



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

Mental health stigma: How it affects men and women



The past two decades have seen a dramatic change in attitudes towards mental health and illness. Public figures and celebrities now freely discuss their own struggles with depression, anxiety, OCD, eating disorders, bipolar disorder, phobias and other mental health problems. Despite this new openness, many people still feel the need to hide their mental illness or avoid seeking help, why? Unfortunately, because stigma and stereotypes continue. Consider the following statements that perpetuate stigma:

- Mental illnesses aren't real illnesses
- People with mental health problems can snap out of it if they try hard enough
- People with a mental health challenge can't handle stress
- Mental health challenges are an excuse for bad behaviour
- Addiction is just a lack of willpower
- People experiencing mental health problems are angry, crazy or "psycho"
- People with mental health challenges are violent and dangerous
- People don't recover from mental illnesses

As a result of prevailing stigma, people experiencing mental health challenges often fear disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination. They worry that their illness could damage their careers, relationships and quality of life.

In addition, men and women have to contend with different stigma that often prevents them from seeking help and support. Here are some more specific gender based stereotypes related to experiencing mental health challenges:

Tough it out

The characteristics of traditional masculinity – toughness, stoicism, strength, bravery and competitiveness – and the fear of being branded a “sissy,” “wimp,” or worse – can cause men and boys to perceive mental health problems as weaknesses and therefore ignore their symptoms and reject help.

This is especially relevant for men in professions that embody these traditional male traits: the military, police force, and fire and emergency services. The recent rise in suicides resulting from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in these groups has shed new light why so many men don’t seek help – particularly the fear that they might be perceived as unable to deal with the pressures of the job.

All things nice

Women face their own set of stigma surrounding mental health issues. While men face societal scorn for displaying traditional feminine traits, such as gentleness, passivity, empathy or emotionality, so women are criticized for displaying stereotypical masculine traits of aggression, competitiveness and toughness. Excessive drinking or gambling and sexual promiscuity are still more associated, albeit unfairly, with men. These gender stereotypes can be especially hard for women with children. The fear of being branded as an unstable or unfit mother leads many women to hide their mental health problems. While men fear shame, women fear blame. Whatever the fear, the stigma both men and women face regarding mental illness prevents too many from seeking help.

Tackling stigma

No matter our gender, age or ethnicity, we all play a role in eliminating any stigma surrounding mental health. Here are some ideas:

- **Educate yourself.** Do what you can to learn about and understand mental health and illness and the importance of making mental health a priority.
- **Try to dispel gender stereotypes.** Men and women may face different stresses and have different biologies, but everybody experiences turmoil and no one is immune to mental health challenges. . Encourage men and boys to talk about how they’re feeling and support women struggling with multiple roles.
- **Speak out.** If you see something in the media that offends, trivializes or patronizes people with mental illness, write or call. If you hear a friend or family member use inappropriate or stereotypical language regarding mental health, let them know.
- **Be supportive.** Treat everyone with dignity and respect. If you have family members, friends or co-workers with mental health problems, encourage their efforts to get well.

According to Health Canada, about 20 percent of us will suffer from a mental health issue at some time in our lives. The rest of us may also be affected when it’s our family member, friend or colleague struggling with a mental health issue. We’re in this together, and it’s time to eliminate the stigma attached to mental health issues. Each of us can do our part: learning the facts, being supportive, and speaking openly about your own experiences is a great start.

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