What is stigma?
A guide to understanding mental health stigma

See Change

The National Mental Health Stigma Reduction Partnership

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See Change, established in 2010, is a national partnership working to change minds about mental health problems in Ireland. The partnership is made up of over 100 organisations and 60 ambassadors who work to create a community driven social movement to reduce the stigma and discrimination associated with mental health problems. Our vision is an Ireland where every person can be open and positive about their own and others mental health.

People with mental health conditions are challenged in dealing with the symptoms that result from the condition but are also challenged by the prejudice and stereotypes that result from misconception and misunderstanding about mental health.

But what is mental health stigma and why is it a central experience for people who have mental health conditions and their family members?

The concept of stigma

Stigma has been described as a sign of disgrace which distinguishes the person from others.[1] In the context of mental health, it usually involves the use of negative labels to identify people as different. This results in the person feeling devalued and may lead them to isolate themselves and conceal their mental health difficulty.

Stigma in mental health

Stigma is a significant problem for people who experience mental health conditions and has been identified as one of the most difficult aspects of living with a mental health condition for both the person and their families. Stigma is recognised as a barrier to the recovery process as people do not seek help as they fear being labelled as mentally ill. The consequences of stigma are shame and humiliation and can lead people to delay or avoid seeking help.

Stigma against those with mental health conditions takes many forms: from the unkind word, social exclusion to higher insurance premiums. Research has shown that stigma makes it more difficult for people to find or return to employment, find somewhere to live, make friends or be involved in social activities. Stigma negatively impacts a person's self-esteem and they may feel devalued. Stigma against family members is also very common with family members often concealing the mental health difficulties of loved ones.

Mental health stigma thrives on lack of knowledge and understanding, negative attitudes and hostile or discriminatory behaviour. To challenge and eliminate mental health stigma we need to understand how it develops and is maintained.

Stigma usually has two main components – public stigma and self-stigma. The impact of stigma is considered twofold[2]

Public stigma

Public stigma manifests itself in:

| STEREOTYPING	
e.g. people with mental health issues are dangerous	Makes it easier to dismiss people with mental health conditions which can lead to social distancing, exclusion and isolation.
PREJUDICE	
e.g. people with mental health issues are dangerous and I am afraid of them.	Prejudice is when people form opinions without being fully aware of the facts. People with self-experience of mental health conditions frequently encounter prejudice in their daily lives and it has a negative impact. Common experiences and impacts of prejudice include: • Difficulties in the workplace • Not applying for jobs due to fears around disclosing mental health issues and explaining gaps on CVs • Isolation from friends and families • Not attending events and activities • Lowered self-esteem resulting from stereotypes associated with mental health conditions • Avoiding or postponing seeking help because of the perception of failure or shame.
DISCRIMINATION	
e.g. I do not want to work with someone with a mental health issue / condition.	Discrimination occurs when someone is treated less positively or appropriately than others due to their mental health condition. Examples of discrimination include: • Not being offered a job because of a disclosure of a mental health condition • Not securing accommodation following a disclosure of a mental health condition • Exclusion from social activities.

Self–stigma

For many people the fear of misunderstanding and the prejudice they experience leads them to develop self-stigma. This is where the person starts to believe that what is being said or reported in the media about their mental health condition is true.
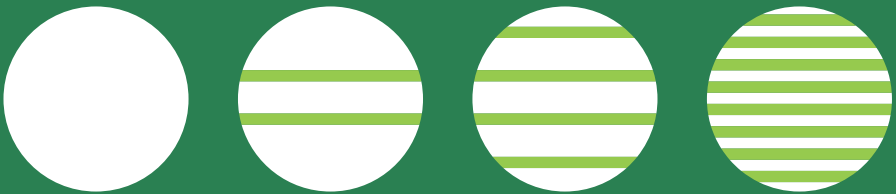
Self-stigma can lead a person to believe myths such as they will not recover or cannot hold down a job. Self-stigma may cause a person to withdraw socially and lead to lowered self-esteem and confidence and can be very damaging. Not everyone will experience self-stigma.

Where can stigma and discrimination occur:

Stigma is very common for people with mental health conditions and they have felt discriminated against in a number of areas; including

EMPLOYMENT
Not being offered roles or not applying for roles

EDUCATION
Settings such as schools, universities - being labeled as different and not offered opportunities to advance

MEDIA
Misrepresentation of mental health difficulties

INSURANCE COMPANIES
Making it more difficult for people with mental health conditions to get insurance

COMMUNITY
Feeling shunned or excluded

FAMILIES
Rejecting and blaming them for their condition

Words matter – The language of mental health stigma

The language that is commonly used about mental health can also create a barrier to truly understanding and helping others. The use of language to describe a person experiencing mental health difficulties can be demeaning and isolating. Although the use of words such as crazy, nuts or psycho may seem trivial and innocent they are the building blocks of stigma that may lead someone to conceal their difficulty.

