Stop the stigma: The hidden burden of mental illness

Stigma is a negative feeling based on a belief about a group of people. It's the hidden burden of mental illness that causes people to feel ashamed for something that is out of their control and can be as hard to deal with as the condition itself — causing many people to censor or keep quiet about how they're really feeling. It affects people's well-being, prevents them from seeking treatment and damages self-esteem. The effects can last long after someone has engaged in recovery.

Stigma occurs when others:

- Don't understand the mental health problem or think it's a laughing matter
- Don't realize that a mental health problem is an illness that can be treated
- Think that a mental health problem is "your own fault" or that you can "get over it"
- Are afraid they might someday have a mental health problem themselves
- Are nervous around you

For a group of people who already carry such a heavy burden, stigma is an unacceptable addition to their pain. And while stigma has declined in recent years, the pace of progress has not been quick enough.

Everyone can play an important role in stopping stigma in their communities. Get started with these tips:

- **Talk openly about mental health.** Acknowledging that mental health conditions exist and are nothing to be ashamed of makes it easier to understand and discuss them.

- **Educate yourself and others.** Find reputable sources to better understand what people with a mental health condition are going through.
- **Use respectful language to talk about mental health conditions.**
    - **Remove** certain words out of your vocabulary (crazy, nutty, psycho, etc.) that reinforce stereotypes and minimize the importance of a truly understanding mental health conditions.
    - **Reword** or rephrase from someone who suffers from mental illness to someone who lives with (or is affected by) a mental illness.
    - **Rethink** – don't refer to someone only by their disease. For example, do no say "schizophrenic person." Instead, use a person-first approach: "a person living with (or diagnosed with) schizophrenia."
- **Speak up.** Don't be silent if you hear people repeating negative stereotypes. Oftentimes, they don't know the correct terminology, and speaking up will help correct them and prevent potential harm.
- **See the person, not the condition.** As with anyone diagnosed with a condition or disease, don't treat someone differently because of their mental health condition.
- **Encourage equality between physical and mental health illness.** Avoid seeing a mental health illness as something "lesser than" compared to any other illness or condition.
- **Offer support if you think someone is having trouble.** Let them know they are not alone and that you are there for them. Offer to do something nice for them, such as treat them to a meal or clean their home.

How to create a safe space where mental health is okay to talk about

In a world filled with judgment and stigma, having a place — physical or virtual — for when you need to open up and ask for help is paramount for your mental health. A safe space, a meeting ground for you when you need assistance, or need to be alone, for others who need the same. It's a simple concept with a big impact.

In my own experience, I've found having a safe space to be hugely important. There's something powerful about not having to apologize for being who you are, what you're experiencing or what you've done. When you feel loved and confident instead of regretful and defensive, you feel less afraid. And when you feel less afraid, you are capable of processing and working toward change more freely.

What this space looks like can vary, but it can be something as simple as a group of people who hold similar values and provide each other with [a supportive, respectful environment](). One of my strongest safe spaces is a text chain with my best friends from high school — girls I can be myself around and open up to entirely, knowing I'm being listened to and will be loved regardless of what I say or feel.

Below are some tips to make every space a safe space, so you can make thoughtful decisions and have greater peace of mind in your personal and professional life.

Make room for who you are

Feeling like you need to have your guard up all the time is exhausting and emotionally taxing. And remember, being comfortable enough in the world to let your true self shine through is a prerequisite for self-actualization. If you can't be yourself, after all, who are you?

Build trust

Calling a space a safe space is not enough. Neither is building the space and encouraging those that come to it to speak up and take risks. You need to create a culture of trust that is forgiving and welcomes openness. Only when someone feels they have the strength to open up and be free will a safe space serve its true purpose.

Be vulnerable and allow yourself to build an emotional connection

Being open to new people, experiences and uncertainty can feel scary or at least unfamiliar if you're not accustomed to it. It requires you to be brave and vulnerable, but it's important to make progress in your mental health journey. As scary as it is, communicate your fears and open up about your past. Every time you open up instead of close yourself off, you're working toward a solution.

Be inclusive

A single member of a minority group will likely feel uncomfortable opening up to a majority group unless the space is welcoming and nonthreatening. To prevent this person from feeling isolated, focus on commonalities and making that person feel welcomed and embraced as a member who truly belongs.

Give others a space to talk

Although a safe space serves as a vehicle for you to unleash all of your thoughts, don't feel you need to dominate the conversation. You've all come to be heard. After you've listened, consider speaking. Once others have listened, let them do the talking.

Know that your actions speak louder than words

One of the reasons a safe space is so impactful is because it provides a sense of reliability. It's not uncommon for people to say things and make promises they have no intention of keeping, so honestly and accountability are especially important in a safe space. Show others in the space how welcomed they are and how their well-being is truly a priority for you.

If there's a physical environment, make it welcoming

Make a physical space more inviting. Use alternative seating areas like bean bags, stools and cushions on the floor. Having a comfortable environment can translate to more relaxed space where everyone can feel calm and open to sharing.

10 tips for supporting someone with a mental health condition

Understanding someone you care about who has a mental health condition is oftentimes frustrating and emotional. While you can't change them and shouldn't try to, there's a lot you can do yourself to help. Try the following tips to help you feel more in control of yourself and to help build a stronger relationship with your loved one.

1. **Stop the stigma.** Separating a person from their illness can go a long way in improving your relationship with them. Understand who they are as a person and how you can show up for them.
2. **Accept different behaviors.** A lot of mental illness symptoms present themselves through social behaviors, such as obsessive compulsions or certain language. Accept that their actions are not intended to be deliberate or embarrassing.
3. **Make personalized adjustments.** While you can't control someone's mental health condition, you can control how to navigate it together to support a positive relationship. For you and your loved one, this may mean communicating better, visiting a therapist or planning activities to do together.
4. **Seek support from others.** When a loved one is dealing with a mental health illness, it's hard for them to be present to support you. Instead of trying to rely on them, lean on other people in your life when you need someone to talk to. This will help you not only support your own health, but your loved one's as well.
5. **Manage expectations.** Accommodating your loved one shouldn't replace a need for structure and expectations. Work together to set clear expectations so you can maintain a positive relationship. This may include ensuring a safe space at home and developing an action plan if your safety or the safety of others is threatened.
6. **Develop effective communication skills**. Learning to communicate effectively can help create positive habits and relationships. One way to approach this is by using statements that focus on your perspective instead of a perceive behavior. For example, say, "I'm worried about you because you haven't been getting enough sleep" to your child instead of, "You don't go to bed when I tell you to." Communicating thoughtfully will go a long way in getting through to your loved one.
7. **Understand their perspective**. Every mental health condition is different. By understanding the symptoms of your loved one's illness, you can better understand their perspective and find more meaningful ways of supporting them. You can also ask them what you can do to help them when they experience various symptoms.
8. **Put larger goals front and center**. By focusing on your long-term goals rather than in-the-moment frustrations, both you and your loved one can work together to achieve them. For example, try focusing on the bigger picture and communicating your feelings calmly when bringing up a situation rather than getting defensive or burying your feelings.
9. **Use clear, simple language**. To ensure a product conversation, make it clear that you want to talk to them without immediately overwhelming them with details. Once they agree, speak clearly and say exactly what you mean instead of hinting at it. For example, say, "I miss going for walks with you" instead of, "You never go for walks with me anymore."
10. **Make your wants known, and be encouraging**. Similar to the above, it's important to be clear when

providing instructions to your loved one. Including a positive outcome or making them feel involved in the decision will help them feel more engaged. For example, ask your child to help you come up with fun recipes to make instead of telling them what they have to eat.