

May is Mental Health Awareness Month

Mental Health Awareness and Stigma...

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May is National Mental Health Month. How many of you have been embarrassed to tell someone you are taking an anti-depressant or turned down an invitation to a gathering because of your anxiety? Would you be embarrassed to tell someone you have cancer, high blood pressure or cardiac disease? Probably not, but the stigma related to mental illness remains a constant threat in our minds. What will people think? Will it get back to my employer? What will my friends think?

Would you be embarrassed to tell someone you have... high blood pressure...?

Stigma is when someone *sees* you in a negative way because of your mental illness. Discrimination is when someone *treats* you in a negative way because of your mental illness. Treating mental health issues as if they are something people can overcome if they just "try harder" or "snap out of it" is a form of stigma.

Stigma often comes from a lack of understanding or fear. Inaccurate or misleading media representations of mental illness can contribute to both of those factors. Media representations of people with mental illness can influence perceptions and stigma, and they have often been negative, inaccurate, or violent representations. A study published in April 2020 looked at a recent example, the popular film *Joker* (2019), which portrays the lead character as a person with mental illness who becomes extremely violent. The study found that viewing the film "was associated with higher levels of prejudice toward those with mental illness." Stigma around mental illness is especially an issue in some diverse racial and ethnic communities, and it can be a major barrier to people from those cultures accessing mental health services.

Stigma and discrimination can contribute to worsening symptoms. Other harmful effects of stigma can include:

- Reluctance to seek help or treatment
- Social isolation
- Lack of understanding by family, friends, coworkers, or others
- Fewer opportunities for work, school, or social activities, or trouble finding housing
- Bullying, physical violence, or harassment
- Health insurance that doesn't adequately cover your mental illness treatment
- The belief that you'll never succeed at certain challenges or that you can't improve your situation



Research shows that knowing or having contact with someone with mental illness is one of the best ways to reduce stigma. Individuals speaking out and sharing their stories can have a positive impact. When we know someone with mental illness, it becomes less scary and more real and relatable. Many celebrities, such as Demi Lovato, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, Michael Phelps, Taraji P. Henson and Lady Gaga have publicly shared their stories of mental health challenges and brought the discussion much more into the general media and everyday conversation.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) offers some suggestions about what we can do as individuals to help reduce the stigma of mental illness:

- Talk openly about mental health, such as sharing on social media.
- Educate yourself and others—respond to misperceptions or negative comments by sharing facts and experiences.
- Be conscious of language—remind people that words matter.
- Encourage equality between physical and mental illness—draw comparisons to how they would treat someone with cancer or diabetes.
- Show compassion for those with mental illness.
- Be honest about treatment—normalize mental health treatment, just like other health care treatment.
- Let the media know when they are using stigmatizing language presenting stories of mental illness in a stigmatizing way.



We must first recognize the high prevalence of mental illness; then re-educate ourselves, friends and family on the truths of mental illness. When we do this, we can reduce the stigma.

For more ways to eradicate stigma, visit: <https://bringchange2mind.org>, <https://www.stampoutstigma.com>, <https://makeitok.org> and personal stories about mental illness at: <https://thisismybrave.org> .