



The Myths of Mental Illness

Mental illness is common. Statistics show that one in every six Canadians will have a mental health problem at some point in their lives. Mental illnesses account for a large percentage of hospital stays every year. Yet, in spite of the fact that every Canadian knows someone who has been, or will be, affected by mental illness, few people know very much about it.

It is human nature to fear what we don't understand. As such, mental illness is feared by many people and, unfortunately, still carries a stigma (a stigma is defined as a mark or sign of disgrace). Because of this stigma, many people hesitate to get help for a mental health problem for fear of being looked down upon. It is unfortunate that this happens because effective treatment exists for almost all mental illnesses. Worse, the stigma experienced by people with a mental illness can be more destructive than the illness itself.

If you want to help remove the social stigma of mental illness, we hope this pamphlet will give you some useful information and ideas.

THE MYTHS OF MENTAL ILLNESS

There are many myths about mental illness. Until people learn the truth, they will continue to deny that mental illness exists at all or to avoid the topic entirely.

How much do you know about mental illness? Here are some of the common myths –and truths.

- **People with mental illness are violent and dangerous.** The truth is that, as a group, mentally ill people are no more violent than any other group. In fact, they are far more likely to be the victims of violence than to be violent themselves.
- **People with mental illness are poor and/or less intelligent.** Many studies show that most mentally ill people have average or above-average intelligence. Mental illness, like physical illness, can affect anyone regardless of intelligence, social class or income level.
- **Mental illness is caused by a personal weakness.** A mental illness is not a character flaw. It is an illness, and it has nothing to do with being weak or lacking will-power. Although people with mental illness can play a big part in their own recovery, they did not choose to become ill, and they are not lazy because they cannot just “snap out of it.”
- **Mental illness is a single, rare disorder.** Mental illness is not a single disease but a broad classification for many disorders. Anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, personality disorders, eating disorders and organic brain disorders can cause misery, tears and missed opportunities for thousands of Canadians.

WORDS CAN HURT

Words like “crazy”, “cuckoo”, “psycho”, “wacko” and “nutso” are just a few examples of words that keep the stigma of mental illness alive. These words belittle and offend people with mental health problems. Many of us use them without intending any harm. Just as we wouldn’t mock someone for having a physical illness like cancer or heart disease, it is cruel to make fun of someone with a mental illness.

MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE MEDIA

People with mental disorders are, many times, not described accurately or realistically in the media. Movies, television and books often present people with mental illnesses as dangerous or unstable. News stories sometimes highlight mental illness to create a sensation in a news report, even if the mental illness is not relevant to the story. Advertisers use words like “crazy” to convey that their prices are unrealistically low and to suggest the consumer can take advantage of them.

You can help change the way mental illness is talked about in the media by speaking up.

RECOGNIZING THE PROBLEM

Use the STOP criteria to recognize attitudes and actions that support the stigma of mental illness. It’s easy. Just ask yourself if what you hear:

- **S**tereotypes people with mental illness (that is, assumes they are all alike rather than individuals)?
- **T**rivializes or belittles people with mental illness and / or the illness itself?
- **O**ffends people with mental illness by insulting them?
- **P**atronizes people with mental illness by treating them as if they were not as good as other people?

If you see something in the media which does not pass the STOP criteria, speak up! Call or write to the writer or publisher of the newspaper, magazine or book; the radio, TV or movie producer; or the advertiser who used words which add to the misunderstanding of mental illness. Help them realize how their words affect people with mental illness.

OTHER THINGS YOU CAN DO

All of us can help the way people think about mental illness.

Start with yourself. Be careful about your own choice of words. Use accurate and sensitive words when talking about people with mental illness. Your positive attitude can affect everyone with whom you have contact.

Try to influence all the people in your life constructively. Whenever you hear people say things that show they do not really understand mental illness, use the opportunity to share with them some of the information that you have.

We have already changed the way we refer to women, people of colour and people with physical disabilities. Why stop there?

DO YOU WANT MORE INFORMATION?

If you want to learn more about mental illness or how to combat the stigma surrounding it, contact your local branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association.

The Canadian Mental Health Association is a national voluntary association that exists to promote the mental health of all people. CMHA believes that everyone should have choices so that, when they need to, they can reach out to family, friends, formal services, self-help groups or community-based organizations.



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