

## **Mental illness stigma endures**

You would have to be mad to want to have a mental illness. No one would choose it. And people don't. Mental illness can be the most debilitating illness.

It is largely "hidden." Therefore most people often do not recognize it as a disability.

The nature and placement of former institutions and treatments of mental illness has done little to promote a positive image.

People with mental illnesses tend to be stigmatised and discriminated against in their search for accommodation, employment and a satisfying social existence.

Why this should be so is mystifying.

One in five people experience some form of mental illness at some stage in their lifetime.

There would be very few of us who have not either been one of that 20% or have known somebody so affected.

You would think there would be a lot more understanding about the experience of suffering and recovery from a mental illness.

The majority, with appropriate support, can return to their former health.

Yet sufferers of mental illness are, as a group, less likely to reenter the workforce.

Evidence from overseas suggests the mentally ill are capable of holding down high-pressure, skilled jobs. Yet the traditional solution for these people has been sheltered workshops, where, too often, repetitive, low-paid work is undertaken.

Either that or they are left to languish on a benefit where they are caught in a Catch-22 situation.

Mental illness, by its very nature, breeds low self-esteem and low self-confidence.

This doesn't improve within the welfare system, as many who have been on a benefit will attest.

There are a certain percentage of people with a serious mental illness who may always be unable to cope on their own. But the majority can manage their condition enough to lead fully productive lives.

They want to work as much as the next person and they deserve the opportunity to do so.

The Government is pushing for a reduction on the number of people on invalid and sickness benefits.

This is heartening news for those able to return to the workforce.

Their task is difficult as they are, as yet, unable to address the reason why many with a mental illness are not getting work. That is attitude.

Those with a mental illness have disadvantages the "well" do not.

If they are honest about the reason for gaps in their work history, they are in danger of not getting a job.

Yet if they keep their illness quiet, they may lay themselves open to charges of deceit.

Employment is of huge benefit to the person with a mental illness, bolstering their self-view and assisting in their recovery.

In Taranaki there are two employment agencies specialising in placing people with mental health issues back into real work.

These are Nga Pukenga Hei Whai Mahi and Workwise.

The former offers a predominantly Kaupapa Maori service and the latter a predominantly mainstream service.

Both services have achieved success in getting their clients into work.

The importance of their work cannot be over-emphasised and it is work that needs to be valued accordingly.