Kids and mental illness: fighting the stigma

Dealing with the stigma and ignorant reactions of others to mental illness can sometimes be harder to deal with than the condition itself.



According to the World Health Organization (WHO), stigma, discrimination and neglect prevent care and treatment from reaching people with mental illnesses. If you think about it, this makes perfect sense: if you were suffering from a condition that would likely subject you to ridicule, discrimination, and rejection, would you admit it – even to those who could potentially help you?

The Mayo Clinic details some of the harmful effects of stigma. These results, which can be blatant or subtle, include:

- A lack of understanding from others
- Bullying, harassment, or physical violence
- Discrimination
- Difficulty finding housing
- Inadequate health insurance when private resources are required
- A decline in confidence; belief that life will not improve or success will not be achieved

Stigma doesn't always come from other people; it can be internalized and therefore experienced as self-generated. Kids suffering from a mental illness may have their own misconceptions about their condition, contributing to low self-esteem, self-doubt, and shame.

How you and your child can combat stigma

Fighting stigma begins with you. Both you and your child should understand the diagnosis and its impact. Your doctor will likely have information sheets and recommend educational materials and websites where you can learn more.

From there, you may want to inform family members, caregivers, teachers, daycare providers, and other people involved with your child about the diagnosis. Keep in mind that your attitude and demeanour when discussing your child's diagnosis often sets the tone for others. Teach your child how to share the diagnosis as well. Remind your child that there is nothing to be ashamed about. Reassure them that you will be there to help them cope with their diagnosis and the reactions of others.

Resources to help

You are not alone! Several organizations are on your side with resources and campaigns that will help you to fight the stigma surrounding mental illness.

- **Mental Health Commission of Canada "Opening Minds" Project –** Established in 2009, the Opening Minds Project is the largest systematic effort in Canadian history dedicated to reducing the stigma associated with mental illness. This project focuses on four fronts: healthcare providers, the workforce, the media, and youth. Its goal is to create an environment where those suffering from mental illness can feel comfortable seeking help, treatment, and support.

- **Canadian Mental Health Association** – With a simple premise – STOP (Stereotypes, Trivializes, Offends, and Patronizes) – the Canadian Mental Health Association helps people to recognize attitudes and actions that stigmatize mental illness. If you or your child hear or witness something that stereotypes, trivializes, offends, or patronizes people with mental illness – stop and speak up!

- **Local Community Resources** – Provinces, cities, hospitals and schools are all good resources for people concerned about mental health and the stigma attached to mental disorders. For example, the Ontario Hospital Association frequently offers webcasts and other educational programs addressing stigma surrounding mental illness.

Joining any one of these groups, or a mental illness support group near you, is one of the first steps you can take to help kids with mental illness. Make a pledge today to do your part, learn more about mental illness, talk to others about it, and become an advocate for the cause. Empower your child to do the same. Through heightened awareness, education and active efforts, you can help stop the stigma.