

## **FACT SHEET**

# **Stigma and Mental Illness**

### **What is stigma?**

When someone appears to be different than us, we may view him or her in a negative stereotyped manner. People who have identities that society values negatively are said to be stigmatized. Stigma is a reality for people with a mental illness, and they report that how others judge them is one of their greatest barriers to a complete and satisfying life. Society feels uncomfortable about mental illness. It is not seen like other illnesses such as heart disease and cancer. Due to inaccuracies and misunderstandings, people have been led to believe that an individual with a mental illness has a weak character or is inevitably dangerous. Mental illness can be called the invisible illness. Often, the only way to know whether someone has been diagnosed with a mental illness is if they tell you. The majority of the public is unaware of how many mentally ill people they know and encounter every day.

- One in five people in Ontario will experience a mental illness at some point in his or her lifetime.
- Mental illness affects people of all ages, in all kinds of jobs and at all educational levels.

### **Why does stigma surround mental illness?**

We all have an idea of what someone with a mental illness is like, but most of our views and interpretations have been distorted through strongly held social beliefs. The media, as a reflection of society, has done much to sustain a distorted view of mental illness. Television or movie characters who are aggressive, dangerous and unpredictable can have their behaviour attributed to a mental illness. Mental illness also has not received the sensitive media coverage that other illnesses have been given. We are surrounded by stereotypes, popular movies talk about killers who are “psychos,” and news coverage of mental illness only when it related to violence. We also often hear the causal use of terms like “lunatic” or “crazy”, along with jokes about the mentally ill. These representations and the use of discriminatory language distort the public’s view and reinforce inaccuracies about mental illness.

### **What are the effects of stigma?**

If you became physically ill, you would go to a doctor. Once you got better you would expect to get on with life as usual. Life, however, does not always fit back into place for people diagnosed with a mentally illness. Everyone has the right to fully participate in his or her community, but individuals struggling to overcome a mental illness can find themselves facing a constant series of rejections and exclusions.

Due to stigma, the typical reaction encountered by someone with a mental illness (and his or her family members) is fear and rejection. Some have been denied adequate housing, loans, health insurance and jobs due to their history of mental illness. Due to the stigma associated with the illness, many people have found that they lose their self-esteem and have difficulty making friends. The stigma attached to mental illness is so pervasive that people who suspect that they might be mentally ill are unwilling to seek help for fear of what others may think. Spouses may be reluctant to define their partners as mentally ill, while families may delay seeking help for their child because of their fears and shame.

### **How do we erase stigma?**

We can battle stigma when we have facts. We all have times when we feel depressed, get unreasonably angry or over-excited. We even have periods when we think that everything and everybody is out to get us and that we can't cope. For someone with a mental illness these feelings become enveloping and overwhelming. There is no particular way to develop a mental illness. For some people, it occurs due to genetic factors in their family. Other causes may relate to environment stressors such as experiences or severe child abuse, war, torture, poverty, loss, isolation, neglect or abandonment. Mental illnesses can also occur in combination with substance abuse. No matter people develop mental illness, there is usually some form of help available which will help them to improved health and a productive life. The support of family, friends and employments is also critical.

For more information, contact the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario, toll-free at 1-800-875-6213 or visit [www.ontario.cmha.ca](http://www.ontario.cmha.ca).