Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

The stigma related to mental illness

The facts: one-in-four people will be affected by a mental illness; it is one of the leading causes of disability in North America; the World Health Organization predicts that by the year 2020, depression will be the second leading cause of disability worldwide. And in spite of the facts, people rarely talk about mental illness. You're much more likely to hear about your neighbour's heart condition than you are to hear about his mental health.



This silence is due to the long-standing stigma related to mental illness. Even though access to accurate information about mental illness increases each year through new research, training and various organizations whose mandate it is to educate the public, the shame attached to these disorders remains. And some mental illnesses seem to elicit more negative connotations than others.

Stigma and depression

If there's one mental illness seen on television more than any other, its depression. Recall the many antidepressants commercials in which people with depression are depicted in their "before treatment" state of sloppy clothes, unable to get up off a couch or as a wind-up toy that's become unwound. This is followed by "after treatment" images involving smiling people walking hand-in-hand with their partner.

These are not positive images for people with depression and may actually increase stigma.

Depictions like these may reinforce the misperception that people with depression are weak, lazy or have some sort of character flaw because they aren't able to correct their depression on their own. In fact, people with depression feel both the stigma of the disease and the stigma of getting treatment, as taking antidepressants can also be seen as yet another sign of weakness.

Stigma and anxiety disorders

Anxiety disorders are recognized medical illnesses, and in fact they are the most common type of mental illness. But while 96% of Canadians are aware of depression as a mental illness, only 85% are aware of anxiety disorders. In one study social phobia, an anxiety disorder was viewed as a personal weakness.

Stigma and Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a highly misunderstood illness, which may be why people suffering from this mental illness experience the greatest stigma of all. While 92% of Canadians are aware of schizophrenia, most people believe in symptoms of schizophrenia that don't exist. For example, Canadians erroneously believe that the following are related to schizophrenia:

- Withdrawing from others (70%)
- Not knowing you are ill (57%)
- Split or multiple personalities (50%)
- Violent behaviour (40%)

Even worse, in a Surgeon General's report, 60% of the U.S. population believed that people with schizophrenia were likely to act violently towards others. But in studies and reality, they are no more likely than others to behave violently.

And stigma doesn't just exist in the general population. More than half of Canadians believe that people with schizophrenia face discrimination from healthcare professionals too.

Other stigma statistics include:

- 39% of people would be embarrassed to tell others if a person in their family had schizophrenia
- 28% would not tell their friends if they had schizophrenia
- 7% believe the best way to help people with schizophrenia is to remove them from society
- 33% believe people with schizophrenia cannot move from treatment to full recovery
- 32% feel uncomfortable in the presence of someone with schizophrenia
- 40% feel that avoiding a person with schizophrenia is not a form of discrimination

Stigma and Bipolar Disorder

People with bipolar disorder are often stereotyped as being unpredictable, unreliable, manipulative and even dangerous in spite of the fact that these behaviours or personality traits are not symptoms of the mental illness. This helps explain why the World Federation for Mental Health found that 35% of people with bipolar disorder had experienced some form of discrimination due to their illness, and 26% of people did not tell their family and friends about their illness.

Another study found that, "The majority of interviewees had experienced stigma in the workplace and believed this had resulted in their being dismissed from positions, denied promotions, demoted, or held back in their career in other ways."

Mental illness and stigma

The greatest weapon in the battle against stigma is knowledge. Learning the facts about mental illness dispels the myth that mental illness is some kind of personal failing and instead is a real, medical illness with treatment and recovery possibilities.

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