

Mental Health Stigma in the Workplace

REMOVING STIGMA

Stigma regarding mental health is often the result of lack of information or incorrect information. People often assume that stigma is related to clearly negative intentions and obviously harmful behaviors. The truth is, however, that stigma is based on assumptions that are uninformed. Stigma can occur even when intentions are good and can show itself where harm may or may not be immediately obvious. Also, people often assume that the sources of stigma are individuals or groups other than the person with the condition, but an individual's own views and misinformation about mental can create "self-stigma." Self-stigma exists when people with mental health issues internalize stereotypes and negative opinions about those who suffer from their condition. This can lead to self-blame, low self-esteem, undue fears or denial. Individuals with a mental health issue often say that the stigma is far worse than the illness itself. Regardless of the source or the intention, the assumptions and labels that are associated with stigma lead to unhelpful behaviors, which can delay care and create isolation.

As a person with a mental health issue:

- **Get treatment.** Don't let stigma hold you back from seeking help.
- **Don't let stigma create self-doubt and shame.** You may have the mistaken belief that your condition is a sign of personal weakness, or that you should be able to control it on your own. Seek help from mental health services and educate yourself about your condition.
- **Try to constructively influence the people in your life.** When you hear people say things that show they do not understand mental illness, use the opportunity to share with them some of the information that you have.
- **Speak out against stigma.** Find the right forums to express your opinions, whether at the workplace or in your personal life. Your speaking out may help build courage in others facing similar challenges.

As a friend, parent, partner or co-worker:

- **Learn the facts.** One of the best ways to remove stigma about mental illness is by understanding what it is and what it is not.
- **Speak with dignity and respect.** Choose your words carefully, use respectful language, emphasize abilities not limitations, and refer to the person not the disability or illness.
- **Speak up.** Tell people when they express a stigmatizing attitude or opinion.
- **Support your co-workers constructively.** Do not "walk on tiptoes," do not stop extending invitations to activities and do not leave the individual alone to "rest." These may seem like kind behaviors, but they are in fact isolating and often damaging. Maintain as much of your relationship and behaviors as possible. This is helpful in supporting recovery and in maintaining the individual's positive self-image.

As a friend, parent, partner or co-worker:

- **Make sure that you are educated and informed.** Participate in any training that is offered, and leverage manager consultation through the EFAP to help you understand key issues and your role. The more you know, the less you will promote stigma.
- **Foster a healthy workplace environment.** Establish a team culture that supports open problem-solving, demonstrates honest and respectful communication and encourages the use of stress-management resources

such as Employee and Family Assistance Program, and where stress is focused with clear priorities. These actions benefit all employees and model actions that are less conducive to stigma.

- **Understand your role at critical points.** An environment where mental health can be discussed openly does not mean an environment where the confidentiality of health-related and personal information is not respected. You do not need to have private and confidential information regarding an employee's health or personal life to support an employee with a health or personal issue. Your role is to identify that there is a change in the employee's performance or behavior as it relates to work. Starting the conversation may prompt the employee to get the assistance needed. It may also identify opportunities for work support or simple flexibility, which may prevent the need for a leave of absence.