

# Challenging Stigma Week

19 to 25 May 2024

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Education and open conversations are key to reducing stigma and creating a more supportive environment for everyone.

This quick guide will help you get started.



# What is mental health stigma and why does it matter?

Stigma refers to negative attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours towards people with mental health challenges. It manifests in various ways, from discrimination and social exclusion to internalised feelings of shame and worthlessness.

Understanding stigma is crucial because it affects individuals' willingness to seek help, adhere to treatment, and recover. It may affect the way we see people and how we relate to them.

Stigma matters because it:

- Prevents people from seeking help due to fear of judgment.
- Leads to social isolation, affecting relationships and support systems.
- Impacts employment, housing, and education opportunities.
- Contributes to worsening mental health and reduced quality of life.

By recognizing the existence of stigma and its harmful effects, we can start taking steps to challenge and change these attitudes. Education and open conversations are key to reducing stigma and creating a more supportive environment for everyone. This incorporates challenging our own bias including unconscious bias.

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# The impact of language on mental health perception

Language shapes our perceptions and attitudes towards mental health. Words can either reinforce stigma or promote understanding and acceptance. For example, referring to someone as "crazy" or "insane" is derogatory and perpetuates negative stereotypes. Instead, using person-first language, like "a person with depression" or "someone experiencing anxiety," acknowledges the individual before the condition. People are people, not a diagnosis.

Why does this matter? Because:

- Respectful language fosters a supportive environment.
- It reduces feelings of shame and embarrassment for those with mental health conditions.
- Positive language encourages more people to seek help and talk openly about their experiences.

By being mindful of our words, we can contribute to reducing stigma and supporting mental health awareness.

We feel so strongly about this at MIFWA that we have moved away from the use of the term 'mental illness'. The language of mental illness is based on a narrow framework that focuses on the medical model as an explanation. By moving away from the term "mental illness" and embracing more inclusive language, we can shift the focus from pathology to holistic well-being. This broader framework allows for a more comprehensive understanding of mental health that encompasses not only medical aspects but also social support, coping mechanisms, and resilience.

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# Exposing mental health myths

Several misconceptions about mental health contribute to stigma. Let's address and debunk some of these myths.

**Myth:** Mental health issues are a sign of weakness.

**Fact:** Mental health conditions are not a result of personal weakness but may be a complex interaction of genetics, biology, environment, and life experiences. Some of the strongest people we know have experienced mental health challenges.

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**Myth:** People with mental health challenges are violent or unpredictable.

**Fact:** Violence is a result of many factors. Most people with mental health conditions are not violent and are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators.

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**Myth:** Mental health problems are rare.

**Fact:** Mental health issues are common and affect millions of people worldwide. One in four people will experience a mental health challenge at some point in their lives. Mental health is part of the human experience, recovery is part of a personal journey.

## *We can reduce stigma.*

By challenging these misconceptions, we can reduce stigma and support a more informed and empathetic perspective on mental health.

# Being a supportive ally in mental health

Supporting someone with a mental health challenge can make a significant difference in their journey towards recovery.

## Here are some ways to be a supportive ally:

- **Listen without judgment:** Allow the person to express their feelings and experiences without interrupting or offering unsolicited advice.
- **Educate yourself:** Learn about their experience to better understand what they're going through and how you can help.
- **Encourage seeking help:** Gently suggest seeking help from mental health specialists or support groups, if they haven't already.
- **Respect their privacy:** Keep their disclosures confidential unless you are concerned for their safety.
- **Stay connected:** Regular check-ins can provide much-needed support and reassurance.

Being there for someone and showing genuine care can help reduce stigma and promote mental well-being.

## Steps we can all take to challenge mental health stigma

Reducing stigma requires collective effort and action. Here are some steps we can all take:

- **Speak up:** Challenge stigmatizing comments or jokes when you hear them. Educate others about the impact of their words.
- **Share your story:** If you're comfortable, share your own experiences with mental health to normalize the conversation.
- **Support mental health initiatives:** Participate in or donate to causes working towards mental health awareness and support.
- **Advocate for change:** Support policies that promote mental health care accessibility and anti-discrimination laws.
- **Practice self-care:** Taking care of your own mental health sets a positive example and reinforces that mental health is a priority.

By taking these actions, we can create a more inclusive and supportive society for everyone.

# Understanding and overcoming self-stigma

Self-stigma occurs when individuals with mental health challenges internalise society's negative attitudes, leading to feelings of shame, low self-esteem, and a reluctance to seek help. It's a hidden struggle that can have profound impacts on an individual's mental and emotional well-being.

## What is self-stigma?

Self-stigma is the internalisation of public stigma. When people with mental health issues absorb and accept the negative stereotypes and beliefs about their experience, it can lead to self-criticism and a belief that they are less worthy or capable. This internal conflict can exacerbate their mental health problems and hinder their recovery.

## The impact of self-stigma

Self-stigma can have several detrimental effects, including:

- **Decreased self-esteem:** Believing negative stereotypes can lead to feelings of worthlessness and self-doubt.
- **Reduced help-seeking:** Fear of judgment and discrimination can prevent individuals from seeking the help they need.
- **Social withdrawal:** Shame and embarrassment can cause people to isolate themselves from friends, family, and social activities.

## Overcoming self-stigma

Overcoming self-stigma is a step towards recovery. Here are some strategies to help manage and reduce self-stigma:

- **Educate yourself:** Learn about your mental health, to understand that it is not a personal failing but a medical issue that can be managed with the right treatment and support.
- **Challenge negative thoughts:** Identify and question the negative beliefs you hold about yourself. Replace them with more realistic and compassionate perspectives.
- **Seek support:** Talk to trusted friends, family members, or support groups. Sharing your experiences can help reduce feelings of isolation and provide validation.
- **Seek professional help:** Therapists and counsellors can offer strategies to combat self-stigma, such as cognitive-behavioural techniques that help reframe negative thoughts.
- **Celebrate strengths and achievements:** Focus on your strengths and accomplishments, no matter how small. Recognizing your capabilities can build self-esteem and confidence.
- **Practice self-compassion:** Treat yourself with the same kindness and understanding that you would offer to a friend facing similar challenges.

We believe in you!