Fighting Stigma

What is stigma?

Stigma is a negative view of a person based on something about him or her. Many illnesses get stigmatized, not just mental illness. People with cancer once had to cope with stigma. People with HIV or AIDS still cope with stigma, though there is less today than when the virus was first discovered. Stigma is unacceptable in any form.

For the purposes of this page, stigma describes a negative view of depression, bipolar disorder or people who have these illnesses. DBSA educates the public to decrease this stigma and make it easier for people with mood disorders to ask for and receive the help they need.

DBSA commissioned a survey of 1,200 American adults, a sample representative of the U.S. population in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, geography and education, and found that many people still need to be educated about mood disorders, especially bipolar disorder.

Stigmatizing attitudes were not held by the majority of people surveyed. However approximately one in four people, which is one in four people too many, believed people with mood disorders are not just like everyone else (18%); they should not have children (19%); they are easy to identify in the workplace (26%); and they do not live "normal" lives when treated (29%). Two-thirds of survey respondents also held the incorrect belief that mood disorder medications are habit forming.

Educating others and standing up for yourself:

Even in casual conversation, people can be gently and quickly reminded that words like "psycho" are hurtful stereotypes, and that people with depression and bipolar disorder deserve understanding, not shame.

You do not necessarily have to identify yourself as mental health consumer to speak out against stigma, but your personal story may add credibility to your argument. It is your decision whether or not to tell others about your illness. In any event, you can always state the facts about depression and bipolar disorder and disagree with any myths about the illnesses that others believe. People may welcome the chance to learn about mood disorders.

Know that you deserve respect at all times. Gently but firmly let your friends and family know that depression and bipolar disorder should not be joked about or belittled. Answer questions to help people better understand the illnesses. Remind people (if they know your diagnosis) that you do not fit into the stereotype of a "crazy person".

Self-stigma:

Self-stigma (the belief that you are weak or damaged because of your own illness) can sometimes be the most difficult kind of stigma to fight. Self-stigma may cause people to stop their treatment, isolate themselves from loved ones, or give up on things they want to do.

How can you fight self-stigma?

- Focus on your strengths, not your limitations
- Know the facts about your biological illness, and keep reminding yourself of them
- Spend time with others who have mood disorders at a DBSA support group; discuss feelings of self-stigma with others who can understand
- Volunteer with your DBSA group, or with other organizations where people need help
- Find out what brings you joy, and go after it
- Stick with your treatment. If you aren't satisfied with your treatment, talk to your health care providers about making changes.

Words vs. Stigma — Letter-Writing:

Letter-writing can be an effective way to fight stigma and inform a large number of newspaper readers, radio listeners or policy makers. You might also write a letter to a business you feel is discriminatory. Any time you see stigma, writing a letter can help to educate and empower.
When writing your letter:

- State the facts about depression and bipolar disorder.
- State your argument clearly let the reader know what was offensive, why, and how it could be made less offensive.
- Don't resort to accusations or name-calling. Support your argument with clear examples that people with different opinions can relate to.
- Keep your argument concise (short, organized, to the point) to hold people's attention.
- Offer help for people who want to know more about mood disorder facts.

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