

Illuminating stigma: A qualitative analysis to understand the dimensions of mental illness stigma in Midwestern communities

Jennifer M. Dinh, Julia A. Andersen, Meghan M. JaKa, Marna M. Canterbury, Jeanette Y. Ziegenfuss

Abstract: Stigma around mental illness exists, but its dimensions are often poorly defined or shadowed in nuance, which makes defining effective intervention strategies difficult. This qualitative analysis seeks to shine a light onto the historically-taboo topic of mental illness stigma by understanding how patients and members in a large healthcare organization describe stigma in their communities, and what perceived facilitators and barriers of addressing stigma exist. We thematically coded open-ended responses from a patient/member survey about experience with mental illness and stigmatizing beliefs. Responses fell into three major themes: actions toward people with mental illness, negative beliefs about mental illness, and negative beliefs about people with mental illness. A lack of understanding on how to approach and talk about mental illness and lack of access to care presented as the most prominent barriers. Identified themes illuminate the nuance of stigma and how its presence impacts anti-stigma efforts.

- 1) How do members of communities targeted by Make It OK, an anti-stigma program in Minnesota and beyond, **describe the dimensions of stigma?**

Actions towards people with mental illness themes

- Distancing
- Distancing: No support
- Distancing: No support: Talking or Engaging
- Distancing
- Judge
- Label
- Pity or sympathy

"Fear prevents many from engaging with others who have or may have a mental illness. What is the right thing? Will I do or say the wrong thing?"

"People shy away from you and either consciously or subconsciously space themselves away from you."

"People with mental illness are sometimes viewed as strange, a problem, and anti-social, lazy, selfish, uncaring."

Beliefs about mental illness themes

- Concealability
- Aesthetics
- Root cause
- Disruptiveness
- Course

"I think in general it's an uphill battle because people more readily identify with a problem they can see rather than something like mental illness that isn't as visible."

"I just think that a lot of people have the impression that people suffering from mental illness are different than everyone else."

Beliefs about persons with mental illness themes

- Controllability
- Perceived character flaws
- Dangerousness
- Aesthetics
- Exaggeration
- Status loss

"There is a mentality that everyone can pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. That no assistance is needed or that it's their own fault for being who they are."

"People don't realize someone else is suffering and attribute it to weakness or personality flaws rather than a mental illness."

Afflicted themes

- Family member or friend
- Youth
- Self
- Homeless
- Men

"[There is stigma] especially toward our youth. Often times it is believed the kids are just "naughty" and "choosing" their behavior when in fact they have a mental illness, are experiencing trauma, or have parents with mental illness."

Stigmatizer themes

- Community or public
- Community or public: Race and culture
- Community or public: Faith community
- Media
- Generational
- Authority figure
- Family or friend
- Health professional
- Person with mental illness

"I think people are impacted by what they hear on the news; that people with a mental illness are more likely to do bad things."

"In general, in my community there are negative impressions regarding mental health as no one wants to seem "crazy" or "altered"."

"I was told by a friend with recurring depression that a person at a church she attended told her that if her faith was stronger she would get rid of her depression."

2) What are the **facilitators and barriers** to addressing mental illness stigma?

Barriers and facilitators

- Support from authority figures
- Awareness and education
- Programs available
- Resources
- Community support
- Contact with people with mental illness

"I feel ill-equipped to help and support someone as they move through the ups and downs."

"More needs to be done at a younger age, and in schools. As a teacher in a middle school, I see kids every day with mental illness who have no idea how to deal with it."

"Reducing the stigma of mental illness starts with availability of resources for people who may have issues but no access! This goes for all communities. You can't reduce stigma without providing access to help otherwise people will continue to suffer alone, without knowledge or support"

"People who have no experience with mental illness and have never seen the impact simply don't know - can't know - what it is like."

Conclusions: Dimensions of stigma are interrelated and cannot be understood without one another. Interventions must tailor programming to the target population because communities face different barriers and facilitators to reducing stigma. No one is immune to mental illness stigma, and evaluations like this shine a light on the work still needed to eliminate it.