

What is Stigma, Anyway?

Grades 8-12

Our charity is called the Stigma-Free Society, but you may be confused about what the word “stigma” actually means.

No problem. We can help answer that.

The Definition of Stigma is: A set of negative and often unfair beliefs that a society or group of people have about something.

Now, that’s a lot to try to wrap your head around, so let’s break it down even further. There are three “types” of stigma in our world:

1. Self-stigma: a negative and often unfair belief you have about yourself – self-stigma often prevents you from asking for help and reaching out for support from family, peers and/or professionals.
 - a. Example: You feel sad all the time but you don’t want to tell anyone because you think everyone probably feels that way. You don’t want to bother anyone or ask anyone for help because you’ll just bring them down. Your sadness will bother others and no one can help you but yourself anyway.
2. Societal (or public) stigma: a negative and often unfair belief that the public has about a particular group of people, typically based on a stereotype.
 - a. Example: Many people believe that If you have a mental illness you should be feared or you belong in a mental institution. That is a stigma against mental illness.
3. Structural stigma: policies that restrict opportunities for people based on negative and unfair beliefs and may be experienced as bias, avoidance, discomfort and/or discrimination.
 - a. Example: Not hiring a person because they are on medication for a mental illness.

People may be stigmatized based on many traits or beliefs, including but not limited to:



- Mental illness
- Sexual orientation



- Gender identity
- Religious beliefs
- Age
- Wealth or lack of wealth
- Addiction
- Ethnicity
- ...and many, many more but hopefully this gets you thinking about stigma in a different way.

Right now, a lot is happening in the world that might make you feel sad, anxious or alone. It makes sense if you are feeling different than usual and you are not the only one who feels this way. Sometimes talking to someone you trust can help your mental health. We understand this is hard though, because often there is stigma around sharing what you are struggling with.

Remember: Stigma is when someone thinks about another person in a negative way because of a label they have. The label could be a mental illness, a learning disorder or anything else that makes someone different. The problem with stigma is that it puts many unique people all into one group instead of thinking of them as their own person.

What we need to remember is that it's okay to be different than your peers. It is actually really awesome! Even if it is hard sometimes, the more people learn about other peoples' differences, the more they will understand. This is how stigma goes away!

Stigma happens a lot with mental health because people don't understand it as much as physical health.

Take this situation;

Tom was feeling sad for a long time so one day he went to see his doctor to ask them for help. His doctor told him that he had depression and gave him ways to feel better. The next day, Tom told his best friend Hailey that he had a mental illness called depression. Instead of asking how she could help, she started to treat him differently and didn't hang out with him as much. Hailey had never learned about mental illness, so she didn't understand what it meant.



A couple weeks later Hailey was curious and looked up depression on her computer. She found out that 1 in 4 Canadians have depression in their life and learned what it was. The next day, she went to Tom and told him she was sorry. They are now even better friends than they were before!

The more we learn, the less stigma there will be!

Let's work together to become Stigma-Free.

If you want to learn more about stigma, we have a quiz you can take to see where you're at on your stigma-free scale. There is no judgment with this quiz, but it may open your eyes to some stigmas you have (most of us have them, don't you worry!) and will encourage you to learn more about these areas to help you de-stigmatize these areas in your life.

