



Reducing Mental Health Stigma

Irrespective of age, culture or income, at least one in five will experience a mental disorder in their lifetime. Given the prevalence of mental health disorders, this article we address common myths and the realities associated with mental health. There is no need to suffer alone and in silence. It's time to start talking.

Irrespective of age, culture or income, at least one in five will experience a mental disorder in their lifetime.(1) Given the prevalence of mental health disorders, in this article we address common myths and the realities associated with mental health. There is no need to suffer alone and in silence. It's time to start talking.

According to the World Health Organization, health is “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” Yet so many people define good health as being physically well. Our mental health is equally important and often does not receive the attention it should.

Aside from the economic cost, mental health disorders prevent millions of North Americans from reaching their full potential and living life to its fullest.

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- Government of Canada

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What are mental health disorders?

Our psychological health has a profound effect on how we communicate, feel, perceive, and understand the world around us. When we are mentally unwell, we experience alterations in thinking, mood or behaviour which causes distress and impairs how we function both day to day and throughout our lives.

There are many types of mental health disorders, the most common include:

Anxiety disorders are the most prevalent of all mental health disorders. While some stress or anxiousness is normal, anxiety disorders are characterized by more severe and long-lasting anxiety, which can interfere with one's ability to function at work, at home and in their relationships. Panic disorder, phobias, social anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and general anxiety disorder fall under this category.

Eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia involve a distorted image of one's body along with extreme behaviours to manage food intake and weight. The opposing behaviour, binge eating disorder, is associated with the consumption of large amounts of food in a short amount of time on a regular basis.

Mood disorders involve changes and disruptions in mood and emotions. Feeling extremely sad or extremely happy from time to time is part of being human. People with a mood disorder such as depression or bipolar disorder experience these feelings with greater intensity over longer durations of time.

Personality disorders affect the way we act, feel and co-exist with others. They can also cause people to be more impulsive. Borderline personality disorder and antisocial personality disorder are two examples.

Common myths and stigmas

Mental health disorders remain shrouded in stigmas and misconceptions that have evolved into fabrications and falsehoods of those struggling with these conditions. Recently, more people are beginning to share their experiences and challenges with conditions such as anxiety or depression. However, other conditions like psychosis and schizophrenia are still characterized by fiction and myth.

In order to dispel the myths, understanding is critical. A mental health disorder can be defined as a psychological pattern, potentially reflected in behaviour, that is generally associated with distress or disability, and which is not considered part of normal development.

People with mental health disorders are often hesitant to tell their family, friends or employer of their struggles for fear of being labelled or having to face prejudices. Others are told to “snap out of it” or “toughen up”. It’s important to know that mental health disorders can be treated, often with excellent results.

Below are six common myths, accompanied by the truths that dispel them:

Myth 1: Mental health disorder is a single, rare disorder. There are multiple types of mental health disorders with different complexities and underlying causes. Similarly, each mental health disorder relates to the impediment of brain chemistry and function. Each of these illnesses has its own specific cause and approach to treatment.

Myth 2: People with mental health disorders never get better. Treatment for mental health disorders are more numerous and more sophisticated than ever before. With the evolution of understanding and with advancements in care, many people do fully recover, while others acquire the skills needed to keep their symptoms managed and under control. Today’s pharmaceutical treatments are more concise, targeting specific areas of the brain where treatment is most beneficial. A full recovery is often attainable, and may require more than pharmaceuticals; recovery may include social and physical activities to get people back to their lives.

Myth 3: Psychiatric disorders are not true illnesses. Unlike a broken leg or heart attack (which are easily detected by simple tests), mental health disorders have traditionally been an invisible disease. This inability to see what's wrong creates the perception or illusion that no illness exists. Mental health disorders are bona fide medical conditions involving complex physiological processes, as well as changes or imbalances in brain chemistry.

Myth 4: Children don't get mental health disorders. "Emotional problems are just part of growing up." Parents naturally want their children to do well, so some may brush off or explain behavioural problems or other childhood difficulties as being mere growing pains. However, numerous psychiatric conditions, including depression, eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder and anxiety disorders can occur in childhood. Roughly one in every 33 kids and one in every eight teens suffer from depression.(3)

Myth 5: People with a mental health disorder lack intelligence. Intelligence has nothing to do with mental health disorders.

Myth 6: People with a mental health disorder shouldn't have jobs. People with a mental health disorder are unlikely to miss any more workdays than those individuals with chronic physical conditions such as diabetes or heart disease. Employees are often unaware of those suffering from a disorder. A stress-ridden workplace may be a breeding ground for the development of stress-related mental health disorders, such as anxiety and depression disorders, threatening work-life balance.

Reducing the stigma of mental health

Three out of 10 Canadian employees report that their work environments are not psychologically safe or healthy.(2)

No matter what role or industry, mental health affects us all. It can be a difficult and daunting task for someone to address their needs when they feel they may be judged by their co-workers or managers. As a collective society, we must realize that mental illness isn't a form of weakness, but a natural reality of what people face. We are complex individuals who react to daily challenges differently. Being open minded, considerate, and compassionate are ways to support those who are facing mental health challenges at your workplace.

10 ways to reduce mental health stigma:

1. Know the facts. Educate yourself about mental health. Learn the facts instead of the myths. Reading this piece is a great place to start!

- 2. Be aware of your attitude and behaviour.** We've all been subject to prejudicial thought and judgemental thinking, but we control the way we think. See people as individual beings, not as labels or stereotypes. See the person beyond the mental disorder; they have other personal attributes that don't disappear because they have a mental health disorder.
- 3. Listening.** It takes courage for someone to open up about their challenges. Perhaps the most important thing you can do is listen.
- 4. Asking what you can do.** Don't guess or assume, ask the person what you can do to help. Letting them tell you how you can help, can guide your actions and ability to support their needs.
- 5. Choose your words carefully.** The way we speak can affect the way others think. Don't use hurtful or derogatory language. Be open to the challenges as judgement can be what someone fears the most.
- 6. Educate others.** Find opportunities to pass on facts and positive attitudes. If your friends, family, co-workers or even media present information that is not true, challenge their myths and stereotypes. Let them know their negative words and incorrect descriptions affect people by keeping misconceptions alive.
- 7. Focus on the positive.** Health problems can be a component of who a person is and the value that they are perceived to offer. We've all heard the negative stories. Let's recognize and applaud the positive ones.
- 8. Support people.** Treat people with dignity and respect. Think about how you'd like others to act towards you if you were in the same situation. If you have family members, friends or co-workers with a mental health disorder, support their choices and encourage their efforts to get well. Your Employee and Family Assistance Program can provide you with a number of supportive tools and resources. Offer to make calls, find information or drive the individual to appointments. But ask first.
- 9. Include everyone.** In Canada, it is against the law to discriminate against people with mental health disorders. Denying access to jobs, housing and health care are a violation of fundamental human rights.(4)(5)
- 10. Taking care of yourself.** Supporting anyone with a physical or mental health disorder can be a physically and emotionally draining scenario. Protect your own physical and emotional health.

People with mental health disorders have the right to take an equal part in society. Let's each do our part to make sure that happens.

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