



BREAK THE CYCLE

Mental Health Stigma

Stigma is a major problem for people living with mental health issues. It undermines their self-esteem, well-being and their ability to recover.

But what is stigma?

- Stigma is any characteristic, trait or disorder that causes a person to be judged as unacceptably different from “normal” people. People with mental health issues are often labelled negatively on account of the disorders they suffer from.

Why do people stigmatize mental health issues?

Most people learn what they know about mental illness from the media, which often portrays people living with mental illness as violent, dangerous, or as having criminal tendencies. The media communicates to readers, listeners or viewers that people with mental health issues are fundamentally different from other people. This leads to unfavourable stereotypes, which further marginalises people struggling with mental health issues.

How does negative portrayal affect people’s view of mental illness?

People see those with a mental illness quite differently from how they see other illnesses. For example, while people easily have sympathy for someone with a physical condition such as asthma or arthritis, they may not have the same level of empathy towards people living with mental health. There is often a perception that mental illness is somehow the sufferer’s fault; that they somehow brought it on themselves.

What is the effect on people living with mental health issues?

- The negative perception of mental illness leads to discrimination against those living with it. Discrimination occurs when someone is treated less positively or appropriately than others due to their mental health conditions.
- Stigma causes barriers for people living with mental health issues, making it difficult for them to find jobs, rent homes, establish relationships, and integrate into their communities.
- It prevents people from seeking help or confiding in others out of fear of discrimination.

How to combat mental health stigma

The main cause of stigma is poor information. Providing accurate information can help correct fears, myths and misconceptions many people have about mental illness. Studies show that the most effective way to combat stigma is through education, combined with real life interaction with someone living with a mental illness.

You can help your students by letting them meet someone with a mental illness who contributes to the life of the community. Negative perceptions can change when people have positive interactions with individuals with mental illness. You can also have activities in class that challenge students to reflect on how they think about mental health issues. Here are examples:

Activity 1: Say it Another Way

Purpose

To highlight the role the media plays in shaping how people perceive mental illness.

Time

45-60 minutes

Materials

Newspaper and magazine articles that discuss mental illness, or report on an event involving a person with mental illness.

Instructions

- Students get into small groups. Groups should not be too large, so that everyone gets a chance to share.
- Each group gets a newspaper or magazine article and analyzes it for how mental illness or people with mental illness is discussed.
- Each group finds examples of stigmatizing or stereotypical images or language in the article.
- They come up with alternative ways of reporting the story without perpetuating the stereotypes they found in the articles.
- Each group shares their discussions with the rest of the class.

Activity 2: Awareness Posters

Purpose

To help students use think creatively about how they can combat stigma.

Time

Homework

Materials

Art supplies like cardboard, coloring pencils, paint, glue newspapers, magazines, etc.

Instructions

- Ask students to choose a subject related to mental health that they would like to create awareness about.
- Examples could include
 - facts about a particular mental illness,
 - the important contributions of people living with mental health issues,
 - how stigma affects the lives of people with mental illness etc.
- Students then make visually appealing posters on their chosen topic.
- Display the posters prominently in different areas of the school.