

# The Voices of Stigma

"My psychiatrist would like me to take more time before disclosing that I have a mental illness to people I meet. But I don't want to waste time with people that won't accept me, either in business or my personal life. It's terrible to have people judge you before they know you. I just want to be understood like everyone else."

"The stigma of mental illness can be more painful than the disease itself. Stigma robbed me of my dignity leading others to doubt my abilities and to see me as weak and untrustworthy."

"In graduate school, I heard whispered stories: one student suffered a breakdown after her divorce and never made it back to the program; another student had a psychotic episode and wasn't allowed to complete his training. I was quickly indoctrinated into an "us vs. them" mentality."

"The shame of having a family member with a mental illness led those closest to me to become physically distant. I felt unwanted and unloved."

"When I interned in a mental health setting I was shocked to hear healthcare professionals use terms about people in recovery like "frequent flyers," "difficult," "non-compliant," and "crazy."

"As a little girl I felt shame and embarrassment when others rolled their eyes and laughed at my mom during her psychotic episodes. I just wanted someone to tell me, "Don't worry. We're going to take good care of your mom."

"I am bipolar. When I was hospitalized during a manic episode a nurse said to me, 'I liked you better when you were depressed.'"

"While working as a reporter, I had to hide...I felt my mental illness was a liability. If I admitted to my disorder, my credibility as a journalist would be undermined. So, I said nothing..."

"After a mass shooting, the media described the shooter as mentally ill. I hated that, knowing people would then fear me. They think that anyone with a mental illness will become violent."

"In my 30's I had a depression episode. I did not want to tell anybody what happened. Still to this day, I am having a hard time accepting what happened to me."

"When our daughter was in junior high, she was treated "like a leper" when her classmates found out she had been hospitalized for "mental problems."

## LISTEN CLOSER! And know me for who I am

"Depression killed my father, but so did stigma. My father was a strong-willed Vietnam Vet who constantly struggled against taking medications. Therapy was out of the question. It was a secret. We couldn't talk about this as a family; there was no safety plan in place. That would have meant when he wasn't feeling right that he should have gone immediately to the nearest emergency room, just like when someone is having the warning signs of a heart attack. But I know him and the stigma and his pain were just too great."

"Police officers often respond to calls about people who are talking to themselves, acting erratic, going through the garbage, or just being in a place of business where the merchant wants them removed. They haven't broken any laws; they just don't fit the social norm. People are afraid of what they don't understand ... they don't understand mental illness."

"One of my clients is a child with a mental health problem. He told me, 'I never get picked for the team. No one sees things the way that I do.'"

"I was so pleased at an event at my child's new school when a parent came over to me and introduced herself. As she walked away another parent came up to her and whispered in her ear. All I heard were the words "mental patient." I never made any friends through that school."

"My father died by suicide after suffering from depression and PTSD. Few people knew how he really died, not even his siblings. The pain of losing him in this way was incomprehensible. My family did not want people to remember my father as "someone who gave up." Having to hide what really happened made grieving very complicated."

"The stigma around mental illness causes us to treat it differently than anything that happens below the neck. Stigma says, 'You should be ashamed of being sick... It's time to man up and simply try harder.'"

"People tell me my depression is a "spiritual malady" and ask me if I pray. They tell me that if I only 'got right with God" my depression would be lifted. I pray regularly, am active with my church and am in constant contact with my God. But my depression never lifted until I received the proper medications."

"When I asked my physician for medical documentation to take off from work he refused to list depression as the reason for my absence. He insisted, 'If we use a mental health diagnosis, it will follow you for the rest of your life, affecting you at each job.'"

"When my psychiatrist prescribed medication, I started being asked the strangest questions... "Do you think you're just using those meds as a crutch?" "Aren't you afraid you're going to become dependent on those medications?" How odd. They wouldn't question me like that if I took insulin for diabetes. No one would bat an eye. Brain malfunctioning though...with that you should just go it alone..."

- Feelings of isolation and hopelessness
- Problems with employment, and lost opportunities for work
- It negatively impacts finding adequate housing
- Harassment
- A negative impact on their community participation and involvement... and isolation
- Loss of self-esteem
- Reduced resources and access to opportunities
- Fear of being "found out"
- Individuals denying their illness and refusing treatment or not seeking help!

## Stigma Results In:

- Inadequate insurance coverage for mental health services
- Fear, mistrust, and violence against people living with mental illness and their families
- Prejudice and discrimination against people who have mental illnesses, which...
- Violates their rights and...
- Denies them opportunities
- Despite Civil Rights Law such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, people with mental illnesses often experience discrimination in the workplace, education, housing, and healthcare.

## What does Stigma have to do with Mental Illness?

### RESOURCES FOR DEALING WITH STIGMA

#### SAMHSA's Resource Center to Promote Acceptance, Dignity and Social Inclusion Associated with Mental Health (ADS Center)

<http://www.promoteacceptance.samhsa.gov/>

Information to design, implement, and operate programs and initiatives to reduce discrimination and the stigma of mental illness.

#### Combating Stigma: A Toolbox for Change

<http://bit.ly/CombatingStigma>

Resources, information, and materials to develop a plan of action to combat stigma, and to assist in understanding types of stigma.

#### Support Technical Assistance Resource Center (STAR)

<http://www.consumerstar.org/>

Technical assistance and resources to improve and increase the capacity of consumer operated programs to meet the needs of persons in recovery.

#### Stigma Busters

<http://www.nami.org>

Stigma Busters' goal is to break down the barriers of ignorance, prejudice, and unfair discrimination, and to fight inaccurate, hurtful representations of mental illness in the media.

For additional information:

#### The Naomi Ruth Cohen Institute (NRCI) for Mental Health Education at The Chicago School of Professional Psychology

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#### NRCI MISSION

NRCI reduces the stigma of mental illness through education and research. The Institute provides resources, hope, and community to those who struggle with mental illness and those who support them.

The stigma associated with mental illness is a major barrier to seeking treatment. In an examination of data from 144 studies, including over 90,000 participants from across the globe, researchers found that the stigma of mental illness remains one of the top reasons people choose to forgo care.

- 56% reported they faced discrimination within the family.
- 51% reported discrimination from friends.
- 37% faced discrimination when seeking work.
- 47% reported discrimination in the workplace.
- 44% reported discrimination from general practitioners.

#### A survey by the Mental Health Foundation reported how people in recovery encountered stigma:

- As many as 75% of people with mental illness experience negative stigma.
- 40% of those surveyed agreed that a person with a mental illness should not hold public office.
- 30% believed a child should be placed in an alternative setting as soon as he or she exhibits a mental illness in school.
- 50% believed major depression was caused by the way a person was raised, or by God's will.
- 60% believed that "pulling oneself together" was effective treatment.

A national public attitudes survey revealed:

## Stigma by the Numbers

# THE STIGMA OF MENTAL ILLNESS IS...

Viewing **someone** in a **negative** way due to their medical condition. We make the person **the problem** rather than identifying their condition as the problem.

**Attitudes** and **beliefs** that lead people to reject, avoid, or **fear** those they see as being different because of their diagnosis.

**Negative** and erroneous attitudes. The impact of stigma on a person's life may be as **harmful** as the direct effects of the disease.

Far beyond the misuse of words and information.

**Disrespect.**