



**OVERCOMING  
THE BARRIERS  
IN MENTAL  
HEALTH**



# OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS IN MENTAL HEALTH

## Introduction

Medical science has made incredible progress in curing and reversing many chronic diseases by treating them successfully with prevention and early intervention treatments and therapies, including mental health disorders. However, the fact is that no one fully understands how the brain works and why it works differently in different people. To solve some of the mysteries, functions and dysfunctions of the brain, the studies continued at the medical research centers. Some studies suggest that a predisposition to certain mental health disorders may be genetic or are believed to have biological causes, just like cancer, diabetes and heart disease. Research shows that mental health disorders are caused by genetic and environmental factors, traumatic events, and other physical illnesses and injuries that have psychiatric side effects.

Since our society tends to not give the same acceptance to brain disorders as we do to other organ disorders, sometimes it is easy to forget that our brain is an organ vulnerable to disease so it is common for people to have something wrong and not know it, which is true of both mental and physical disorders. People can have heart disease or diabetes and not know it. Similarly, an individual may be clinically depressed for years, and be unaware of the problem. For example, people with a depressive illness, are often perceived by others to be sad, down, irritable, uncooperative, lazy and self-pitying. This can lead to unhelpful, though and advice - that they should simply pull themselves out of those negative thoughts. However, the emotions and low energy are part of the illness and are more severe and long lasting than the normal mood changes. There are often physical symptoms too, such as disturbances in sleep and appetite, weight loss or gain, headaches and pain. A person with depressive illness, have a mental health disorder and may find it very difficult to change their mood or behavior, even if they would like to. This Person needs help, otherwise may even attempt to suicide because of the characteristics of his/her condition.

Each year, more than 54 million Americans are affected by a mental health disorder. There are many different types of mental disorders which can strike anyone.



## What is a mental health disorder?

The Surgeon General's 1999 report on mental health states that mental health disorders are "health conditions that are characterized by alterations in thinking, mood, or behavior (or some combination thereof) associated with distress and/or impaired functioning." A mental health disorder is a disease that causes mild to severe disturbances in thinking, perception and behavior. If these disturbances significantly impair a person's ability to cope with life's ordinary demands and routines, then he or she should immediately seek proper treatment with a mental health professional. With the proper care and treatment, a person can recover and resume normal activities.

If your best friend told you she had breast cancer, how would you react? If you are like most people, you would express sympathy and concern, offer your support and reassurance, and feel confident that your friend's condition would improve with treatment. Now, if that same friend told you she had a mental illness and she did not know what to do, what would you do?

Our society has a long history of alienating people with mental health problems, placing them in institutions or maintaining them in social isolation due to prejudice. Mental health conditions affect the person's health. People may be less willing to offer support and empathy if someone is suffering from a mental health illness rather than a physical health problem. Mental health disorders or illnesses are no different from physical illnesses and the emotional and psychological aspects of mental disorders make supportive



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friends and family even more important to a person’s recovery. People with mental disorders can recover or manage their conditions and lead happy, healthy, productive lives.

People with mental health disorders often exhibit types of behaviors, such as sadness and irritability. In more severe cases, they may also suffer from hallucinations and total withdrawal. This can result in people with mental health disorder experiencing hostility and discrimination instead of receiving compassion and acceptance from others.

People generally respond negatively when confronted with a person's mental health disorder due to poor understanding of the issue and being unable to relate to the experiences of those who are affected. It can seem more difficult to empathize with or accept a person with a mental health disorder and generate misunderstanding, prejudice, confusion and fear towards them.

## Unveiling the Barriers of the Stigma and its Harmful Effects

The Surgeon General of the United States reported in 1999 that stigma was the single largest barrier to the successful recovery of people with mental health disorders, making it harder for people to get treatment, as well as find housing, jobs and friends.

The stigma of mental health disorders is real, painful, and damaging to the lives of people with mental health illness.

## What is Stigma?

Stigma is the use of labels when describing someone, and it is often attached to people who suffer from mental health disorders. Stigma exists when people do not fully understand mental health disorders and those affected by them. When people think that a mental health disorder is an uncommon condition, they stigmatize those who are suffering from mental health disorders by attaching labels or categories to them. The stigma of mental disorders goes far beyond the misuse of words and information; it is about disrespect. Those with a history of mental health disorders may find that they lose contact with family and friends as others become uncomfortable or distrustful around them. People who are known to have had mental health disorders may find it more difficult to find employment or get a promotion, even if they are well at the time. Some people with a mental health illness report that the stigma is at times worse than the illness itself.



## Some of the harmful effects of stigma include:

- LIVING IN DENIAL OF THEIR CONDITION.

Stigma may stop people from seeking help when they experience mental health difficulties. Those who become concerned about their own mental health or that of someone else they are close to may be reluctant to talk to others about the situation. We are discovering that the negativity and misunderstanding that often surrounds mental health illnesses can create fear and cause shame, which in turn causes unnecessary pain and confusion. These results of stigma can be profound.

- STIGMA CAUSE CONFUSION AND KEEPS PEOPLE FROM SEEKING HELP

Often people do not want to acknowledge their need for support or simply do not know how to raise the issue with family, friends



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→ or health professionals. Many of them do not seek such services because they do not have health insurance and are afraid of being labeled as "mentally ill" or "crazy". This is a serious problem since early identification and treatment is generally associated with better outcomes.

