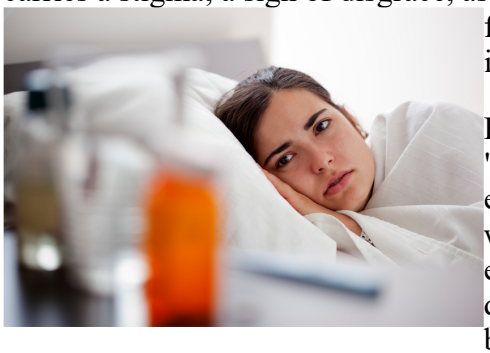
The everyday life of stigma

It is human nature to fear what we don't understand. Mental illness is therefore feared by many of us and still carries a stigma; a sign of disgrace, as the person suffering from a mental illness is labelled, stereotyped and feared. Unfortunately, the stigma can be more destructive than the illness itself.



Franklin D. Roosevelt said in his first inaugural address as President, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself". He was referring to the economic conditions of the time – The Great Depression, saying that if we can't shake our pessimistic outlook it will be tough to turn the economy around. The same is true for the effects of the type of depression our society faces today. If we can't shake the stigma, it will be difficult for those affected by mental illness to turn their lives around.

People suffering with mental illness (and their family members) often experience "self-stigma". They view themselves with embarrassment or self-disgust as a result of internalizing the negative perceptions around them, aided and abetted by the media reinforcing negative stereotypes. Here are some of the key life needs that are compromised by stigma:

Getting a Job

Fighting against prejudice. A person suffering from a mental illness is more vulnerable to unemployment. Trying to find and obtain a job in the midst of depression, anxiety attacks or substance abuse issues can prove to be very challenging. A seminal medical study showed that 44% of those who had been diagnosed with depression believed that the stigma surrounding mental illness resulted in difficulty in them getting a job. In some ways, mental illness is the final frontier of socially acceptable discrimination. People who would not consider uttering a racial or ethnic slur glibly refer to ‘’nuts’’, "lunatics" and "crazy" people. Who wants to hire a "crazy" person?

Low self-esteem. Many studies have shown that people with mental health problems lose self-esteem. Trying to find a job in today's environment is tough enough, without adding the burden of low self-worth.

Keeping a Job

Impact on the workplace. Every day 500,000 Canadians do not go to work due to mental health problems. This accounts for half of all illness days taken by employees. For someone who has a physical illness in addition to depression, it can take 2-3 times longer for them to recover.

Job vulnerability. Due to inaccurate stereotyping and general ignorance, people have been led to believe that an individual with a mental illness has a weak character or is inevitably dangerous. When senior leadership decides who gets promoted or who stays in the event of a downsizing, it is unlikely that the employee who has been identified and/or characterized as mentally ill will make the promotion list.

Interaction with family, friends, colleagues

Blame the victim. Even though family can be the greatest support system, family can also be the greatest challenge. Like everyone else, family members are affected by stigma. They may blame the person who is suffering, not realizing that mental illness is a no-fault brain disease that cannot just be willed away.

The invisible man/woman. Mental illness can be called the invisible illness. Often, the only way to know whether someone, even a family member, has been suffering with a mental illness is if they tell you. Most of us are unaware of how many people we know and encounter every day who are struggling with mental illness.

Misperceptions prevail. Almost half of Canadians (46 per cent) think people use the term "mental illness" as an excuse for bad or lazy behaviour. Perhaps we stigmatize those with mental illness because society typically marginalizes people who are different. We may also subconsciously feel that these individuals are somehow to blame for their condition, or that mental illness is actually contagious, so that we should stay away from those people.

What can we do?

Look stigma in the eye. In the face of the debilitating effects of societal stigma that plagues those with mental health disorders, there is really only one clear direction to look: education and awareness leads to understanding. Shedding light on this "invisible" disease starts with accurate information. We can then talk about this issue constructively with our family, friends and colleagues, in order to dispel the power of stigma.