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Mental Illness Stigma

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A colleague recently shared with me that she has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. I am familiar with mental health issues, having family members who suffer from them, but have begun noticing that others in my office are somewhat evasive toward her now. What can I do to help them feel more comfortable with mental health issues?

The surgeon general's 1999 report on mental health notes a strong consensus that "our society no longer can afford to view mental health as separate and unequal to general health" and that stigma "deprives people of their dignity and interferes with their full participation in society." From the vantage point of the surgeon general's report, if we are to improve mental health and mental health care in the coming years, we must address stigma.

Many of us are not afraid of mental illness, but we may not understand it either. Think about how it would feel to be rejected, not invited, stared at, talked about and told to snap out of it. That's the way stigma affects those with a mental illness.

Mental illness has been recognized for centuries, yet stigma continues to live silently but actively in our communities. This year alone, 1 in 4 people will develop a mental illness. One in 10 will develop a mental illness serious enough that it will affect their functioning at home, at work or in the community.

Mental illnesses are medical conditions that disrupt a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others and daily functioning. Just as diabetes is a disorder that diminishes the body's ability to perform a vital function, mental illnesses are medical conditions that often result in diminished capacity for coping with the ordinary demands of life. Mental illnesses can affect persons of any age, race, religion, or income. Mental illnesses are treatable and between 70 percent and 90 percent of individuals receiving treatment have significant reduction of symptoms and improved quality of life.

How can we change mental illness stigma? We all have a role in creating a mentally healthy community that supports recovery and social inclusion and reduces discrimination. Simple ways to help include:
- Learn and share the facts about mental health and illness
- Get to know people with personal experiences of mental illness
- Speak up in protest when friends, family, colleagues or the media display false beliefs and negative stereotypes
- Offer the same support to people when they are in physical or mental distress
- Don't label or judge people with a mental illness; treat them with respect and dignity as you would anyone else
- Don't discriminate when it comes to participation, housing and employment
- Talk openly of your own experience of mental illness. When mental illness remains hidden, people continue to believe that it is shameful and needs to be concealed.

Stigma is real, it is powerful, and most importantly stigma prevents people from getting the care and help they need. The stigma associated with mental illnesses has produced real barriers to effective treatment and recovery. It is time to take these barriers down.