

# The Stigma of mental health issues

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What is stigma?

- Stigma is related to the shameful feelings we develop when experiencing difficulty with an issue in our lives. It is what alienates us from others when we feel that what we are going through cannot be spoken about.
- Stigma brings us experiences and feelings of self-blame, secrecy, hopelessness and distress. For many years mental health issues have been misrepresented in the media contributing to many people's reluctance to seek help, causing us to feel isolated and more alone.
- Self-stigma is the sense of shame that we feel towards ourselves about having a mental health issue. It is when we inwardly direct surrounding unhelpful attitudes, worsening the negative cycle of isolation, distress and hopelessness brought on by experiencing mental health issues in the first place.
- Stigma creates secrecy. As a result some of us live our lives without ever fully disclosing our internal experiences to those we love around us.
- This secrecy around mental health issues acts as an obstacle to getting professional help and making changes to move forward in our lives.
- Some of us will avoid seeking help for mental or emotional problems because it can be frightening to think of ourselves getting a mental illness label. Or we may feel that others will avoid us or see us as weak if it comes out that we are struggling with something in our lives. This leads to the belief that we should instead deal with our own issues.

Many people have experienced the stigma related to mental health issues. People can go for many years trying to conceal their underlying issues from the world, due to that personal stigma of being somehow weaker, less able to cope and not as mentally strong as others. This creates even more exhaustion than what is caused by dealing with these issues inside. When you are trying so hard to deal with the feelings you feel and at the same time present an image to the world that is quite the opposite, it can be a very draining and tiring existence.

It also creates a huge disconnect between our internal and outside selves. Our internal self is made up of our thoughts, emotions and beliefs, whereas the outside self is what we project to the world through our behaviours. For example if we have anxiety, there may be a mismatch between what is going on inside us and what others may see on the outside. This can cause us to feel detached or disconnected from our self and the world around us, known as depersonalisation and derealisation respectively. When we feel disconnected from our outer self, we cannot accept praise for things that we do as we don't feel deserving.

With time and help from a supportive and understanding professional, I believe that we can all get to a point in our lives where we are living authentically, that is, acting genuinely and being honest about our internal experiences. Accepting and being ourselves are the keys to dealing with and reducing the impact of self stigma. When we start to accept our inner self for who we really are, we allow the process of living in a more authentic way in our outer life to begin.

For some people this involves telling others around them that they have experienced mental health issues. It can often be surprising at how this does not make them feel weaker, but more honest and aware of themselves. We may initially feel more vulnerable, in that others know our personal issues, but what is often very surprising is the support offered by people who truly love and care about our wellbeing. This process of self-disclosure contributes to our discovery of who we really are as a person, as we become connected to all the aspects that make up who we are. When we are honest with our inner world and emotional experiences this leads to a much more fulfilling life. We no longer have to live as a projected version of ourselves that we thought was the more acceptable version for others to see, but can be who we really are.