Dispelling Myths About Mental Health to Overcome Stigma

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Although an estimated 25 percent of Americans will experience a mental disorder in any given year, fewer than one-third of adults and one half of children with a diagnosable mental disorder receive any mental health services. Stigma still discourages people from getting help, despite advances in education and research. By learning the truth about mental illness and encouraging others to do the same, you can help lessen the stigma.

What is stigma?

“Stigma” describes the shame, fear and discrimination that result from stereotypes surrounding mental illness. It can affect people with a mental illness psychologically and even economically, when it comes to finding housing and employment. Stigma can cause family tension and rejection. It also leads to fear, mistrust and violence against people with mental illness.

As a society, we are bombarded with negative images of mental illness, explains Michelle Pruett Nostheide, director of public education at Mental Health America. “The media and entertainment industries overwhelmingly present people with mental illness as dangerous, violent and unpredictable individuals,” Nostheide says.

Myths about mental illness

Media stereotypes often portray people with mental illness as failures or villains, and terms such as “schizophrenia” and “psychotic” are frequently misused.

“In my position, I see outrageous marketing campaigns, movie trailers, commercials, even children’s toys, that paint an unfair picture of people with mental illness, or use mental illnesses as a source of ridicule or humor,” she says. “People that know someone with a mental illness or have one themselves are offended or saddened by these portrayals, but the real damage is done when people who have no experience with mental health accept these stereotypes and pass them on.”

You’ve probably heard some of these common myths about mental illness:

Myth: People with mental illness fake symptoms. They’re really just being irresponsible.

Fact: According to a survey by Mental Health America, almost 1 in 3 Americans say they believe depression is a “state of mind.” Behaviors resulting from mental illness can’t be controlled at will. “You’d never hear 31 percent of the population deny that diabetes and heart disease are real,”
notes Michael Faenza, former president and CEO of Mental Health America.

**Myth:** Severe mental illness can’t be treated.

**Fact:** The efficacy of treatment for severe mental illness can be compared to that in other branches of medicine—including surgery, reports research psychiatrist E. Fuller Torrey in his book*Out of the Shadows: Confronting America’s Mental Illness Crisis*.

**Myth:** People with mental illness are violent.

**Fact:** The overall contribution of mental disorders to the level of violence is very small, Nostheide says. “Research has shown that the vast majority of people who are violent do not suffer from mental illness,” she explains. “In cases where violence does occur, the incident typically results from the same reasons as with the general public, such as feeling threatened or excessive use of alcohol or drugs.”

**Myth:** Children and teens don’t experience mental illness.

**Fact:** Twenty-one percent of children ages 9 to 17 have a diagnosable mental illness. Half of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14. Early identification can significantly improve quality of life.

**You can help**

Even in the last decade, the media has become more sensitive to mental illness. The general public also has become more knowledgeable. However, there still is a long way to go.

Most importantly, educate yourself. You can then help educate others and gently point out stigmatizing behavior. Further, you can insist on media and government accountability. Contact your local mental health organization or the offensive media outlet when you hear stereotyping and support funding and legislation that improves mental health care. Finally, treat people who have a mental illness with the same dignity and respect that you would give to anyone else.

**Resources**

*Mental Health America*  [www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org)
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The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration*  [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

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