Stigma, Self-Stigma, and Identity in Severe Mental Illness: Negative Consequences and Ways to Counter

This product accompanies the 'Stigma, Self-Stigma, and Identity in Severe Mental Illness: Negative Consequences and Ways to Counter Panel ' which is available for viewing <u>here</u>.

Overview of Self-Stigma and Severe Mental Illness

Public mental health stigma is pervasive and has many negative impacts. One consequence is that it can lead to self-stigma among mental health service users, including people with severe mental illness. This info sheet discusses how self-stigma can impact identity development of service users and shares ways that mental health staff can help combat mental health stigma.

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What is Stigma and Serious Mental Illness (SMI)?

What is Stigma?
- Stigma refers to negative attitudes towards or discrimination against a group of individuals based off certain attributes
- Stigma often stereotypes groups by pushing harmful, disrespectful beliefs into social spaces

What are Serious Mental Illnesses (SMIs)?
- Serious mental illnesses are mental, behavioral, or emotional disorders which lead to a severe impairment in the quality of one's day to day life and limit one or more major life activities[1]
- Examples of SMI include[2]
  - Bipolar disorder
  - Major depressive disorder
  - Schizophrenia

SAMHSA
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

What is Stigma in Mental Health? [3]

- Stigma in mental health refers to negative attitudes towards mental illness
  - An example is believing that an individual with mental illness is "dangerous, incompetent, [and has] character weakness" [4]
- There is often the belief that individuals with SMI are:
  - *Likely to be violent*
  - *Not likely to be productive*
  - *Shouldn't care for children*
- **The presence of stigma in mental health settings can prevent individuals from seeking care**
  - In 2020, about 65% of the approximately 14 million individuals with SMI received care [4]

- There are multiple forms of stigma including structural and interpersonal/public
  - **Structural or institutional** stigma refers to negative attitudes toward mental illness that are perpetuated by an organization's policies or through legal frameworks [5]
  - **Interpersonal/public** stigma is the most common when discussing stigma in general terms, and refers to negative attitudes from the public towards individuals with mental illness [5]

What is Self-stigma? [6]

- **Self-stigma is the manifestation of agreeing with negative attitudes towards one's own mental illness** and can also be referred to as internalized stigma
  - Self-stigma has been related to **poor health outcomes** such as failure to seek/access treatment and poorer quality of life
- A person is never to blame for having self-stigma, as it is an effect of external stigma
  - There are further concerns about:
    - *Independency, disconnectedness*
    - *Reduction of self-esteem & self-efficacy*
    - *How stigma affects identity*

Discrimination in Health Care[9]

- Consumers of mental health services and their families often describe mental health professionals as a source of stigma, with specific **providers frequently focusing on the disease and ignoring the person**

- Mental health professionals unfortunately can **endorse stereotypes** about mental illness

  - Discrimination can include providers withholding diagnoses or not giving explicit diagnosis in an effort to avoid labels
  - Mental health professionals who reinforce stigma show negative attitudes about prognosis and fail to maintain a recovery-oriented narrative

- Professionals reinforcing these attitudes can impact the individual's quality of care and treatment they receive, affecting their overall wellbeing and recovery
- Primary care providers may misattribute signs and symptoms of physical illness to mental health which leads to under-diagnosis and mistreatment of physical conditions

In a study of California adults, 4% reported being discriminated against while accessing mental health or substance use services[7]

Identity & Self-Stigma

What is One's identity? [9]

- **Identity is an individual's sense of self and the roles they occupy in their life**
- The onset of SMI often occurs in adolescence and early adulthood, which are key periods of one's identity development
  - Developmental Theory posits that youth often struggle to develop a coherent identity, in which they may experience diffusion
    - **Diffusion**: a state in which the individual may have difficulty in locating themselves meaningfully in a social setting and drift from one venture to another

[9]

Identity, Mental Illness, and Self-Stigma

Through different processes, the idea of having a mental illness can take over one's identity and take priority over other identity categories

> ### Link's Modified Labeling Theory[7]
>
> Socially held stereotypical attitudes about mental illness are absorbed during childhood which then take on personal relevance when a person is diagnosed fostering increased negative emotions
> According to this perspective, it is not necessary for one to even experience stigma or discrimination directly to become aware of it

- Self-stigma can lead to **over** or **under** identification with illness
  - **Under identification**
    - Not wanting a label
  - **Over identification**
    - Ignoring other identities and focusing only on treating illness

What can we do? [9]

- **Use Person First Language in Conversation**
  - Person first language is important because it centers the individual before their illness (person with "illness" i.e., depression)
  - In certain communities, the condition IS important to be mentioned first such (i.e., in the deaf community)

- **Confront and Advocate About Mental Health**
  - _Challenging and questioning stigma_
    - In the workplace
    - Family and friends
    - In yourself
  - _Being an ally/advocate_
    - Getting involved with mental health organizations such as NAMI and volunteering
  - Engaging in community and political work

- **Continuing Education and Setting Goals**
  - It is important to continuously educate oneself and others about stigma, stereotypes, and discrimination
  - _Promoting Recovery Attitudes_
    - Community integration
      - Replace public stigma with commitment to helping people achieve their goals in their community
    - Personal Empowerment
      - Ensuring that people with SMI have complete control of their own life (shared decision making)

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