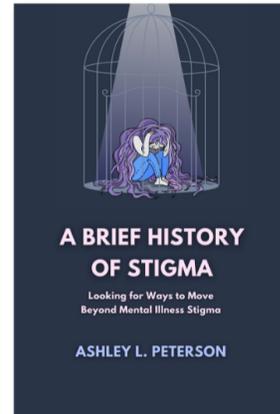


Stigma Fact Sheet



mentalhealthathome.org

A Brief History of Stigma: Stigma Reduction Toolkit Stigma Fact Sheet

We've all heard of stigma, but what exactly is it? This fact sheet will look at some of the relevant theoretical concepts to get a better idea of the nature of stigma.

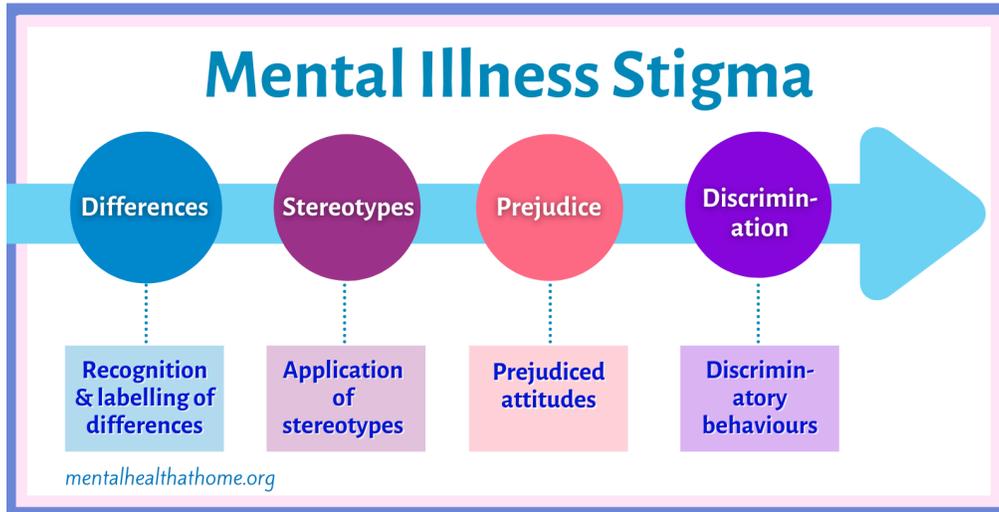
What Stigma Is

The concept of stigma dates back to Ancient Greek times, when slaves were given a physical mark of their low social status. The concept has evolved since then, though, and the current understanding of stigma is largely based on the work of sociologist Erving Goffman in the 1960s.

According to Goffman, stigma arises from society's perceptions of undesired differences that mark people as Other. Because of that difference, people are considered to be tainted and not quite human. Stigma is not something that's inherent in the undesired difference, such as mental illness; it comes entirely from the meaning that society assigns to that difference.

Stigma involves several components:

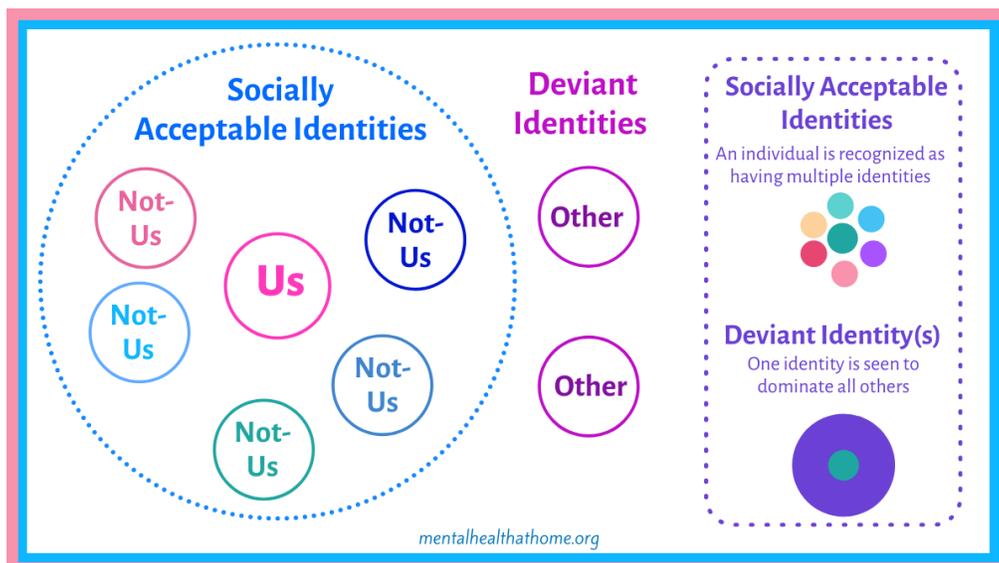
- Recognition and labelling of social differences associated with Otherness
- Rigid application of stereotypes
- Prejudiced attitudes based on stereotypes
- Discriminatory behaviours



