

# Reducing the Stigma Surrounding Mental Health

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Stigma is one of the most damaging things to the conversation around mental health. Stigma breaks down communication, support, and truth which can isolate people seeking help and keep people from getting the support they need (Levin et al., 2018). Stigma is defined as “*the negative social attitude attached to a characteristic that may be regarded as a mental, physical, or social deficiency*” (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2022). The way we are socialized to think about mental health conditions and distress impacts the way we think about these topics and people who experience them. In fact, these biases can also affect how a person might think about themselves, known as self-stigma (Kondrat & Teater, 2009). Mental health and substance use disorders are complex, often involving an intricacy of biological and social factors for treatment (Taylor-Olsen et al., 2021). By changing the way society talks about mental wellness, we can help to ensure that support and accurate information are readily available to people who need it. Especially when research finds that stigma is one of the main reasons that people that need help do not seek it out (Moskos et al., 2007).

However, not all change needs to be on a societal level. If you would like to reduce stigma in your circles and help those around you, there are things you can do to change your relationship with mental health. These include getting informed, changing perspectives, modifying language,

and sharing what you have learned to actively break the stigma. Learn more below:

1. **Get Informed:** Research mental health topics from reliable sources instead of relying on inaccurate and damaging content (Kershaw et al., 2021). For example, start with sites like these:
  - a. **National Institute of Mental Health:** NIMH studies mental health in the US and its website provides information about mental health and related topics.
  - b. **National Alliance on Mental Illness:** NAMI is a grassroots organization that helps to reduce the stigma around mental health and provides not only an Anti-Stigma pledge, but more resources on how to combat it.
  - c. **American Psychiatric Association:** APA is an evidence-based website with information for patients and families; discussing various types of stigma.
2. **Change Perspectives:** Think about all the inaccurate information you may have encountered in the past and compare it to the accurate information you just learned. Change your perspective by challenging yourself to see the situation differently and spend time with people with mental health conditions (Chung & Slater, 2013; Shahwan et al., 2022). Ask the following questions:
  - a. How harmful were these inaccuracies and what if this was someone I cared about?
  - b. Where did the original bias come from? Have I learned more about this topic and can challenge these perspectives now?
  - c. Why might these topics be associated with shame or stigma? Put yourself in someone’s “shoes” or situation to see how this might impact your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.
3. **Modify Language/Behavior:** Changing our language to fit with the most up-to-date information can help us be both sensitive and accurate. Changing our own language and/or behavior can help others to know that you are safe to talk to about sensitive topics (Kondrat & Teater, 2009).
4. **Share What You Have Learned and Advocate for Others:** By helping others to start on the journey to reduce stigma in their lives, we can help make our circles stigma-free or closer to it

(Shahwan et al., 2022). Start breaking the stigma in conversations with the following steps:

- a. Be open to discussing sensitive topics. Keep in mind *who* you are talking to. We may need to change the way we discuss sensitive topics based on who we are discussing them with (Rafal et al., 2018). Also, keep discussions accurate and kind.
- b. Correct misinformation when it comes up.
- c. Support the people you care about.

By changing the way you and your circle interact with mental health, you can make a difference in the lives of yourself and others. You have made a great step in reducing stigma today by getting informed, changing perspectives, and learning about language/behavior modifications. Continue to take chances to educate yourself and others to break down the stigma in your community. Additional resources for support and opportunities to learn more are below.

### Additional Resources for Support:

- **Reducing Stigma towards Opioid Use Disorder Treatment:** <https://extension.usu.edu/heart/research/reducing-stigma-towards-opioid-use-disorder-treatment>
- **CDC Stop Overdose, Stigma Reduction:** <https://www.cdc.gov/stopoverdose/stigma/index.html>
- **Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>.
- **Crisis Text Line:** <https://www.crisistextline.org/>

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