



Canadian Mental
Health Association

Association canadienne
pour la santé mentale

Mental Health for All Fact Sheet

Stigma and Discrimination Around Mental Health Problems

About one in five people – over six and a half million Canadians – experience a mental disorder during their lifetime. Unfortunately, many people don't ask for help because they feel ashamed or scared. People may judge them and treat them negatively based on a mental health problem. Others have trouble finding a place to live, finding a job, maintaining relationships and other important parts of life. In fact, most people living with a mental disorder say that stigma is worse than the symptoms they feel.

Stigma originally meant a physical mark of shame. Now, it's an invisible mark that sets you apart from others. The problem with the word 'stigma' is that it puts the focus on the person's difference instead of on the people who are setting them apart. Using the word stigma makes it seem different than racism, homophobia or sexism. It isn't. So it's time to talk about stigma for what it really is: prejudice and discrimination. Prejudice is holding negative attitudes or beliefs about people who are viewed as different. Discrimination is acting on these ideas or beliefs.

Causes and effects of Discrimination:

Many factors lead to discrimination. Major examples include:

Fear: Such as the fear of violence and the fear of the issues themselves because they affect our mind and behaviour. Some fears may be reinforced in the media.

Untrue beliefs: Such as the belief that people can't recover or the belief that people can't participate in their communities.

Blame and self-blame: People may be blamed for their conditions and viewed as weak. People with mental disorders, and their loved ones, may also deeply blame themselves.

Discrimination affects all areas of living. It can prevent people from getting or having basic things that most of us take for granted, like:

- Getting hired, promoted or keeping a job
- Finding or keeping a place to live in a safe, accepting community
- Getting proper health care
- Feeling loved, needed and accepted by family and friends
- Contributing to communities and feeling productive
- Getting insurance
- Going to school
- Immigrating to another country
- Feeling positive about ourselves

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Discrimination may also affect families and friends. Others may dismiss their concerns. In many cultures, the entire family carries their loved one's stigma because they strongly identify as a group. As a result, family members may not confide in friends or others in their support network.

“Layers” of stigma

Many people don't experience stigma for just one reason. They may experience discrimination based on many different prejudices, like sexual orientation, gender, culture or physical disability. Discrimination itself can lead to mental health problems. And people who already face discrimination for any reason may be even less able to find help for mental health problems or less able to find services that meet their needs.

How bad is it?

Research shows that over half of people living with mental disorders said that they were embarrassed about their health problems, and over half felt like they had experienced discrimination. In one recent Canadian study, researchers found that:

- Just under half of Canadians thought that a mental disorder was just an excuse for poor behaviour
- Only about one in three Canadians would continue to be friends with someone with an alcohol use problem
- Only about one in four would continue to be friends with someone with a drug use problem

What can we do about it?

Discrimination around mental health is a human rights issue. Human rights are rights and freedoms that all people should have. The United Nations says that, “All persons with a mental illness ... shall be treated with humanity and respect for the inherent dignity of the human person.” This respect and dignity is a freedom that should not be taken away by. It's also a basic human right for all people with mental health problems, no matter where they live. Everyone has the right to live without discrimination of any kind. This includes discrimination based on a mental health problem.

But when we talk about discrimination, human rights laws meant to protect people from discrimination are only part of the solution. For these laws to really work and protect people, everyone has to embrace the spirit and intent of the laws.

Health is about more than not having a disease or health problem. Health and well-being include things like human rights, community connections and access to opportunities. Discrimination promotes poor well-being because it denies human rights, prevents connections among community members and creates unequal access. When we support human rights and help everyone take part in our communities, we're also countering discrimination – and improving people's well-being. Here are some things we can do:

Address differences that prevent people from taking part in communities:

Poverty, lack of affordable housing, lack of education opportunities and lack of meaningful work are a few of the social factors that affect well-being. These factors may be both a result of poor health and a cause of poor health. Addressing these inequalities among community members is good for both individuals and the community as a whole. We can challenge systems that create differences by encouraging our governments to form positive social policies and laws.

We can also support people in our communities who are working to reduce differences.

Support everyone's right to work:

It's no wonder that the right to employment is identified as a human right by the United Nations. Work gives us purpose and meaning. It's also tied to income, which is tied to other social factors. For example, if we have a good income, we can afford better housing and access more services. While full-time work may not be everyone's goal, we need to support people who want to find purpose and meaning through work. To do this, we need to make sure people have access to training, education or other workplace programs.

Promote direct personal contact:

Meeting and interacting with people with mental health problems is one of the best ways to improve attitudes and behaviours. This works best when the people meeting each other have equal status, when there can be discussion, and when the presenters with personal experiences can counter major myths. Education efforts like this fact sheet can help us understand the challenges, but they don't change attitudes.

Help people be heard:

We need to encourage and empower people with experiences of mental health problems to be leaders in any efforts, such as anti-stigma programs and research. This includes supporting people and connecting them with peers. When people relate to each other's struggles and want to see changes, they're more likely to share their stories and protest when they see injustice.

Help media be a force for good:

Media like TV, movies, newspapers and web sites influence how we see others. Media should be

encouraged to show people for who they really are – capable and productive community members. Hearing the direct voice of people with mental health problems through the media can be incredibly powerful. And we need to challenge media that discriminates against a group of people.

Five small ways I can make a difference:

1. Tell someone who doesn't know my story of mental health problems, or help others tell their story.
2. Seek direct contact by volunteering for a mental health organization, or find personal stories of recovery.
3. Think about the words I use. Do I use people-centered language like, "A person living with..." or do I say, "A schizophrenic" or, "A depressive?"
4. Think about how I personally support and treat people around me who are living with a mental health problem.
5. Speak up when I see discrimination or when I see a law or policy that unfairly excludes people.

Do You Need More Information?

Mental Health Week is a designated week created by **The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)** to talk, reflect, engage and celebrate mental health for all. The theme of Mental Health For All represents the right of every Canadian to enjoy and have the best possible mental health. It's this attitude that represents ways in which all Canadians can actively protect and preserve their mental health at home, work and in their own community. CMHA develops policies and delivers programs and services through its 10,000 volunteers and 135 branches across Canada everyday.

Learn more by visiting www.MentalHealthWeek.ca

This factsheet was developed in 2010 by CMHA BC Division on behalf of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information and HeretoHelp.bc.ca. Funding for BC Partners is provided by the Provincial Health Services Authority.

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