

# Addressing Stigma

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## Introduction

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, “in any given year, 1 in 5 people in Canada will personally experience a mental health problem or illness” (Canadian Mental Health Association [CMHA], 2021). On a global scale, “in 2019, 1 in every 8 people or 970 million people around the world” were living with mental health conditions (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). In recent years, great advances have been made, both in Canada and around the world, in how we understand and talk about mental health conditions. However, despite these advances, stigma attached to mental health conditions is pervasive. The recent Lancet Commission report on ending stigma and discrimination in mental health concluded with one simple key message, “mental health is part of being human, let us act now to stop stigma and to start inclusion” (Thornicroft, G., et al., 2022, p. 1472). Stigma attached to mental health conditions is a complex issue that has been well-researched and well-documented. While it is beyond the scope of this article to fully explore the depth of evidence-based research, we will briefly explore what stigma is, the causes and consequences of stigma attached to mental health conditions, and identify ways by which it can be addressed.

## Stigma

The World Health Organization states that stigma “can be defined as a mark of shame, disappointment, or disgrace which results in an individual being rejected, discriminated against, and excluded from participating in a number of different areas of society” (WHO, 2001, p. 16). Stigma attached to mental health conditions is universal in the general population, and is experienced by individuals in every part of the world (Rössler, 2016). Researchers have identified three types of stigma associated with mental health conditions: public stigma, self-stigma, and institutional stigma.

Public stigma refers to “the negative or discriminatory that others have” about mental health conditions. Self-stigma refers to the negative beliefs or attitudes, “including internalized shame,” that an individual holds about their own mental health condition. Institutional stigma “is more systemic, involving policies of government and private organizations that intentionally or unintentionally limit opportunities” for people living with mental health conditions (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2020).

The Mental Health Commission of Canada noted that people living with mental health conditions often report “that experience of stigma—from members of the public, from friends, family and co-workers, and even at times from the very service systems that they turn to for help—has a more devastating impact on them than the illness itself” (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2012, p. 22).

### **Causes of Stigma**

Stigma has several interrelated causes and dynamics. For example, stigma attached to mental health conditions is the result of information, or cause and effect attributions, that are untrue and/or inaccurate, rather than from information based on facts. Stigma can originate from personal, cultural, societal, religious, or family beliefs, and can be a reaction to the new, unfamiliar, or unknown. It can result from inaccurate stereotypes, and be influenced by misleading representation in the media of people living with mental health conditions (APA, 2020). Assumptions, confusion, misdirected blame, anger, fear, and a lack of understanding, can cause stigma. There are times when stigma takes the form of judgment in concluding that an individual has avoided, denied, or not given sufficient attention to a mental health concern. Stigma then becomes a form of blame.

### **Consequences of Stigma**

For people living with mental health conditions, serious and negative consequences are often experienced in many aspects of their lives; they can encounter barriers in employment, education, housing, and health care. The experience of stigma “leads to social isolation and discrimination, which impacts a person’s ability to earn an income, have a voice, gain access to quality care, be part of their community and recover from their mental health condition” (WHO, 2022, p. 80). One of the most significant consequences of stigma attached to mental health conditions is the delay in obtaining a timely diagnosis and appropriate treatment, which may result in an increase in the individual’s symptomatology and emotional distress. This can progress towards tragic results, such as self-harm, or loss of life by suicide. While providing medical attention is of immediate concern, it is the psychological impact of stigma, more specifically damage to self-worth, that can be overlooked and which may make recovery difficult. An individual who is stigmatized may feel a sense of failure and self-blame. They may feel excluded, rejected, and damaged; anxiety, fear, or depression are common. They may experience feelings of shame, fear, or anxiety because of the experience of stigma, which may lead to isolation, secrecy, denial, and avoidance. Stigma is divisive;

factions and opposing sides develop. Stigma is about labels and power; how a person who is stigmatized feels is not considered. What usually emerges are the feelings, judgements, and biases of the stigmatizer, and these are not usually challenged.

## **Addressing Stigma**

In recent decades, much has been done to reduce stigma and to raise public awareness about mental health. And yet, across societies and cultures, stigma and discrimination are pervasive and continue to be added challenges for people living with mental health conditions. (The Editorial Board, 2022). Researchers have identified three general ways that have been used in combination to reduce stigma and discrimination attached to mental health conditions: education strategies, contact strategies, and protest strategies, which include, among other actions, advocacy campaigns (WHO, 2022, pp. 82-83). There is a resounding urgent need in Canada, and around the world, to effectively reduce stigma attached to mental health conditions. We all have a role to play in the achievement of this goal, as governments, corporations, media, non-profit organizations, faith communities, and individuals, including people with lived experience of mental health conditions. Together, with education, awareness, understanding, and effective informed actions, we can help to create mentally healthy communities, and reduce stigma attached to mental health conditions.

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