



**CONNECTICUT
Clearinghouse**
a program of the Connecticut Center
for Prevention, Wellness and Recovery

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

Stigma and Mental Illness

It's easy to label someone and overlook what's really inside. When a psychiatric diagnosis is used to label a person – "he's bipolar" or "she's obsessive-compulsive" – it devalues and stigmatizes an individual. Would you use a term like "cancerous" when referring to someone with a cancer diagnosis? Using negative labels leads to branding and shame – what is called stigma. Stigma is not just the use of the wrong word or action: it is about disrespect. Stigma discourages people from seeking help, even though mental illness is treatable. Stigma can also lead to discrimination. While many people are aware of the effects of racial, religious or cultural discrimination, they are less aware of how people with mental illnesses experience discrimination. Although discrimination may not always be obvious, it exists – and it hurts. Some employers may be reluctant to hire people who have a mental illness, even though the Americans with Disabilities Act makes this illegal. The mass media often skew public perception of people with mental illness, especially after violent acts are perpetrated by individuals who may or may not have a mental illness. In fact, the vast majority of people who have mental illnesses are no more violent than anyone else.

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

1. **Learn More.** Many organizations offer free educational programs about mental health and mental illness. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration website offers literature that can be downloaded free of charge: <http://store.samhsa.gov/home>
2. **Insist on accountable media.** Are you getting the facts about people with mental illness when you read the news online or in print? What about the movies or television programs you watch – do they provide accurate portrayals of people with mental illness? How do the portrayals make you feel?
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 the American workforce and society - 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.
6. **Think about the person – the contents behind the label.** Avoid labeling people by their diagnosis. Remember: mental illnesses are treatable conditions and people can recover. If you know someone who needs help, don't be afraid to reach out: you are not their therapist, but you can tell them there are people who can help. Contact SAMHSA's Treatment Referral Line at 1-800-662-4357 or visit online: <http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline connects callers to a skilled trained counselor at a crisis center in your area – call 800-273-8255. People can call no matter what kind of crisis they are experiencing – whether it's related to depression, economic worries, substance abuse, relationship or family problems, or if you are concerned about a friend or loved one - someone is there to help.

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