Active In Spreading Mental Health Awareness

The societal perception of mental illness won’t change if we don’t act to change it. It's up to us to tell others what it means to experience a mental health condition. Mental illness is real, and it isn’t always in a person’s control. People who live with mental health conditions are not alone—there is hope.

For us, StigmaFree is more than a campaign—it’s the foundation of our movement to create a better world for people affected by mental illness. No real improvements will happen—to the health care system, to treatments, to research—if mental illness isn’t understood first. Monumental change won’t happen until people realize the harm stigma creates for millions of Americans.

StigmaFree is our way of pushing towards this monumental change. Each person who takes the StigmaFree pledge helps us get one step closer. So, this Mental Health Month, join the movement, take the pledge and be StigmaFree. We need to show the world that we are all #IntoMentalHealth.

Source:

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Some people believe that focusing on fighting stigma is a worthless cause. They wonder why NAMI pushes our StigmaFree campaign so much. Why does being StigmaFree matter? What difference does it really make?

Because of stigma, those who experience mental illness are often labeled and seen as their condition—and nothing more. They are often:

- Held responsible for their conditions.
- Expected to change their thoughts and behaviors.
- Avoided, isolated and ostracized.
- Viewed as unpredictable, erratic and sometimes dangerous.

Considered incapable or unable to make rational decisions.

Living with a mental health condition is already challenging, and the added burden of stigma leads to tragic outcomes. According to the CDC, more than 41,000 individuals take their own life each year. Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death among adults in the U.S. and the 3rd leading cause of death among people aged 10-24. We need to step up to fight stigma and prevent suicide.

So, you see, StigmaFree is not just some marketing campaign—it’s an individual’s all-encompassing approach to mental illness. When you are StigmaFree, you are:

Open To Conversations About Mental Health

To reduce mental illness-related stigma, we need to feel comfortable having conversations about it. It used to be that cancer was “taboo” to talk about, but through open and honest conversations, cancer became de-stigmatized. The more we talk about mental health conditions, the more normalized it becomes. Starting the conversation is the first step.

Respectful With Language

Words are powerful—they can both heal and harm. We need to watch our words when talking about mental illness:

- Use person-first language. A person is not defined by a condition, and someone should not be addressed as such. A person experiences bipolar disorder—he’s not bipolar. A person experiences mental illness—she doesn’t belong to a group called “the mentally ill.”

- Be cautious when talking about suicide. Suicide is a sensitive topic and should be talked about in a way that is respectful to the person and their loved ones. A person is “lost to suicide” or “died by suicide” rather than “committed suicide.” If a person tries to take their life, they “attempted suicide” opposed to “had an unsuccessful suicide.”

- Challenge misconceptions. If you hear people use stigmatizing or harmful language, let them know.

- Don’t use mental health conditions as adjectives. You shouldn’t call yourself “OCD” because you like to organize or say the weather is “bipolar” because it keeps changing. This undermines legitimate diagnoses.

Don’t refer to someone as “crazy,” “psychotic” or “insane.” For people going through challenging symptoms beyond their control, it can be very harmful to be labeled as “crazy” on top of it all.

Don’t use the term “others” or “abnormal.” Referring to people experiencing mental illness as “others” or “abnormal” creates an “us versus them” narrative. This can make people with mental illness seem inferior, different and as though they’re the outliers of society—which they are not.

Understanding Of What You Might Not Understand

It’s challenging to understand something you’ve never experienced. And it’s easy to think that people are exaggerating or making up symptoms for attention, but this mindset is dangerous and hurtful.

Living with a mental health condition makes everyday tasks—like going to work, spending time with friends and getting out of bed in the morning—more difficult. If an employee needs a sick day for mental health or if a friend cancels plans at the last minute, try to be understanding and empathetic. You never truly know what someone else is going through.

The difference between the two is clear: stigma versus understanding and support. You can make a positive impact on someone’s mental health just by offering a few kind words. A few minutes of your time can change a person’s life.