

## Self stigma

Mental illness is, and probably will always be, an enigma to some people. After all, how is it possible for people who have not had first hand experience of this condition, to have a real understanding of what it would be like?

Even after years of learning about the various forms of illness, how they manifest and how to treat them, the majority of mental health professionals can only relate to the experience on an academic level.

It has taken many years to reach the level of understanding the medical profession has about mental illness today; there is still much that is unknown. They are still trying to discover what causes it. How to treat it.

These people who have spent years learning about mental illness still don't have a complete understanding of this condition; is it any wonder that the average person in society may not have a complete grasp of the facts?

Both groups look for ways to explain a phenomenon we still don't understand. The 'man on the street' however, gets much of his knowledge of this subject from a different source than those working in mental health.

Health professionals learn in an academic environment, and are presented with a culmination of years of research – distilled as far as possible into proven facts.

Where does the average person learn about mental illness from? There are many possible sources

of information.

In my case for example, prior to being diagnosed with a mental health condition myself, my understanding of the matter came primarily from popular culture and the media.

The majority of this information was either untrue, or depicted in a way that exaggerated the negative side of the subject.

Mental illness is something that has probably existed as long as mankind itself; only quite recently have we begun to have a scientific understanding of what causes it, and how to treat it. It should come as no surprise that an accumulation of 'myth' and false belief surrounds the topic.

However, it is often the case that we will continue to believe even inaccurate information, until we are made to challenge it. This applies just as much to those with experience of mental illness, as it does to those without it.

The stigma and discrimination attached to mental illness has its roots primarily in ignorance. The information is available - thanks to the internet it has never been easier to find; most will never use the tools available to them, to challenge what they think they know.

Other people's negative beliefs about mental illness can have wide ranging effects on the lives of tangata whaiora, affecting their chances of living the lives they are truly capable of living.

**Perhaps the most destructive form of stigma and discrimination is that which comes from within—self, or**

**internalised, stigma. This is a very real burden that some with mental illness carry, believing that negative opinion truly describes them as people.**

Self stigma can discourage individuals from trying to improve their situation, meaning they may not realise their true potential. This personal barrier can be broken though, with inner strength and education.

Finding the strength, and other tools, to help combat self stigma was the focus of two workshops facilitated by Cecily Bull and Karen Wehle from Like Minds Taranaki, during Mental Health Awareness Week 2011. They were held in New Plymouth and Hawera.

I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to attend two of these workshops, to both offer my support and provide additional feedback.

Cecily and Karen did a great job, making those who attended feel at ease while discussing what can often be a difficult issue.

There was a relaxed atmosphere, and a real feeling that although this group had come together as strangers, we were all somehow unified by our experiences.

And perhaps this feeling of unity was one of the most important things to come out of these sessions—when battling the inner demon of self stigma, it's easy to feel isolated and alone. This feeling, however, is as illusory as the stigma itself.

Tony Spencer

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