

# Stamp Out Stigma during May: Mental Health Awareness month

May is Mental Health Awareness Month. This is an opportunity to increase public awareness of mental health conditions. We can break down the stigma by ending the silence. About 1 in 5 Americans experience mental illness. It is important to be able to talk openly about it to get people the help they need. It is particularly timely this year, as we are seeing stigma associated with COVID-19, and we must do what we can to stamp out stigma in all its forms.

## Understanding mental illness

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), a mental illness is a condition that affects a person's thinking, feeling or mood. Such conditions may affect someone's ability to relate to others and function each day. Each person will have different experiences, even people with the same diagnosis. If you have – or think you might have – a mental illness, the first thing you must know is that **you are not alone**. Mental health conditions are far more common than you think, mainly because people don't like to, or are afraid to, talk about them.

Mental illness can affect anyone regardless of age, gender, income, social status, religion or race/ethnicity.

- 1 in 5 U.S. adults experience mental illness each year
- 1 in 25 U.S. adults experience serious mental illness each year
- 1 in 6 U.S. youth aged 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year
- 50% of all lifetime mental illness begins by age 14, and 75% by age 24

Depression and anxiety disorders are the most common mental

health disorders worldwide.

The exact causes of mental illness are not fully understood. However, factors that can contribute to mental health problems include:

- Genes and family history
- Biological factors such as brain chemistry and brain injury
- Serious medical conditions
- The use of alcohol or other drugs
- Traumatic life experiences
- Isolation and other social factors

Mental illness is not a character flaw or something that a person can just “snap out of.” For many people, recovery – including meaningful roles in social life, school and work – is possible, especially when you start treatment early and play a strong role in your own recovery process.

Sadly, many people never seek treatment out of fear and shame. The stigma of having a mental illness or substance use disorder is two-fold: people suffer needlessly even though effective treatments are available, and they’re also at higher risk of premature death. For example, people with depression have a higher risk of heart disease and cancer. Studies also show that people with severe mental illness have a higher incidence of chronic diseases and tend to die 10 – 25 years earlier than the general population.<sup>1</sup>

## **Stamping Out Stigma**

Everyone experiences the ups and downs of mental health. Many people have a mental illness or know a friend or family member who has struggled with one. To stamp out stigma and get people the help they need NAMI offers these practical tips:

- Talk openly and honestly about your own experiences with mental illness and addiction.
- Educate yourself and others about the facts of mental illness. Mental disorders are treatable just as physical diseases are, and people with mental illness are not to blame for their condition.
- Recognize the signs of mental illness and seek professional help when needed.
- Show empathy for those living with mental health and substance use disorders.
- Be aware of your attitudes and language used to describe mental illness and people with mental illness. Jokes and name-calling are hurtful and perpetuate demeaning stereotypes.

Let's work together to Stamp Out Stigma!

Sources:

[1] Management Information Sheet. (n.d.). Retrieved from [https://www.who.int/mental\\_health](https://www.who.int/mental_health)

<sup>2</sup>Social Stigma associated with COVID-19. (2020, February). Retrieved April 10, 2020, from [https://www.unicef.org/media/65931/file/Social%20stigma%20associated%20with%20the%20coronavirus%20disease%202019%20\(COVID-19\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/media/65931/file/Social%20stigma%20associated%20with%20the%20coronavirus%20disease%202019%20(COVID-19).pdf)