

What is stigma, anyway?

Our charity is called the Stigma-Free Society, but you may be confused about what the word “stigma” actually means.

No problem. We can help answer that.

The Definition of Stigma is: A set of negative and often unfair beliefs that a society or group of people have about something.

Now, that’s a lot to try to wrap your head around, so let’s break it down even further. There are three “types” of stigma in our world:

1. **Self-stigma:** a negative and often unfair belief you have about yourself – self-stigma often prevents you from asking for help and reaching out for support from family, peers and/or professionals.
 - a. Example: You feel sad all the time but you don’t want to tell anyone because you think everyone probably feels that way. You don’t want to bother anyone or ask anyone for help because you’ll just bring them down. Your sadness will bother others and no one can help you but yourself anyway.
2. **Societal (or public) stigma:** a negative and often unfair belief that the public has about a particular group of people, typically based on a stereotype.
 - a. Example: Many people believe that If you have a mental illness you should be feared or you belong in a mental institution. That is a stigma against mental illness.
3. **Structural stigma:** policies that restrict opportunities for people based on negative and unfair beliefs and may be experienced as bias, avoidance, discomfort and/or discrimination.
 - a. Example: Not hiring a person because they are on medication for a mental illness.

People may be stigmatized based on many traits or beliefs, including but not limited to:

- Mental illness
- Sexual orientation

- Gender identity
- Religious beliefs
- Age
- Wealth or lack of wealth
- Addiction
- Ethnicity
- ...and many, many more but hopefully this gets you thinking about stigma in a different way.

The world is very different right now because of the COVID-19 virus. A lot of people are feeling sad, nervous or alone. You might be feeling this way too, and that is OK.

Sometimes, stigma can stop us from talking to others about how we are feeling.

Remember: Self-stigma is the reason why you ask yourself; “what will others think?” before talking to them about your mental health or another problem you may be experiencing. On the other hand, public stigma is when someone thinks about another person in a negative way because of a label they have, like a mental illness or a learning disorder.

IMPORTANT: Our “labels’ make us unique – and being unique is awesome! When we learn more about the differences between us we work towards making stigma go away.

Here is a story that explains an example of stigma;

Tom was feeling sad for a long time so one day he went to see his doctor to ask them for help. His doctor told him that he had depression and gave him ways to feel better. The next day, Tom told his best friend Hailey that he had a mental illness called depression. Instead of asking how she could help, she started to treat him differently and didn't hang out with him as much. Hailey had never learned about mental illness, so she didn't understand what it meant.

A couple weeks later Hailey was curious and looked up depression on her computer. She found out that 1 in 4 Canadians experience depression in their life and learned more about it. The next day, she went to Tom and told him she was sorry. They are now even better friends than they were before!

The more we learn, the less stigma there will be!

Let's work together to become Stigma-Free.

If you want to learn more about stigma, we have a quiz you can take to see where you're at on the stigma-free scale. There is no judgment with this quiz, but it may open your eyes to some stigmas you have (most of us have them, don't you worry!) and will encourage you to learn more about these areas to help you de-stigmatize these areas in your life.