

Mental illness: do you know myth from fact?

Mental illness often takes on the qualities of the proverbial elephant-in-the-room: it's there, we know it's there, but no one is talking about it. The main reasons for this remain the two big S's: **stigma** and **silence**. **Stigma** is a word that we hear a lot around the topic of mental illness, but what does it really mean? Stigma is defined as a mark of disgrace, and it causes stereotyping, shame, and feelings of hopelessness and fear. Stigma is a major cause of **silence** amongst people with mental illnesses, and their families and friends. This silence contributes to stigma, creating a vicious cycle that is difficult to break. Both of the big S's rely heavily on myths and misconceptions about mental illness, so the more you know the more empowered you are to challenge stigma and break the silence!

Let's take a look at some of the most common myths about mental illness, and the facts that dispel them.

Myth: *Mental illness isn't a real illness*

Many people misunderstand the authenticity of mental illness, and think it is due to laziness, a bad attitude, or weak character.

Fact: Mental illness is an illness like any other, and is recognized as such by the World Health Organization (WHO). It is nobody's fault, and most often requires professional treatment, which can take the form of medication and/or counselling.

Myth: *Mental illness is rare and does not affect me*

Mental illness is commonly misjudged as something that happens "over there" to "other people" and certainly not to anyone you know.

Fact: Mental illnesses are actually common. [In fact, they are more common than cancer, diabetes or heart disease.](#) This means that most people will at some point in their lifetime be touched by mental illness whether it is first hand or through family, friends or coworkers.

Myth: *People with mental illnesses are unpredictable and dangerous*

This myth is one of the most harmful to mental illness awareness efforts, as its pervasiveness spreads fear and adds fuel to the fire of shame.

Fact: People experiencing mental illness are no more inclined to violence than anyone else. [In fact they are more likely to be the victims of violence than to commit it.](#)

Myth: *Children and youth don't experience mental illness*

Common mental illnesses such as anxiety disorders and depression are viewed as uniquely adult problems. When children or teens appear to be depressed for example, it is easily written off as just a phase.

Fact: Many children and youth struggle with mental illnesses – [about 20% of children worldwide are affected. Further, suicide is second only to accidents as one of the leading causes of death amongst Canadians aged 15-24.](#)

Myth: *Bad parenting causes mental illness*

When mental illness appears in children, fingers are pointed at parents, leading many families to avoid seeking help for their kids.

Fact: An unstable home environment as well as [unhealthy relationships can worsen existing mental illnesses in children, but their roots are often biological.](#) Parents however play an important role by supporting their children through treatment and raising awareness to [help fight stigma.](#)

Myth: *People will treat me differently when they find out I or someone I love has a mental illness*

The truth: It isn't exactly a fact, and of course there are exceptions, but you will be surprised by how compassionate people are, especially given how common mental illnesses are. As we have learned above, everyone will be touched in some way by mental illness, so speaking about it and sharing your story can inspire others around you to do the same. As more and more people share their stories, the more myths are broken and the two big S's will be worn away at and dissolved.