- SOME DISORDERS MAY ATTRACT GREATER STIGMA AND PREJUDICE

Mental disorders can happen to anyone. A study in the United Kingdom found that schizophrenia, alcoholism and drug addiction attracted the most negative ratings among the public with a high proportion of respondents saying that people with these disorders were unpredictable and dangerous. In regard to clinical depression, a significant proportion of people showed a negative and inaccurate view of this disorder by responding that those with severe depression could simply 'pull themselves together'.

- LIVING IN FEAR OF PHYSICAL VIOLENCE, HARRASSMENT, PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION

Stigma leads to fear, mistrust, and violence. Even though the vast majority of people who have mental health illnesses are no more violent than anyone else, the average television viewer sees three people with mental health illnesses each week, and most of them are portrayed as violent. Such inaccurate portrayals lead people to fear those who have mental health disorders. Many individuals try to prevent people who have mental health illnesses from living in their neighborhoods. Some people also believe that if you have a mental health disorder, you must be dangerous and violent. This perception is often inflamed by media accounts of crime in which someone is vaguely referred to as "mentally ill." Statistics, however, do not bear out a connection between mental health illnesses and violence. In fact, those suffering from mental health disorders are more likely to be a victim of violence than those in the general population.

- LACK OF INFORMATION AND INADEQUATE HEALTH INSURANCE

One in four adults and one in five children experience a mental health problem. Ignorance of the services and resources available and the stigma surrounding these misunderstandings, as well as the lack of knowledge, can limit their opportunities. It can stand in the way of a new job, increase feelings of loneliness and cause many other unfortunate outcomes.

Until the society understands how the stigma and discriminations affects and fuels negative attitudes about mental health problems, then will stop the cycle, the use of labels, the myths and the reality behind the misconceptions.



## Stigma and Discrimination Ends the Hope

"Despite the current health care 'revolution,' mental health disorders still remain shrouded in myth or mystery, perpetuating stigma and discrimination against people who have them."

—Former U.S. First Lady Rosalynn Carter.

Everyone knows it is wrong to discriminate against people because of their race, religion, culture, or appearance. However, they are less aware of how people with mental illnesses are discriminated against. Although such discrimination may not always be obvious, it exists and it hurts. People with mental health disorders continue to experience prejudice and discrimination in every area of their lives, from finding somewhere to live to getting a job. It is hardly surprising that many people with serious mental health disorders end up poor or homeless. Stigma and discrimination prevent them from getting the treatment and support they need to lead healthy, normal lives.

### TO REDUCE STIGMA, THE FOLLOWING IS REQUIRED:

- Promote community education and participation.
- Individuals need to have good will and courage to stop others whenever discrimination occurs or when mean names or labels are used to describe or refer to someone who has a mental health disorder.
- Erroneous ideas should be eliminated so as to put an end to myths and to promote the fact that mental health problems are common and that minor and severe disorders can be treated and kept under control during the recovery period.



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## Words Can Heal and Help End the Stigma and Discrimination that Surround Mental Health Disorders

Surgeon General David Satcher called on America to tear down the barriers of prejudice that block access to services and recovery. We can achieve this by putting into practice the following:

- Empower yourself with the facts, and then use your knowledge to educate others and reach out to those around you with mental health disorders. The media also offers hope for eradicating stigma because of its power to educate and influence public opinion.
- Think and value a person for his/her content. Avoid labeling people by their diagnosis. Instead of saying, "She's a schizophrenic," say, "She has a mental health disorder." Never use the term "mentally ill", "crazy", or "loco".
- A person with a mental health disorder is not at fault, but everyone can and should seek and give help.
- Treat people with the dignity and respect we all deserve. People who have mental health disorders may include your friends, your neighbors, and your family.
- Understanding and support are powerful tools. They can make a difference in the life of a person who needs them.



## Fortunately, stigma can be reduced by changing how we think

The barriers to reducing stigma and deterring discrimination are lack of information, resources, understanding, interest, and knowledgeable and experienced health care professionals. Stigma must, and can, be exposed and overcome. Prevention and Early Intervention appropriate services and programs can be the best way to prevent mental health disorders and illnesses from getting worse.

The San Diego County Mental Health Services (Health and Human Services Agency) is conducting public forums to gather community inputs to determine the type of mental health Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI) programs needed. The new programs will be funded with approximately \$16 million the County will receive annually from the Mental Health Services Prevention and Early Intervention component, which was approved by California voters in 2004. MHSA imposes a 1 percent tax on personal income above \$1 million for the expansion of mental health programs statewide. These PEI programs and services will serve individuals that have been exposed to trauma, or are experiencing the onset of serious psychiatric illness, as well as children and youth living in stressed families, at risk of school failure and in danger of entering the juvenile

justice system. The State's PEI guidelines require that a minimum of 51 percent of funding be spent on programs for individuals age 25 and younger.

Participants in the County's MHSA PEI Community first forums and roundtables ended on the note of reaffirming that the action of the stakeholders must be taken quickly to work and determine the next best steps to implement the plans made at the roundtables to stop stigma and discrimination against people experiencing mental health problems and disorders. This can be achieved by promoting education and awareness on mental disorders and the resources available to access mental health services and prevention and early intervention programs.

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**The Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) emphasizes prevention and early intervention as key for successful outcomes over untreated serious mental health illness. Mental health services are confidential, and are based on the notion that people can and do recover from mental illness. They are available by calling: 1-800-479-3339.**



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For additional free copies of this document, please call SAMHSA's National Mental Health Information Center at 1-800-789-2647 or 1-866-889-2647 (TDD).
- SAMHSA - National Mental Health Awareness Campaign's  
[www.nostigma.org](http://www.nostigma.org)

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County of San Diego Health and Human Services



Mental Health Services Act (MHSA)

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