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Mental Health

Mental health - Recognizing and Addressing Stigma at Work

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What is stigma?

Stigma is defined as negative attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours about or toward an individual or group of people because of a characteristic they share. Stigma can include stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination.

- **Stereotype**: believing unfairly that all people with a particular characteristic are the same

- **Prejudice**: negative feelings about a person or group because of perceived characteristics

- **Discrimination**: unfairly treating a person or group differently because of prejudice or stereotype

We can recognize a stereotype without being prejudiced or discriminatory. When we judge a person based on negative stereotype, our misunderstandings can lead to prejudice and discrimination.

What is the harm of stigma?

Stigma about mental illness, for example, can affect our attitude and behaviour towards people experiencing mental health issues, the workplace policies we make, and the quality of support we provide. Stigma and the fear of discrimination can also create barriers to appropriate diagnosis and treatment.

Stigma is harmful to the individual and the workplace. For the individual, stigma can lead to negative experiences at work, low self-esteem, discrimination, and fear of disclosing mental health issues and seeking treatment. For the workplace, stigma can lead to staff presenteeism and absenteeism, reduced productivity and engagement, difficulty attracting and retaining talent, difficulty implementing psychological health and safety initiatives, and increased costs related to mental health injuries and illnesses.

How do our words affect mental health stigma?

Our words and actions reflect the attitudes we have. The words we use can make a person who is living with a mental health issue feel like they have been labelled in a negative way, such as someone who is "unstable", "weak", or "inferior". At the same time, our words can be positive, break down negative stereotypes associated with mental health issues, and reduce barriers to accessing support.

Use person-first language

Person-first language means always putting the person first, not the mental health issue. This way of speaking focuses on the individual, not the disability or illness. The opposite is true in identity-first language, where the focus is on the disability or illness, not the individual.

Examples of person-first language and identity-first language:

Person-first language	Identity-first language
People with a mental health issue	The mentally ill
Person with a mental health issue	Crazy, insane
People/individuals without disabilities	Normal people
They're experiencing anxiety; they are living with depression	They're anxious; they're depressed
They're living with bi-polar disorder	They're bi-polar
They're living with schizophrenia	They're schizophrenic
They're affected by problematic substance use, alcohol use	They're an addict, a drunk

What can workplaces do to reduce stigma?

Workplace leaders can create a space where employees feel safe to ask for help. For example, leaders can share their own mental health experiences, showing disclosure and vulnerability as strengths instead of weaknesses. It is also important to support leaders through providing related training or asking for support from the human resources team.

When someone discloses to you that they are experiencing mental health issues, this opportunity can be used to help connect, provide support if you feel capable and comfortable, and suggest any additional resources you are aware of. Remember, you do not need to know the exact diagnosis or the details of the mental injury to provide support, only the functional abilities of the individual.

Workplaces should review aspects of the work and workplace to make sure it is not contributing to mental health issues or stigma.

Employers should:

- Assess existing workplace and workplace culture by reviewing internal data such as complaint reports, absenteeism and turnover rates, and resource usage rates.

- Evaluate all work processes, procedures, and policies to determine if mental health is included or considered

- Make sure measures are in place to prevent harm

- Implement a process that encourages self-disclosure or self-identification in a safe manner

- Provide education and training programs that will help everyone understand how their actions and words matter

What can individuals do to reduce stigma?

Follow these steps to help reduce stigma:

- Be aware of your attitudes and behaviours and choose your words thoughtfully

- Support others by treating everyone with dignity and respect

- Educate yourself about mental health issues

- Speak up when you hear or see stigmatizing attitudes or behaviours and educate others where you can

- When someone discloses to you that they're experiencing mental health issues, be compassionate and avoid comparing experiences or diminishing their feelings

Remember, we are all learning, so be kind to yourself too. If you use incorrect language, apologize sincerely, and try again. Being aware of our own attitudes and behaviours is key. Together, we can create a workplace culture that reduces stigma and empowers everyone to use the support available.

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