

COPING WITH THE STIGMA OF MENTAL ILLNESS

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What steps can I take to cope with the stigma of a mental illness?

How can you make a difference for someone with a mental illness?



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Coping With The Stigma Of Mental Illness

Even though there has been greater acceptance and understanding of mental illness in recent years, there is still a stigma, or sense of shame, attached to having a mental illness. The stigma comes from the general public's lack of understanding about mental illness. People diagnosed with a mental illness and their families can take certain steps to help cope with this stigma.

What steps can I take to cope with the stigma of a mental illness?

Here are some important ways to cope if you, or a family member, have a mental illness:

- **Remember that you are not alone.** Many people cope with having a mental illness. Depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and other mental health problems are common.
- **Ask for help.** Many patients with mental illness remain underserved, in part because of the stigma of seeking help. Mental illness is like any other kind of illness. Treatment helps and people recover, and they recover sooner when they are treated. Don't be afraid to ask for help.
- **Keep hope and remember that treatment works.** Safe, effective medicines and psychosocial treatments are available, and newer treatments are being developed. As a result, most individuals with mental health issues enjoy productive lives in society with their families.
- **Support your loved one as he/she seeks help.** Mental health treatment can be difficult. Patience is often needed when trying new medicines. Coping with side effects and learning new behaviors are often frustrating, but, in the long run, rewarding. Supporting your loved one through the journey to stability and wellness is important.
- **Be an active part of your treatment.** Discuss with your doctor the outcomes that are important to you. If treatment is not working, talk to your doctor about it. If you are having side effects from your medication, discuss it with your doctor. There is always hope, and if your doctor knows how the treatment is affecting you, you can work together to make sure to target the outcomes that are most important to you.
- **Remain active and surround yourself with supportive people.** Social isolation can be a negative side effect of the stigma linked to mental illness. Isolating yourself and discontinuing enjoyable activities put you at high risk for depression and burnout. Take a risk and try new activities in your community.

Remember always, too, that you and your loved ones have choices. Whom you wish to tell about the mental illness - and what you want that other person to know - is your decision. It is important to accept the diagnosis and to learn about your illness. This way, you can be prepared to be an active part of your treatment decisions and ask for help when you need it the most. Silence can be isolating; having your loved ones and your doctor support you can make a world of difference.

Remember that there is always hope. Discuss your goals with your doctors. It's important for you to be an active part in making the decisions about your treatment. It is also important to help your family understand your diagnosis - the more they know, the more they can help you. Stigma happens because people don't understand mental illness. Educating our community about the facts can be very helpful.

How can you make a difference for someone with a mental illness?

- Learn and share the facts about mental health, especially if you hear or read something that it isn't true.
- Be an active part of your treatment team. Tell your doctor how you really feel.
- There are many organizations that support patients with mental illness. Take part in local events in your community.
- Treat people with mental illness with respect and dignity.
- Respect the rights of people with mental illness and don't discriminate against them.

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