

## CAPE Exercise for Webinar 2

### Reducing the Stigma of Mental Illness and Substance Abuse

#### **Instructions:**

During Webinar 2, we will have a discussion about what we can do to reduce stigma towards mental illness and substance abuse, both in our own lives and in the communities in which we live. Please read the following information and come prepared to discuss the kinds of stigma that the individuals in these scenarios may face at the level of self, family, and network (see additional information on each of these on page 2), and the action steps from the resources listed on pages 3-7 that you think would be best to reduce this stigma:

**Scenario 1:** Barbara is a 36-year-old wife and mother of three living in a community of 50,000 population. She was a professional graphics designer. About five years ago, she suffered a serious auto accident, injuring her leg. She underwent multiple surgeries and was given pain medications. While her injuries seemed to heal, her family, co-workers, and people in the community began to notice changes in her behavior. She missed a lot of work seeing new specialists. People began speculating that she sometimes appeared to be drunk at church and work. Others reported hearing many loud arguments in the household. Her children became unruly in school and were frequently absent. Eventually, she lost her job. More recently, she “left town” for over a month. She’s back now and looking for new work.

What do you think was going on in Barbara’s life? What do you think Barbara’s neighbors, friends, and co-workers thought? Would Barbara face any stigma as she moves forward with her life? What can be done to help Barbara?

**Scenario 2:** James is now 28. He lives in a town 28,000 people. He was always well known as a troublemaker in school and had frequent skirmishes with local law enforcement officials. Many knew him as a “druggie.” He dropped out of school, and eventually was sentenced to seven years in the state penitentiary for dealing drugs to support his own drug habit. He has since been released and is now back in the community. He says he wants to earn a GED, get a job, and go to college.

What do you believe people in the community think of James? Would he face any stigma as James moves forward with his life? What might be the sources of stigma James may encounter? What can be done to help James?

**Scenario 3.** Kate is 19, has left home, and is looking for a job. Lately, she is finding it very hard to get to sleep at night and then get out of bed in the morning. She has not had a job interview for a long time and has difficulty paying her bills. Her friends have noticed she doesn’t want to come out with them any more. She has been going to different doctors to get sleeping pills to help her sleep at night. She now has a full drawer of different types of prescription drugs. She has been talking a lot about how hopeless things are, and that things are never going to change for her.<sup>1</sup>

Do you believe there is something wrong with Kate? What are the clues about Kate’s behavior that might suggest Kate is in distress and might need help? If you were Kate’s friend, what would you do?

## ***Background Information on Stigma***

### **Definition of Stigma:**

“Stigma refers to a cluster of negative attitudes and beliefs that motivate the general public to fear, reject, avoid, and discriminate against people with mental illnesses. Stigma is widespread in the United States and other Western nations. Stigma ... leads to low self-esteem, isolation, and hopelessness. It deters the public from seeking and wanting to pay for care. Responding to stigma, people with mental health problems internalize public attitudes and become so embarrassed or ashamed that they often conceal symptoms and fail to seek treatment.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Why is reducing stigma important?<sup>3</sup>**

Reducing stigma will:

- Help people better recognize mental illness and be more equipped to avert harmful acts.
- Help those who struggle with mental health to obtain the best help and treatment.
- Reduce discrimination and hostility against people with mental health illness, thereby empowering them for more successful outcomes.
- Better enable caregivers and loved ones to have the most effective support for those who need it.
- Result in a safer society for us all, as those who deal with the most severe diagnoses will be less likely to render harm to themselves or others.

Stigma in relation to mental health exists at multiple levels.<sup>4</sup> In relation to **Self**, we may apply stigma to ourselves when we need mental health assistance. The sense of shame we may feel can prevent us from admitting a problem exists and seeking appropriate help.

We may observe mental health stigma among family members within our own household. Referring to the **Family Target Group**, we may choose to eradicate it from within ourselves and other family members, just as many have striven to do with racial prejudice.

