

Tips for Overcoming Stigma



If you've checked out our downloadable resource "What is Stigma, Anyway?", you will have learned that stigma is defined as: **a set of negative and often unfair beliefs that a society or group of people have about something.**

That resource does an amazing job of breaking down the different parts of stigma, examples of stigma and the kinds of stigma that exist in our society. This resource takes it one step further. Here, you will find tips and suggestions of ways to overcome stigma in your life.

This might seem like a big and overwhelming idea. Stigma is a huge issue in our society and creates a lot of problems for people of all backgrounds, abilities, races, genders, sexual orientations, etc. Looking at this big picture perspective of stigma might make it feel like there's nothing you, one person, can do to change it.

Something that is so important to understand about stigma is that we can do more to change it than we realize. Making changes in our own lives can not only reduce the stigma that we may have towards ourselves and others, it can also have the ripple effect of encouraging others to do the same. This ripple effect is the way change happens on a bigger scale!

Here are some suggestions of things you can do to live a more stigma-free life:

Learning About Others: so many of the issues connected with stigma, and one of the main reasons stigma exists in the first place, is that people often don't understand other people's lived experience. You only exist in your body and your mind, so it can be hard to put yourself in someone else's shoes and feel what a situation might feel like for them. Reducing stigma starts with listening to someone else's lived experience. Once you are able to see things from their perspective, you can reduce or eliminate any stigma you might have had about them or a group that they belong to.

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Example 1: if someone with a physical disability is frustrated that they cannot access a building because there is no accessibility ramp or elevator, their lived experience will be different than yours if you are able-bodied. Listening to their experience about trying to access the building and not being able to might help to shift your understanding of how being able-bodied means not having to think about how you will get inside.

Example 2: if you don't have a mental health issue or mental illness, it can be difficult to understand the experiences of those who do struggle with these things. If you have a friend who has a mental health issue, try really listening to what they have to say when they speak about it so you can try to put yourself in their shoes and feel how it might feel to struggle in this way.

Shedding Self-Stigma: as discussed in the “What is Stigma, Anyway?” resource, self-stigma is a big issue. Without even realizing we're doing it, we can take on stigma about parts of our identity. This self-stigma can affect the way we see ourselves in really negative ways. Reducing self-stigma can be harder to do, because it isn't always easy to see it for what it is. If you catch yourself judging yourself or being really critical of something you've done, try reminding yourself “this is my self-stigma talking” and attempt to re-frame what you were judging yourself for.

Example 1: if you have a learning disability and try really hard to be successful in school, but don't do well on a test, you might judge yourself for this and feel like your learning disability is the reason you failed the test. If this happens, try saying to yourself “I am smart, I just really struggle with this subject. This is just my self-stigma talking”.

Example 2: if you feel insecure about the way your body looks when you look in the mirror, this could be the self-stigma you have around body image. When you feel this way, try saying to yourself “there is nothing wrong with my body. Society can't tell me how to feel about the way I look. This is just my self-stigma talking”.

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These suggestions might seem small or like they won't do much to change stigma, but they're bigger than they seem. Stigma can be reduced and stopped by each and every one of us. We just have to do our best to shed the stigma we have about each other and ourselves.

Once we have an awareness of stigma, it is much easier to make changes and take action. **Overcoming stigma starts with you!**