

## Meigs Health Matters: Stigma Associated with Mental Health: December 3, 2022

It is widely known that historically, people may hesitate to seek treatment for a mental health problem, and we often hear the word stigma associated with mental health. You may not even recognize that you portray or perpetuate stigma. So, let's discuss this topic further by asking, what does stigma mean, and what can we do about it?

Stigma is when someone views you in a negative way because you have a distinguishing characteristic or personal trait that's thought to be, or actually is, a disadvantage (a negative stereotype). Unfortunately, negative attitudes and beliefs toward people who have a mental health condition are common. (MayoClinic.org)

Stigma can lead to stereotyping. Stereotypes are assumptions about individuals based on the presumed qualities of the group they belong to. An example of stereotyping within mental health is that "all who suffer mental health problems are violent or unpredictable."

Stereotyping may lead to discrimination. Sometimes discrimination is obvious and direct, i.e., when a person makes a negative comment about one's mental illness. However, it may also be indirect or unintentional, for example, a person avoids someone who has a mental illness diagnosis just because he or she thinks the person is 'dangerous,' 'crazy,' or 'incompetent' due to said mental illness.

According to MayoClinic.org, some of the harmful effects of stigma can include:

- Reluctance to seek help or treatment
- Lack of understanding by family, friends, co-workers or others
- Fewer opportunities for work, school or social activities or trouble finding housing
- Bullying, physical violence or harassment
- Health insurance that doesn't adequately cover your mental illness treatment
- The belief that you'll never succeed at certain challenges or that you can't improve your situation

MayoClinic.org further states ways you can deal with stigma:

- **Get treatment.** You may be reluctant to admit you need treatment. Don't let the fear of being labeled with a mental illness prevent you from seeking help. Treatment can provide relief by identifying what's wrong and reducing symptoms that interfere with your work and personal life.
- **Don't let stigma create self-doubt and shame.** Stigma doesn't just come from others. You may mistakenly believe that your condition is a sign of personal weakness or that you should be able to control it without help. Seeking counseling, educating yourself about your condition and connecting

- with others who have mental illness can help you gain self-esteem and overcome destructive self-judgment.
- **Don't isolate yourself.** If you have a mental illness, you may be reluctant to tell anyone about it. Your family, friends, clergy or members of your community can offer you support if they know about your mental illness. Reach out to people you trust for the compassion, support and understanding you need.
  - **Don't equate yourself with your illness.** You are not an illness. So instead of saying "I'm bipolar," say "I have bipolar disorder." Instead of calling yourself "a schizophrenic," say "I have schizophrenia."
  - **Join a support group.** Some local and national groups, such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), offer local programs and internet resources that help reduce stigma by educating people who have mental illness, their families and the general public. Some state and federal agencies and programs, such as those that focus on vocational rehabilitation and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), offer support for people with mental illness.
  - **Get help at school.** If you or your child has a mental illness that affects learning, find out what plans and programs might help. Discrimination against students because of a mental illness is against the law, and educators at primary, secondary and college levels are required to accommodate students as best they can. Talk to teachers, professors or administrators about the best approach and resources. If a teacher doesn't know about a student's disability, it can lead to discrimination, barriers to learning and poor grades.
  - **Speak out against stigma.** Consider expressing your opinions at events, in letters to the editor or on the internet. It can help instill courage in others facing similar challenges and educate the public about mental illness.

The Meigs County, Ohio Community Health Assessment 2020-2023 identified mental health and substance abuse (together) as one of the top five priority areas for Meigs County. Unfortunately, both mental health and substance abuse issues, whether separate or together, carry high stigma levels. This stigma is believed to be a major barrier for those who could seek treatment for either issue. As an example, the Meigs County Health Department (MCHD) has offered free Naloxone/Narcan for both the public and law enforcement/first responders since 2015. We will train and then equip not only residents, but also businesses and service entities with boxes of Naloxone to have on hand in the event of an unintentional overdose. Unfortunately, we've experienced stigma that focused only on the illicit drug user needing the product when approaching stakeholders about this, which has prevented access to the drug when it was needed in the instance of other unexpected or unintended exposures.

To summarize, stigma may lead to stereotyping, and stereotyping may lead to discrimination, all of which are harmful to the person with mental illness. Additionally, these beliefs and actions almost always come from a lack of understanding and not facts. The person with mental illness can learn to accept his or her condition and

recognize what he or she needs to do to not only treat it and seek support, but also help educate others, which can make a big difference.

For mental health resources in Meigs County, please visit our Quick Reference Guide at <https://meigs-health.com/general-resources/>. For questions about or for training to obtain Naloxone from the MCHD, please call Leanne Cunningham, Director of Nursing, at 740-992-6626.