We may observe and believe a person we encounter is in need of mental health assistance. The **Patient Person** may feel stigma and display denial and resistance to the notion of seeking assistance.

Finally, mental health stigma is often pervasive within the broader **Network Community** in which we live. It often can be observed in public communication and commonly held attitudes encountered.

## ***Five Resources that Detail how to Reduce Mental Health Stigma***

### **Resource 1: 5 Simple Steps to Reduce Stigma about Mental Illness.<sup>5</sup>**

*Don't label people who have a mental illness.* Don't say, "He's bipolar" or "she's schizophrenic." People are people, not diagnoses. Instead, say "He has a bipolar disorder" or "She has schizophrenia." And say "has a mental illness" instead of "is mentally ill." All of this is known as "person-first" language, and it's far more respectful, for it recognizes that the illness doesn't define the person.

*Don't be afraid of people with mental illness.* Sure, they may sometimes display unusual behaviors when their illness is more severe, but people with mental illness aren't more likely to be violent than the general population. In fact, they are more likely to be victims of violence. Don't fall prey to other inaccurate stereotypes, such as the deranged killer or the weird co-worker depicted in the movies.

*Don't use disrespectful terms for people with mental illness.* In a research study with British 14-year-olds, the teens came up with over 250 terms to describe mental illness, and the majority were negative. These terms are far too common in our everyday conversations. Also, be careful about using "diagnostic" terms to describe behavior, like "that's my OCD" or "she's so borderline." Given that 1 in 4 adults experience a mental illness, you quite likely may be offending someone and not be aware of it.

*Don't be insensitive or blame people with mental illness.* It would be silly to tell someone to just "buckle down" and "get over" cancer, and the same applies to mental illness. Also, don't assume that someone is okay just because they look or act okay or sometimes smile or laugh. Depression, anxiety and other mental illnesses can often be hidden, but the person can still be in considerable internal distress. Provide support and reassurance when you know someone is having difficulty managing their illness.

*Be a role model.* Stigma is often fueled by lack of awareness and inaccurate information. Model these stigma-reducing strategies through your own comments and behavior and politely teach them to your friends, family, co-workers and others in your sphere of influence. Spread the word that treatment works and recovery is possible. Changing attitudes takes time, but repetition is the key, so keep getting the word out to bring about a positive shift in how we treat others.

### **Resource 2: U.N.I.T.E. Acronym the can help reduce stigma<sup>3</sup>**

*U: Understand.* This means we need to educate ourselves and learn all we can about mental health issues. If you don't know the signs of depression, or if you don't understand words like "psychosis", or you aren't sure why a particular child with autism might act a certain way, then you need to take the time to learn and understand. Understanding is the first key to ending

stigma. Absorb information. Be a 'sponge' and learn about this vast world that psychologists have expounded on for more than a hundred years.

*N: Nurture Mental Health.* In today's health-conscious society, we hear all the time about proper bodily nutrition. We are inundated with the right ways to eat, diet, and exercise. You can turn on your TV and within minutes you will see some kind of ad about taking care of your body. But just as important as nurturing your body, is nurturing your mental health- your emotions, and inner self. We must be aware of our own emotional health, and that of our children and loved ones. Do things to nurture the mental health of yourself and your family and encourage others to do so. Don't just take care of your body, take care of your inner self as well.

*I: Include Others.* Inclusiveness is critical and a key part of reducing stigma. People who have mental illness often have compounding difficulties when they also have to deal with the terrible effects of shame and humiliation. Remember to include everyone. Treat all as equal. Do not discriminate. We must be more inclusive as a society, so that no one is left out. Promoting diversity is a vital part of advancing inclusion.