Psycho

Nutter

Looney

Crackers

Weirdo

Insane
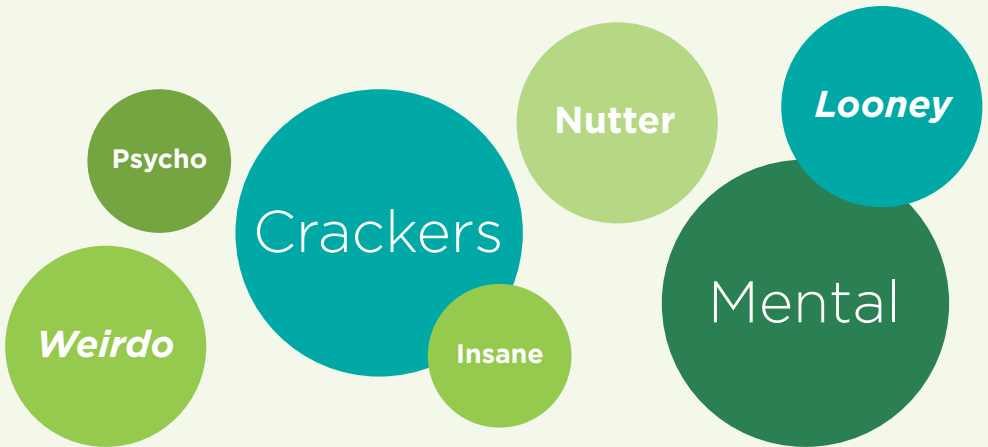
Mental

Labelling is viewed as central to stigma

Once you label me, you negate me[3]

...remember that people are not their diagnoses – they are people who are facing a mental health challenge.

One of the most important ways in which we can reduce the stigma associated with mental health is to change how we talk about mental health conditions.

Dispelling the myths associated with mental health will reduce the stigma and improve the quality of life for people who experience mental health conditions

MYTH	FACT
People with mental health conditions do not recover	**Recovery is possible for people with mental health conditions and with the right treatments and support people go on to lead rewarding and fulfilling lives**
People with mental health conditions are violent and unpredictable	**Misconceptions about people with mental health conditions and violence developed through stereotypes portrayed in the media. The majority of people who experience a mental health condition are not violent**
Mental health conditions are rare and don't affect me	**Mental health conditions are very common with research indicating that 1 in 4 people will experience a mental health difficulty in their lifetime**
People with mental health conditions cannot hold down a job or tolerate stressful situations	**Many people with mental health conditions do work and it is likely that you work or have worked with someone with a mental health condition**
I cannot do anything for a person with a mental health condition	**Breaking down the stigma associated with mental health needs all our voices to create a society where people with mental health conditions are treated with dignity, respect and equality**
Physical health conditions are worse than mental health conditions	**A mental health condition can feel just as bad as a physical condition and needs treatment and support**

Mental health stigma in Ireland

EXPERIENCES OF THOSE QUESTIONED IN IRELAND

1 in 8
have lived with someone with a mental health problem

1 in 5
have worked with or had a neighbour with a mental health problem

1 in 3
have a close friend who has experienced mental health problems

46%
of under 35 year olds would conceal a mental health difficulty

42%
living in rural communities would conceal a mental health difficulty from family, friends or colleagues
4% higher than the national average

more than half
would live with someone with a mental health problem

66%
are willing to work with someone with a mental health difficulty

Stigma in the workplace is a significant issue for people. The workplace is identified as a key setting for social change around attitudes to mental health problems.

How to help end mental health stigma and discrimination

- Educate yourself on mental health conditions and the recovery process

- Recognise the contribution of people with mental health conditions

- Challenge stigma and discrimination when you hear or see it

- Consider the language you use and how a simple change in the language you use will show your openness and acceptance

- Start a conversation with a friend, family member or work colleagues about mental health.

References

[1] Byrne, P. (2000). Stigma of mental illness and ways of diminishing it. Advances in Psychiatric Treatment, Vol.6, 65-72.

[2] Corrigan, P.W. & Watson, A.C. (2002). Understanding the impact of stigma on people with mental illness. World Psychiatry, Vol.1, 16-20.

[3] Kierkegaard, S. & Dru, A. (1938). The Journals of Soren Kierkegaard, London, Oxford University Press.

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