Eliminating Stigma

One in five Americans is affected by a mental health condition, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). Additionally, 19.7 million Americans, aged 12 and older, battled a substance use disorder in 2017 and 8.5 million American adults suffered from both a mental health disorder and a substance use disorder, also known as a co-occurring disorder, according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH). Even though these conditions are prevalent in our society, negative attitudes and beliefs towards people with substance use disorder or mental health conditions are still common. The effect stigma has on individuals suffering from these conditions, as well as their families, is extensive. Stigma is harmful to mental, physical, and social health because it creates shame, fear, and silence which can stop individuals from seeking help and getting treatment.

One way we can all work toward reducing stigma starts with the language used around substance use disorders and mental illness. Currently, slang used by professionals as well as the general public can be inadvertently dehumanizing and disrespectful towards the individual with substance use disorder and/or mental illness. The language needs to be changed to one that is hopeful, recovery-focused, and community-centered. We need to know that recovery is not only possible, but likely.

Stigma arises out of fear or a lack of understanding. This has persisted even with greater knowledge of the biochemical and genetic components of these conditions. The stigma associated with substance use disorder and mental illness can be categorized into two groups: self-perceived stigma and social stigma.

Self-Perceived Stigma

Self-perceived stigma involves internalized stigma within the individual suffering from a substance use disorder or a mental health condition. People who use drugs can internalize their stigma and may view themselves as deviants while individuals with a mental health condition may view themselves as weak.

This self-perceived stigma can severely impact an individual's self-esteem and self-worth because they could feel pushed to the outskirts of society. This can lead them to lose touch with their family and community. Research has shown that when a person does not feel like they have someone to talk to, they are less likely to reach out for help or to seek treatment. They are also more likely to feel depressed and could hide drug use or other symptoms from healthcare providers to avoid more stigma and shame. It is a vicious cycle of isolation leading to an increase in drug use or other symptoms, leading to further isolation. The best way to break this cycle is to reach out to loved ones and ask for help, or offer help if you notice signs of an illness.

Social Stigma

Social stigma involves the prejudiced attitudes others have towards mental illness and substance use disorder. Social stigma can lead to harassment, bullying, and violence along with discrimination in employment, housing, and even insurance coverage for treatment.

Social stigma is associated with discrimination. For example, a person with a mental health condition may find that others, including friends and colleagues, avoid them. Stigma also exists in doctor's offices and hospitals. Studies show that some healthcare providers feel uncomfortable working with people who struggled with addiction and who were dependent on drugs. The stigma held by some healthcare providers affects how they assess and treat patients with substance use disorder, and it could prevent individuals from seeking treatment. Stigma can also affect the public view on harm reduction strategies as the common belief is that these strategies facilitate and encourage drug use even though research shows that these practices actually lead to decreased drug use.
Not only is stigma harmful to the emotional and social health of individuals with substance use disorder and/or mental illness, but stigma can also be harmful to their physical health. A study was done where 235 people were surveyed who kept some parts of their identities secret to avoid stigma. The survey included individuals who have mental illness and/or a substance use disorder, who were victims of rape, and/or who have a criminal background. The study found that the more their identity was stigmatized, the more likely people were to report symptoms of physical illness. Whether it is social stigma or self-perceived stigma, stigma can be detrimental to healing and cause a decline in emotional, social, and physical wellbeing. The best way to stop stigma is to have compassion for the individuals with mental illness and/or substance use disorder and to seek understanding to not only educate yourself but your community as well.

**Nine Ways to Fight Stigma**

- Talk Openly About Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder
- Educate Yourself and Others
- Be Conscious of Language
- Encourage Equality Between Physical Illnesses and Mental Illnesses and Substance Use Disorder
- Show Compassion for Those with Mental Illness and/or Substance Use Disorder
- Choose Empowerment Over Shame
- Be Honest About Treatment
- Let the Media Know When They’re Being Stigmatizing
- Don’t Harbor Self-Stigma

**How to Help Combat Stigma:** *(Adapted from: the Mayo Clinic)*

- **Get treatment.** You may be reluctant to admit you need treatment, but don't let the fear of being labeled with a mental illness or substance use disorder prevent you from seeking help. Treatment can provide relief by identifying what's wrong and reducing symptoms that interfere with your work and personal life.

- **Don't let stigma create self-doubt and shame.** Stigma doesn't just come from others; you may mistakenly believe that your condition is a sign of personal weakness or that you should be able to control it without help. Seeking counseling, educating yourself about your condition, and connecting with others who have a mental illness or substance use disorder can help you gain self-esteem and overcome destructive self-judgment.

- **Don't isolate yourself.** If you have a mental illness or a substance use disorder, you may be reluctant to tell anyone about it. Your family, friends, clergy, or members of your community can offer you support if they know about your condition. Reach out to people you trust for the compassion, support, and understanding you need.

- **Don't equate yourself with your illness.** You are not an illness. So instead of saying “I'm bipolar,” say “I have bipolar disorder.” Instead of calling yourself “a drug addict,” say “I have a substance use disorder.”

- **Join a support group.** Some local and national groups, such as the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), offer local programs and internet resources that help reduce stigma by educating people who have mental illness and/or substance use disorder, their families, and the general public. Some state and federal agencies and programs, such as those that focus on vocational rehabilitation and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), offer support for people with mental illness and/or substance use disorder as well.

- **Get help at school.** If you or your child has a mental illness that affects learning, find out what plans and programs might help. Discrimination against students because of a mental illness is against the law, and educators at primary, secondary, and college levels are required to accommodate students as best they can. Talk to teachers, professors, or administrators about the best approach and resources. If a teacher doesn't know about a student's disability, it can lead to discrimination, barriers to learning, and poor grades.

- **Speak out against stigma.** Consider expressing your opinions at events, in letters to the editor, or on the internet. It can help instill courage in others facing similar challenges and educate the public about mental illness and addiction.