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## Mental health: Overcoming the stigma of mental illness

**False beliefs about mental illness can cause significant problems. Learn what you can do about stigma.**

By Mayo Clinic staff

Stigma is when someone judges you based on a personal trait. Unfortunately, this is a common experience for people who have a mental health condition. Stigma may be obvious and direct, such as someone making a negative remark about your mental illness or your treatment. Or it may be subtle, such as someone assuming you could be unstable, violent or dangerous because you have a mental health condition. You may even judge yourself. Some of the harmful effects of stigma can include:

- Lack of understanding by family, friends, colleagues or others you know
- Discrimination at work or school
- Difficulty finding housing
- Bullying, physical violence or harassment
- Health insurance that doesn't adequately cover your mental illness
- The belief that you will never be able to succeed at certain challenges or that you can't improve your situation

## Steps to cope with stigma

Here are some ways you can deal with stigma:

- **Get treatment.** You may be reluctant to admit you have a condition that needs treatment. Don't let the fear of being "labeled" with a mental illness prevent you from seeking help. Treatment can provide relief by identifying what is wrong in concrete terms and reducing symptoms that interfere with your work and personal life.
- **Do not let stigma create self-doubt and shame.** Stigma does not just come from others. You may have the mistaken belief that your condition is a sign of personal weakness, or that you should be able to control it without help. Seeking psychological counseling, educating yourself about your condition and connecting with others with mental illness can help you gain self-esteem and overcome destructive self-judgment.
- **Do not isolate yourself.** If you have a mental illness, you may be reluctant to tell anyone about it. Have the courage to confide in your spouse, family members, friends, clergy or other members of your community. Reach out to people you trust for the compassion, support and understanding you need.

- **Do not equate yourself with your illness.** You are not an illness. So instead of saying "I'm bipolar," say, "I have bipolar disorder." Instead of calling yourself "a schizophrenic," call yourself "a person with schizophrenia." Do not say you "are depressed." Say you "have clinical depression."
- **Join a support group.** Some local and national groups, such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) offer local programs and Internet resources that help reduce stigma by educating people with mental illness, their family members and the general public. A number of state and federal agencies and programs also offer support for people who have mental health conditions. Examples include agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation and Veterans Affairs (VA).
- **Get help at school.** If you or your child has a mental illness that affects learning, find out what plans and programs might help. Discrimination against students because of a mental health condition is against the law, and educators at primary, secondary and college levels are required to accommodate students as best they can. Talk to teachers, professors or administrators about the best approach and available resources. If a teacher does not know about a student's disability, it can lead to discrimination, barriers to learning and poor grades.
- **Speak out against stigma.** Express your opinions at events, in letters to the editor or on the Internet. It can help instill courage in others facing similar challenges and educate the public about mental illness.
- Others' judgments almost always stem from a lack of understanding rather than information based on the facts. Learning to accept your condition and recognize what you need to do to treat it, seeking support, and helping educate others can make a big difference.

## See Also

- Intervention: Help a loved one overcome addiction Mental illness stigma lessening Don't be afraid to ask for help  
References

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