



# UNDERSTANDING STIGMA & MENTAL HEALTH

## What Is Stigma?

There is a great stigma surrounding mental health issues. When individuals appear to be different we attach a stigma to them; we do not do it to be cruel, we simply do not understand their differences. Stigma is a reality for people with a mental health issue and their greatest barrier to a complete and satisfying life. People feel uncomfortable about mental health issues; they are not seen like other health issues, such as heart disease and cancer.

Due to inaccuracies and falsehoods, people have been led to believe that an individual with a mental health issue has a weak character or is potentially dangerous. However, mental health issues only become visible when someone is in a crisis. The majority of the public are unaware of how many people with mental health issues they know and encounter every day.

- One in five people in Ontario will experience a mental health issue at some point in their lifetime.
- Mental health issues affect people of all ages, in all kinds of jobs and educational levels.

Stigma are negative attitude or behaviours toward people with mental health issues. Stigma means having fixed ideas or judgements about others, fearing or avoiding what we don't understand.



## Why Does Stigma Surround Mental Health Issues?

We all have an idea of what someone with a mental health issue is like; however, most of our views and interpretations of mental health issues have been distorted through the media. Media, especially television, has done much to create and sustain a distorted view of mental health issues. Characters are usually portrayed as aggressive, dangerous, and unpredictable—70% of the television characters with a mental health issue are violent. Mental health issues have not received the sensitive media coverage that other issues have been given. We are surrounded by stereotypes: popular movies about killers with mental health issues; news coverage of tragedies and violence caused by people with mental health issues; casual use of terms like “psycho” or “crazy”; jokes about people with mental health issues; the insanity defence and news coverage of homelessness which is typically attributed to mental health issues. These representations distort the public’s view and reinforce inaccuracies about mental health issues.

## What Are The Effects Of Stigma?

If you became ill you would go to the doctor. Once you got better, you would expect to get on with life as usual. However, life does not always fit back into place for people who have mental health issues. Everyone has the right to fully participate in their community; however, individuals struggling to overcome a mental health issue find themselves facing a constant series of rejections and exclusions.

## How Do We Erase Stigma?

We can only start to erase the stigma, which surrounds mental health issues, when we have facts. We all have times when we feel depressed, get unreasonably angry or over-excited, we even have periods when we think that everything and everybody is out to get us and that we can't cope. For someone with a mental health issue these feelings do not go away. There is no particular way to develop a mental health issue. For some people it develops due to a chemical imbalance in the brain. Other causes may relate to the amount of stress in their lives, the patterns of communication that are developed within their families, poverty and poor housing, the numbers of close friends and family they have to support them through difficulty, and the degrees of self-esteem. No matter how the person develops a mental health issue, there is usually an approach to recovery that will help them get better and lead a productive life.

In 2001, the World Health Organization declared stigma to be the "single most important barrier to overcome in the community".

If you or a loved one are living with a mental health illness, you may want to contact the Canadian Mental Health Association Durham for information or support.

Individuals with a mental health issue and their relatives have reported that increased isolation and loneliness followed the diagnosis of their mental health issue.

The typical reaction encountered by someone with a mental health issue is fear and rejection. Individuals with a mental health issue experience stigma in all areas of their life; some have been denied adequate housing, loans, health insurance, and jobs due to their history of mental health issues.

Due to the stigma associated with mental health issues, many people have found that they lose part of their self-esteem and have difficulty making friends. The most damaging effect of stigma is the unwillingness of people to seek help. Spouses may be reluctant to define their partners as having mental health issues, while families may delay seeking help for their child because of their fears caused by the stigma placed on people with mental illness.

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Source: Adapted from Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario Division

*The Canadian Mental Health Association is a community based mental health service that provides support to people who have experienced mental health issues and their families and friends. These information sheets have been created by people in the community including individuals who have experienced mental health issues, family members and mental health practitioners. We recognize that there are many different perspectives about mental health issues and encourage people to increase their understanding by learning from a variety of sources. Hopefully, these information sheets will assist in raising community awareness and promote greater **UNDERSTANDING** of mental health issues.*



**Canadian Mental  
Health Association**  
Durham  
*Helping people move forward*

*This information is of a general nature. For more information and resources please contact:*

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