*T: Talk.* Start talking! Start speaking up- whether in forums, in blogs, in person, to your family, or friends...everywhere. When you are on your social media channels, and there is an opportunity to talk about mental health awareness, take it. When you learn of an event or tragedy in the news and people want to blame or focus on things like politics, gun control, or movies...bring up the topic of mental health. Far too many times after a tragedy, politicians act quickly to score points and take the spotlight away from mental health and put it on policy debates. Mental health is apolitical. It doesn't care about partisanship, and if this fight will be successful, we need to talk about mental health awareness and bring it to light. Initiate the discussion. Shine a light on the realm of mental health so people can start thinking about it, and focusing on it. Teach others what you have learned.

*E: Embrace Therapy.* Here is a sentence that all of our society should believe: "There is no shame in therapy." We must stop this notion of embarrassment over seeing a therapist. When an employee tells someone at work "I have a doctor's appointment", no one bats an eye. But, to say "I have an appointment with my counselor (or psychologist)" suddenly people start mumbling, "Oooh, did you hear so-and-so is seeing a therapist? Must be dealing with something serious"...and thus the rumor mill begins to churn, and stigma has won. We call on people everywhere to please stop this and take a new and brighter view of the work of therapists and mental health professionals. A doctor helps to take care of our physical health, just like a therapist is there to help take care of our mental health. There is no shame in seeing a therapist. We need to start recognizing the many benefits that therapy can give us, and view it as something positive. Talk about counseling and therapy openly as something that is healthy, and not shameful. Therapy is a good thing. We can say it, and fully believe it, because it is true.

### **Resource 3: Mental Health: Overcoming the Stigma of Mental Illness<sup>6</sup>**

*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 psychological counseling, educating yourself about your condition and connecting with others with 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 with mental illness, their families and the general public. Some state and federal agencies and programs, such as those that focus on vocational rehabilitation or the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), offer support for people with mental health conditions.

*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 health condition 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.

#### **Resource 4: Top 10 Ways to Reduce Mental Health Stigma<sup>7</sup>**

So how do we fight stigma? Here are ten ways from Dr. Otto Wahl of George Mason University:

*Learn more about mental illness.* Knowledge is power. When I was first diagnosed with BPD, I knew next to nothing about it. Now I know that my emotions are not always stable, that I have a propensity to abuse alcohol, that my relationships are often conflicted, and that I self-injure. I also learned that there is treatment, such as schema therapy. The more you know, the better off you'll be.

*Talk to individuals who have experienced mental illness, especially those with your diagnosis.* Healthy Place blogs are a good place to start—we all are open about our situations. Many people with mental illness can share stories of what is stigmatizing, how stigma affects them, and how they would like to be treated.

*Avoid using stigmatizing language, such as “nutcase”, “lunatic”, “maniac”, “psycho”, etc.* Also, avoid using depersonalizing language. Refer to a person as “a person with” instead of just by their diagnoses—people are more than their diagnoses, hence the name of this blog. For example, “person with borderline personality disorder” instead of “borderline.”

*Monitor the media.* The National Alliance of Mental Illness Stigma Busters, the NMHA, and the National Stigma Clearinghouse protest such material by contacting the people responsible for the material. Consider joining one of these organizations.

*Respond to stigmatizing material in the media.* Remember, you vote with what you watch and with your wallet.

*Speak out about stigma.* Educate others. Silence is often complicity. Most people have stigma because they're ignorant, not malicious. When called on it, people often change their opinions.

*Talk candidly about mental illness.* How can we fight stigma if we don't address the issue? As a line in the play *Nobody Needs to Know* by Carol Bozena says, “If you're ashamed of who you are and what you've been through, how can you expect anyone else to act any differently?”

*Demand change from elected officials.* A good place to start is by demanding mental health courts. Many times people need treatment but get jail—mental health court is one way to fight this.

*Support stigma-fighting organizations.* Even if you can't contribute financially, encouraging mail could help.

*Contribute to research.* If mental illness can be understood and treated, stigma will be reduced.

