

Module 2:

The Stigma of Mental / Neurodevelopmental Disorders

- Stigma involves negative thoughts, feelings and behaviours towards mental disorders and their treatments
- People with a mental / neurodevelopmental disorder can live a fulfilling life
- We all can help to reduce stigma around mental / neurodevelopmental disorders



The Stigma of Mental / Neurodevelopmental Disorders



In ancient Greece, the term stigma was used to signify a tattoo or mark used for decorative or religious purposes, or to brand slaves to indicate their ownership, and criminals to indicate their social transgressions. A sharp stick called a 'stig' was used for tattooing, hence the origin of the word stigma and its subsequent association with a mark or a brand of shame (Oxford Dictionary).

Mental disorders are only one of many medical conditions that have been stigmatised over the years. Others include diseases such as leprosy, epilepsy, HIV / AIDS, cancer, etc. There are many similarities amongst stigmas across these different conditions. Reflecting on what changed to reduce stigma around other medical conditions may lend insight useful in reducing stigma around mental disorders.

There are many definitions of stigma related to mental / neurodevelopmental disorders and most of them focus on negative attitudes and behaviours towards people with mental disorders. For example, the Mental Health Commission of Canada (2009) states:

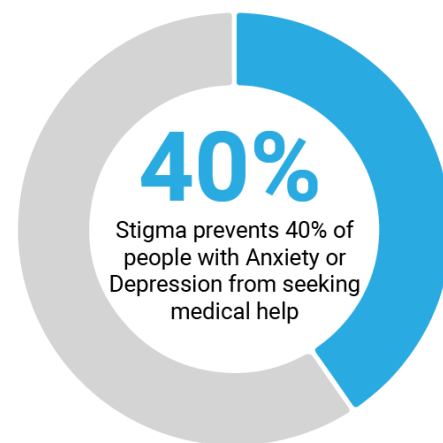
“Stigma refers to beliefs and attitudes about mental health problems and mental illnesses that lead to the negative stereotyping of people living with mental health problems and illnesses and to prejudice against them and their families.

Stigma related to mental disorders involves negative feelings, thoughts and attitudes (prejudice) and behaviours (discrimination) towards people with mental disorders. Mental / neurodevelopmental disorders affect approximately 1 in 5 people worldwide with a similar proportion in Canada (Mental Health Commission of Canada). People with mental disorders include our acquaintances, friends, family members, coworkers and celebrities. Statistically, approximately 1 in 5 people who are teachers in Canada will have a mental disorder. However, we tend to think of people who have a mental / neurodevelopmental disorder differently without even realising it.

Stigma is prevalent in everyday life, including among service providers. Stigma can come from an individual person (e.g. 'I don't think students with mental disorders should be in a regular classroom') or from the general public (e.g. 'A person who has a mental disorder should not get married nor run for public office'). Stigma can present as emotional negativity (e.g. 'I am embarrassed that my child has an Anxiety Disorder') or can target the treatment of mental disorders (e.g. 'Psychotherapy is nothing but talk').



The stigma of mental / neurodevelopmental disorders may have significant impacts on people with the disorders. They may feel hopeless and ashamed (self-stigma), have difficulty finding a job or making friends, and lack access to medical care or housing. This may further prevent them from seeking the help they need. Stigma prevents about 40% of people with Anxiety Disorders or Clinical Depression from seeking medical help (Thornicroft, 2007). Stigma can also lead to social isolation and discriminative behaviours from others such as social distancing (e.g. 'I don't want people with mental disorders living in my community').



Teachers can play an important role in helping students and others change how people with mental / neurodevelopmental disorders are perceived and treated. The following strategies are effective in helping ourselves and students fight stigma against mental disorders:

- Educating about mental health and mental disorders with information based on the best available scientific knowledge. Evidence backs up this approach for teachers and students in the school setting
- Using appropriate words. Avoid labelling people with mental / neurodevelopmental disorders by using stigmatising language such as 'crazy', 'psycho', or 'insane'
- Speaking up when hearing someone use stigmatising language. Support your students through your words and actions. When someone you know misuses a psychiatric term (such as Schizophrenia, Bipolar, OCD, etc.), let them know and educate them about the correct meaning. When someone tells a ridiculing joke, or makes disrespectful comments about a mental or neurodevelopmental disorder, express that this is hurtful and you find such comments offensive and unacceptable
- Supporting and advocating for organisations that fight stigma

Sources:

- Mental Health & High School Curriculum Guide: <http://teachmentalhealth.org>
- The Centre for Addiction & Mental Health (CAMH): <https://camh.ca/en/driving-change/addressing-stigma>