Overcoming stigma around mental illness

According to the Canadian Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, by age 40, half of us have had or will have a mental illness. So why do less than half of us seek treatment?

There are many reasons – access to appropriate mental health services, the cost of many medications, cultural and gender expectations – but the greatest barrier remains stigma.

What is stigma?

Stigma refers to negative stereotypes and beliefs that cause people to shun and reject those with differences. Despite more openness and understanding of mental health and mental illness issues over the past decade, physical and mental illnesses are not viewed in the same way. Individuals with a mental illness are still often judged and thought to be unstable, weak, unreliable and even dangerous.

Stigma can affect every aspect of people's lives, including their relationships, self-esteem and professional opportunities. In severe cases, finding employment and housing is difficult.

Dealing with stigma

Here are some ideas to help deal with the stigma associated with mental illness:

- **Don't judge yourself.** Mental illness is just that – an illness that needs treatment. Educate yourself about mental health and don't let false and/or negative labels prevent you from seeking help.
- **Reach out**. Recovery from any illness requires a support network that includes medical professionals, family, friends and employers. Begin by confiding in a close family member or friend, talking to a therapist or joining a support group.
- **Don't isolate yourself.** H**uman connection** is vital to both our mental and physical well-being, yet illness often isolates us. Try to spend time with family and friends and take part in social gatherings.
- **Be an advocate**. Challenge negative stereotypes, language and behaviours and correct misinformation with facts. Support others struggling with mental health issues by guiding them to appropriate resources, such as their Employee Assistance Program.

For more information on mental health, or to access mental health resources, contact us.