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# The Stigma of Mental Health

By Julie McAllister, Infinite Healing and Wellness

May is Mental Health Awareness month, and it has me thinking about the stigma regarding mental health, and how that stigma keeps people from seeking treatment. First, let's define mental health. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), mental health "includes emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing" and "mental health and physical health are equally important components of overall health." More importantly, our brain actually governs the rest of our system. Our mind and our bodies are connected! Health encompasses our mind, body, and spirit — our whole self.

Now let's look at some numbers. The National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI) offers some eye-opening statistics describing the prevalence of mental illness and participation in mental health services in America.

Approximately one in five adults experience mental illness within a given year. A similar number of youth aged 13 to 18 experience mental illness at some point in their lifetime, while for children aged 8 to 15, the estimate is 13 percent. 6.9 percent of American adults live with depression and a staggering 18.1 percent live with various forms of anxiety. 90 percent of those who die by suicide have underlying mental illness.

While mental illness is clearly prevalent in American society, NAMI reports that 50 to 60 percent of people with mental illnesses did not receive mental health treatment in the previous year. How can this be? A major contributing factor is stigma. With mental health and physical health being equally important, it's sometimes hard to understand how mental health is so stigmatized. Let's take a closer look at stigma and what it means.

Stigma is bred from a lack of understanding and misconceptions. Stigma occurs when a person is viewed in a negative way simply due to having a mental health condition. There are two types of stigma, social and self-stigma.

Social stigma occurs when discrimination is directed towards someone with a mental illness. Discrimination can be direct or subtle. Direct discrimination takes place when a person makes disparaging remarks about mental illness or towards someone with a mental illness. Statements like, "he obviously needs to take his meds," or "she should just get over it," are directly discriminatory. We may even inadvertently use stigmatizing remarks such as, "I was so OCD this weekend, I organized my cabinets," or "I can't decide. I'm so bipolar." Subtle discrimination occurs when we view someone with a mental illness in a negative way or avoid engaging with them in some manner because of a negative belief about their character or abilities. Social stigma can make a person feel shameful, which can compound self-stigma.

Self-stigma is when someone views themselves negatively or as lacking in some way due to having a mental illness. Symptoms derived from low mental health or illness can be debilitating. If a person is experiencing anxiety, they





may be fearful about leaving their home or feel uncomfortable engaging in social situations. This could lead to a self-perception that they are somehow damaged or do not fit in to society. Someone who has depression may struggle to focus, may feel fatigued, or lack motivation. This may lead to a belief that the person is lazy or is not driven to be successful or pursue personal growth. Unfortunately, if other people overtly or even inadvertently allude to the belief that this may be true, negative beliefs and feelings of shame can be exacerbated and perpetuated. These painful feelings are sometimes ignored or suppressed, leading to an intensification of the very feelings they are seeking to avoid or new symptoms may appear. Often a perception of a lack of self-efficacy or apathy can result and lead to further isolation and withdrawal.

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Self-stigma and fear of judgement can inhibit people from seeking treatment. Without treatment, symptoms increase, negative self-beliefs intensify, and feelings of shame and self-doubt are often magnified. When people seek treatment, the benefits can be life-changing.

Some mental health disorders are biological but can be treated with proper care and good clinical oversight. Symptoms can become more manageable and even alleviated. Just as physical

health fluctuates over the lifetime, mental health can also change. Life circumstances such as financial hardship, work stress, death of a loved one, and traumatic events can all affect mental health. When treated by a competent mental health professional, people can move through these stressful times with more support, direction, and ease. When we are able to manage our mental health better, we learn that we can do it! It provides a feeling of control over one's life and a sense of personal effectiveness.

So, what can we do to encourage treatment? We need to reduce the impact of stigma. In order to do so, we must first be aware of our own prejudices and language around mental health. Take some time to understand your own beliefs about mental illness. Get educated. Speak out against stigma. Be open and let others know of your own mental health challenges creating a culture of openness and transparency. Secrets perpetuate shame. There is no shame in having any physical or mental illness. Help one another by simply listening and offering support. When appropriate, make referrals to competent mental health treatment providers and resources.

*Located in Gilbert, Infinite Healing and Wellness is a practice dedicated to providing comprehensive treatment to address various mental health concerns. From intake to treatment completion, our clients feel that they are valued, become empowered, and know that they are cared for by our team. The benefits that clients gain are immeasurable. When a person heals from trauma, gains healthy coping skills, improves communication, and learns healthy ways to adapt to stressful life circumstances, the person's life is not all that improves. All of those who come in to contact with someone who has resolved maladaptive ways of living and interacting benefit; thus improving families, work environments, neighborhoods, and ultimately society in general.*

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*The clinicians at Infinite Healing and Wellness are ready to assist. Check out our website, [infinitehealingandwellness.com](http://infinitehealingandwellness.com) to learn about our incredible team, upcoming groups, and follow our positive and encouraging Instagram and Facebook pages. Infinite Healing and Wellness LLC, in Gilbert at 2563 S. Val Vista Drive #108, is a collaborative counseling practice designed to serve children, families, teens, adults, couples, first responders, and military veterans. For more information, call 480-448-1076 or email [info@infinitehealingandwellness.com](mailto:info@infinitehealingandwellness.com).*

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## Time Is Precious, Spend It Wisely

It's important to be socially involved with family, friends, and the community! Social activity is related to motor function and vitality! Being connected socially is important to all people, but for seniors it becomes a key quality of life concern, just as important as exercise! To help you achieve these social needs, delegate your to-do list and give yourself time back in your day!

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