



A Program of Wheeler Clinic

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# Stigma and Mental Illness

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

It's easy to label someone else and overlook what's really inside. When mental illnesses are used as labels – depressed, schizophrenic, manic or hyperactive – these labels hurt. Using negative labels leads to branding and shame – what is called stigma. Stigma leads to discrimination. Everyone knows why it is wrong to discriminate against people because of their race, religion, culture or appearance. They are less aware of how people with mental illnesses are discriminated against. Although discrimination may not always be obvious, it exists – and it hurts. Stigma is not just the use of the wrong word or action. Stigma is about disrespect. It is the use of negative labels to identify a person living with mental illness. Stigma is a barrier and discourages individuals and their families from getting the help they need due to the fear of discrimination. An estimated 50 million Americans experience a mental disorder in any given year and only one-fourth of them actually receive mental health and other services.

## Words Can Be Poison

**Stigma discourages people from getting help.** At any given time, one in four adults and one in five children experience a mental health problem. Early and appropriate services can be the best way to prevent an illness from getting worse. Many people don't seek such services because they don't want to be labeled as "mentally ill" or "crazy."

**Stigma keeps people from getting good jobs and advancing in the workplace.** Some employers are reluctant to hire people who have mental illnesses. Thanks to the American with Disabilities Act (ADA), such discrimination is illegal. But it still happens!

**Stigma leads to fear, mistrust, and violence.** Even though the vast majority of people who have mental illnesses are no more violent than anyone else, the average television viewer sees three people with mental illnesses each week – and most of them are portrayed as violent. Such inaccurate portrayals lead people to fear those who have mental illnesses.

**Stigma results in prejudice and discrimination.** Many individuals try to prevent people who have mental illnesses from living in their neighborhood.

**Stigma results in inadequate insurance coverage.** Many insurance plans do not cover mental health services to the same degree as other illnesses. When mental illnesses are covered, coverage may be limited, inappropriate, or inadequate.

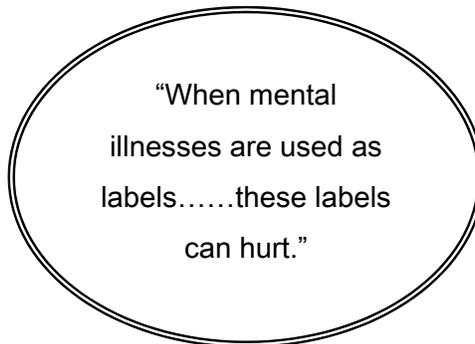
## Words Can Heal

**Here are six steps you can follow to help end the stigma of mental illnesses:**

1. **Learn More.** Many organizations sponsor nationwide programs about mental health and mental illness.
2. **Insist on accountable media.** Sometimes the media portray people who have mental illnesses inaccurately, and this makes stereotypes harder to change.
3. **Obey the laws in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).** The ADA prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in all areas of public life, including housing, employment, and public transportation. Mental illnesses are considered a disability covered under the ADA.
4. **Recognize and appreciate the contributions to society made by people who have mental illnesses.** People who have mental illnesses are major contributors to American life - from the arts to the sciences, from medicine to entertainment to professional sports.
5. **Treat people with the dignity and respect we all deserve.** People who have mental illnesses may include your friends, your neighbors, and your family.

*(continued)*

6. **Think about the person – the contents behind the label.** Avoid labeling people by their diagnosis. Instead of saying, “She’s a schizophrenic,” say, “ She has a mental illness.” Never use the term “mentally ill.”



### Do's and Don'ts

#### Do's:

- \* **Do use** respectful language such as:
  - Person who has schizophrenia
  - Person with a psychiatric disability
  - Person with bipolar disorder
- \* **Do emphasize** abilities, not limitations.
- \* **Do tell** someone if they express a stigmatizing attitude.

#### Don'ts:

- \* **Don't portray** successful persons with disabilities as super human.
- \* **Don't use** generic labels such as retarded, or the mentally ill.
- \* **Don't use** terms like crazy, lunatic, manic depressive, slow functioning, or normal.

To learn more about mental health and how to end stigma call  
**National Mental Health Services**  
**Knowledge Exchange Network**  
**800-789-CMHS (2647)**