## **Resource 5: Seven Important things we can do to reduce Stigma and Discrimination<sup>8</sup>**

*Know the facts.* Educate yourself about mental health problems. Learn the facts instead of the myths.

*Be aware of your attitudes and behavior.* We've all grown up with prejudices and judgmental thinking. But, we can change the way we think! See people as unique human beings, not as labels or stereotypes. See the person beyond their mental illness; they have many other personal attributes that do not disappear just because they also have a mental illness.

*Choose your words carefully.* The way we speak can affect the way other people think and speak. Don't use hurtful or derogatory language.

*Educate others.* Find opportunities to pass on facts and positive attitudes about people with mental health problems. If your friends, family, co-workers or even the media present information that is not true, challenge their myths and stereotypes. Let them know how their negative words and incorrect descriptions affect people with mental health problems by keeping alive the false ideas.

*Focus on the positive.* People with mental health and substance use problems make valuable contributions to society. Their health problems are just one part of who they are. We've all heard the negative stories. Let's recognize and applaud the positive ones.

*Support people.* Treat people who have mental health problems with dignity and respect. Think about how you'd like others to act toward you if you were in the same situation. If you have family members, friends or co-workers with substance use or mental health problems, support their choices and encourage their efforts to get well.

*Include everyone.* In Canada, it is against the law for employers and people who provide services to discriminate against people with mental health and substance use problems. Denying people access to things such as jobs, housing and health care, which the rest of us take for granted, violates human rights. People with mental health and substance use problems have a right to take an equal part in society. Let's make sure that happens.

## References:

<sup>1</sup> Australia Department of Health. 1997. Research and Consultation Among Young People on Mental Health Issues: Final Report.

<https://www.health.gov.au/internet/publications/publishing.nsf/Content/mental-pubs-r-recons-toc>

<sup>2</sup> The President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health. 2003. *Achieving the Promise: Transforming Mental Health Care in America*. Page 4.

<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/mentalhealthcommission/reports/FinalReport/downloads/downloads.html>

<sup>3</sup> Theravive. 2017. What Is Mental Health Stigma? <http://www.theravive.com/end-stigma/>

<sup>4</sup> Byrne, Peter. 2000. "Stigma of Mental Illness and Ways of Diminishing It." *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, 6 (1) 65-72. <http://apt.rcpsych.org/content/6/1/65>

<sup>5</sup> Susman, David. 2015. "5 Simple Steps to Reduce Stigma about Mental Illness." The Mental Health and Wellness Blog. <http://davidsusman.com/2015/04/30/5-simple-steps-to-reduce-stigma-about-mental-illness/>

<sup>6</sup> Mayo Clinic. 2014. "Mental Health: Overcoming the Stigma of Mental Illness." Diseases and Conditions. <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/mental-illness/in-depth/mental-health/ART-20046477>

<sup>7</sup> Oberg, Becky. 2014. "Top 10 Ways to Reduce Mental Health Stigma." Healthy Place: America's Mental Health Channel. <http://www.healthyplace.com/blogs/borderline/2014/07/top-ten-ways-to-reduce-mental-health-stigma/>

<sup>8</sup> Pathstone Mental Health. 2017. "Seven Important Things We Can Do to Reduce Stigma and Discrimination." <https://www.mendthemind.ca/stigma/seven-important-things-we-can-do-reduce-stigma-and-discrimination/>

## Recommended Reading

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. 2006. *Developing a Stigma Reduction Initiative*. <https://www.overdosefreepa.pitt.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/SAMHSA-Stigma-Reduction-Initiative.pdf>

Landry, Mim. 2012. *Anti-Stigma Toolkit: A Guide to Reducing Addiction-Related Stigma*. 2012 Edition. The Danya Institute on behalf of the Central East Addiction Technology Transfer Center. <https://attcnetwork.org/centers/central-east-attc/anti-stigma-toolkit-guide-reducing-addiction-related-stigma>