While a mental illness diagnosis can act as a cue for recognizing the associated social difference, society’s labelling of mental illness, craziness, or whatever the term that happens to be used, exists independently of medical diagnoses. The social label is based on the category of people that are Othered.

Social Deviance

We all have various social identities associated with the different roles that we play. It is human nature to categorize people into Us and Not-Us. Many Not-Us categories are still considered socially acceptable, but some, like mentally ill, are considered deviant, and are treated as Other. We learn about these social categories from an early age, so this information is deeply ingrained. Later education may not reach deep enough to challenge these beliefs.



Normally, we recognize that people have multiple social identities associated with the different roles that we play, such as wife, mother, friend, teacher, volunteer, etc. When someone has a deviant identity, though, that's all people can see. Every other identity a mentally ill person might have gets swallowed up by that mental illness identity.

For those of us with mental illness, having a variety of different role identities can help with deflecting the stigma that can be directed at the mental illness identity.

Common Stereotypes

While there are often specific stereotypes associated with individual diagnoses, there are also stereotypes that tend to be applied broadly across people with mental illness in general. These stereotypes are applied rigidly as if all people with mental illness are a homogeneous group, which we're certainly not. These stereotypes include beliefs that we are:

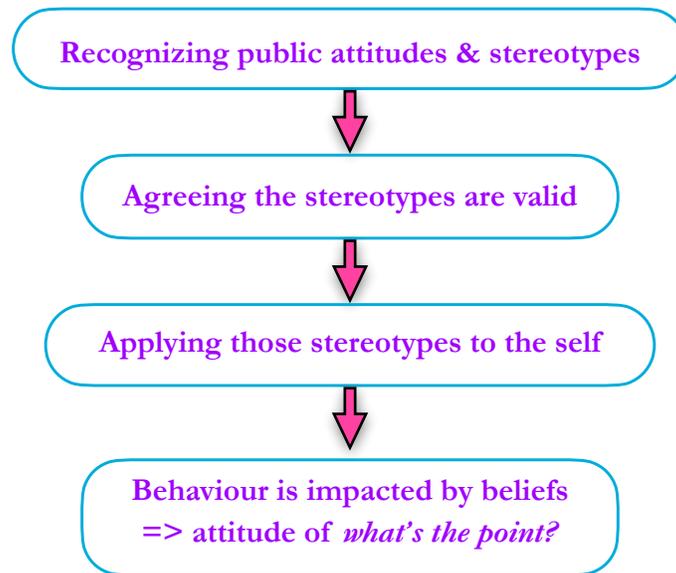
- Violent/dangerous: The majority of people with mental illness are no more violent than anyone else. There are a few subgroups that do have an increased risk of violence, including people misusing substances, people with antisocial personality disorder, and people experiencing command auditory hallucinations to harm someone (which is not the case for most people experiencing hallucinations).
- Unpredictable
- Unreliable
- Untrustworthy
- Incompetent, unable to make decisions
- To blame for our illness
- Of weak character: People may blame us for our mental illness, seeing it as within our control or a moral failure



Self-Stigma

Self-stigma happens when public stigma is internalized. It can be just as damaging as the effects of public stigma, and can lead to decreased self-esteem and hypervigilance, with increased sensitivity to stigma cues.

The key factor that influences whether we self-stigmatize or not is whether we perceive stigma to be legitimate. Mutual support from within the in-group of people with mental illness, i.e. peer support, can help to minimize self-stigma.



Implications for Stigma Reduction

Stigma is not inherent in mental illness; it's a social phenomenon that needs to be addressed at all levels of society. It's the nature of stigma for people to only see our deviant identity (i.e. mental illness) and rely on stereotypes. Part of challenging stigma is showing that we are more than just our illness, and put a myriad of human faces to mental illness to replace the inaccurate stereotypes.

A Brief History of Stigma

A Brief History of Stigma has more information on what mental illness stigma is and what to do about it. You can learn more about the book on [Mental Health @ Home](#).

It's available on [Amazon](#) and [Google Play](#).

