based, meaning that the guidelines have been developed from, and are supported by, scientific studies that document the effectiveness of the guidelines. For example, there is considerable agreement among scientists about what works for depression and for attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. There also are "promising practices," treatments that experts believe work, but that have not been scientifically validated. Research on social attitudes reveals that when people believe that there are effective treatments for mental illnesses that are readily available, stigma is reduced.

Public education, contact with people with mental illness, peer-support groups, and the availability of best treatment practices along with data on the effectiveness of the treatments can reduce stigma, resulting in people getting the help they need, restoring their dignity and enhancing their participation in society.