



"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has."

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Fighting Stigma through Education and Compassion

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In the United States, during the last half of the twentieth Century and the beginning of the twenty-first Century, we have witnessed great progress in the battle against discrimination. Racial equality and women's rights have been fought for and mainly achieved. A new era of "openness" and honesty has led to discussions around many subjects that once were considered "taboo".

Some diseases, such as breast cancer, were hidden until certain advocates began to speak out and demand good treatment and respect. The battles have been won in many areas except in mental health. Why is stigma still so widespread in brain disorders and how can this unfair condition be remedied?

First let's define the parts of what comprises stigma. According to Mayo Clinic's Tools for Healthy Living, stigma has four parts.

1. Labeling someone with a condition.
2. Stereotyping people who have that condition
3. Creating a division — a superior "us" group and a devalued "them" group resulting in loss of status in the community.
4. Discriminating against someone on the basis of their label.

Let's look at labeling: Let's take mental illness and cancer and make a list of the qualities people attribute to these diseases and the people who have them.

We see that labels themselves are not the problem but the negativity of the labels. A great deal of the stigma comes from a lack of understanding of mental illnesses. Throughout history mental illness was thought to be caused by various factors: demons, a lack of will power, laziness, and all sorts of personality flaws and defects of character. This faulty reasoning encouraged society to blame the person with the disease or their families (especially mothers) and hence discriminate against them.

The most devastating discrimination has been the lack of equality in services for people with brain disorders. Insurance companies do not reimburse at the same rate as they do for other diseases and generally community resources are woefully under funded by county and state governments. Instead of treatment many people with mental illnesses are jailed. It is shocking to think that over 16% of prisoners in the United States have a critical mental illness. This fact has led people to label jails as the new mental health hospitals. In light of these distressing facts we must ask ourselves what we can do to end stigma. Here are some suggestions.

1. Understand the disease model of mental illness. Today, with the advent of effective imaging technology, there is positive proof that critical brain disorders are just that: physical manifestations of chemical and structural malfunctions of the brain and no more a person's fault than having Parkinson's, MS, or most other diseases. Knowledge is power and it can lessen fear and give courage. Share your knowledge with friends, co-workers, neighbors, and your extended family members.
2. Urge your family member to get treatment. Learn about new medicines and therapies. Newer medications have allowed many people to have reduced if not eradicated symptoms of their brain disorder. Recovery is real and possible.
3. Join a support group of others who have shared experience in the challenges of family members with brain disorders. There is strength in numbers and the power to withstand and change society's negative attitudes when you know you are not alone.
4. Watch the media and when you see instances of stigma and complain to those in charge. Newspaper articles, headlines, comedy routines, television and radio programs can all be carriers of stigma. Even toys can be insensitive. A few years ago, a toy manufacturer came out with a bear in a strait jacket for Valentine's Day. The so called "Crazy for You" bears even had commitment papers. Advocates and even the governor of the state complained to the company who discontinued the bears. It was a win win situation when the president of the company apologized and no more bears with that theme were made again.
5. Participate in an advocacy group. Helping to make society fair and humane for those faced with the challenges of brain disorders helps empower you and change society