

Mental illnesses can take many forms, just as physical illnesses do. Mental illnesses are still feared and misunderstood by many people, but the fear will disappear as people learn more about them.

What is stigma?

Stigma is not just a matter of using the wrong word or action. Stigma is about disrespect. It is the use of negative labels to identify a person living with a mental illness or developmental disability. It is a barrier. Fear of stigma and the resulting stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination discourage individuals and their families from getting the help they need. An estimated 22 to 23 percent of the U.S. population experience a mental disorder in any given year, but almost half of these individuals do not seek treatment (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002; U.S. Surgeon General, 2001).

The educational information on this fact sheet encourages the use of positive images to refer to people with mental illness and underscores the reality that *mental illness can be successfully treated*.

Do you know that...

- An estimated 44 million Americans – or 1 in 5 – experience a mental disorder in any given year?
- Stigma is not a matter of using the wrong word or action?
- Stigma is about disrespect and using negative labels to identify a person living with mental illness?
- Stigma is a barrier that discourages individuals and their families from seeking help?
- Many people would rather tell employers they committed a petty crime and served time in jail, than admit to being in a psychiatric hospital?
- Stigma can result in inadequate insurance coverage for mental health services, and in fact, Michigan is one of 17 states which does not have equal insurance coverage for mental and physical illnesses?
- Stigma leads to fear, mistrust, and violence against people living with mental illness and their families?
- Stigma can cause families and friends to turn their backs on people with mental illness?
- Stigma can prevent people from getting needed treatment?

DOs...

- DO use respectful “Person First” language, which focuses on the person, not their disability, e.g. “person with schizophrenia” instead of “a schizophrenic”; “person with autism” instead of he/she “is autistic”.
- DO emphasize abilities, not limitations, that a person is “a wheelchair user” or “uses a wheelchair,” not “is wheelchair-bound.” Many in the disability rights community feel that Person First language helps to reduce stigma attached to disability.
- DO tell someone if they express a stigmatizing attitude.

DON'Ts...

- Don't portray successful persons with disabilities as super human.
- Don't use generic labels such as retarded or the mentally ill.
- Don't use terms like crazy, lunatic, idiot, manic-depressive, slow functioning.

Mental Illness Myth and Reality

Myth	Mental illness does not affect the average person.
Reality	No one is immune to mental illness. The National Institute of Mental Health's statistics show 35 million Americans have some form of mental illness in any given six months, 44 million in any given year – or 22-25% Americans, or 1 in 5 Americans.
Myth	Most people who struggle with mental illness live on the streets or are in mental hospitals.
Reality	About two thirds of Americans who have a mental illness live in the community, either with their family or in various types of community living settings.
Myth	Children do not get mental illness.
Reality	Twelve million children and adolescents do suffer diagnosable mental disorders including depression, attention deficit disorders, and conduct disorder.
Myth	A person can recover from a mental illness by thinking positively and praying.
Reality	Recovery is possible when the person receives the necessary treatment and supportive services.
Myth	People who have a mental illness are dangerous.
Reality	Most individuals suffering from even the most severe mental illness are in touch with reality and are not actively psychotic. Their illness is much more likely to make them the VICTIMS of violence, rather than the perpetrators.
Myth	If people with other disabilities can cope on their own, people who have a mental illness should be able to do so as well.
Reality	Most people who have been through a disabling illness need help or rehabilitation to return to normal functioning. Physical therapy often fills this role after physical illness. Similarly, social rehabilitation is often needed following mental illness.
Myth	People with mental illness are less intelligent.
Reality	Mental illness and developmental disabilities are two different disorders. Persons with mental illnesses reflect a normal range of intelligence. In addition, not all developmental disabilities are associated with a lower intelligence.

For more information, visit www.northernlakescmh.org.

In addition to a wide variety of mental health information located there, the Links page is a good portal to a wide variety of other local, regional and national links.