

Stigma

What is Stigma?

Stigma, by definition, is a mark of disgrace or shame. Stigma has four components:

- Labeling someone with a condition
- Stereotyping people who have that condition
- Creating a division— a superior “us” group and a devalued “them” group, resulting in loss of status in the community
- Discriminating against someone on the basis of their label

How are persons with a mental illness stigmatized?

Actions and language that stigmatize can be overt such as offensive jokes and comments, or subtle such as avoiding a person or withholding a promotion at work. Unreasonable fears about mental illness can lead to social isolation and low self esteem. Stigma can mean a person is not taken seriously even about matters that are not affected by their illness.

Why should I care?

One of the fundamental truths of Christian belief is that each human being is created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27). The Catholic Church unconditionally embraces and faithfully proclaims this truth. It is the foundation for human dignity. *Affirming the Dignity of the Mentally Ill, Nebraska Bishops Conferences* 1.05

At times we unwittingly act and speak in ways that devalue people with mental illness. We must constantly evaluate our attitudes and be vigilant in our efforts to treasure each person as a member of the Body of Christ.

We recognize the cost of stigma to persons and society. Although effective treatment for mental illness exists, it is estimated that nearly two-thirds of the people with these conditions do not seek treatment because of the fear of negative consequences should it become known. Lack of treatment can lead to pressure on marriages, families, friends and relationships in the community.

What can I do?

Use Person First Language acknowledging the person before the condition; for example say a **person** with mental illness rather than a mentally ill person.

Never use words referring to mental illness as a metaphor. Use of words such as *schizophrenic* and *psychotic* to describe anything other than the medical condition they name reinforces and spreads stigma.

Let persons who use demeaning language or engage in humor that trivializes mental illness know that you find it unacceptable.

Meet fiction with fact. When you hear or see misleading statements about mental illness speak up for the truth.

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