

The price of Self or Internalised Stigma...

When we think about stigma and discrimination, for the most part, we think of the stigma and discrimination portrayed by others towards people with a mental and/or physical disability. It can so often be hurtful and life changing.

“Stigma” refers to a set of attitudes and beliefs held by individuals and society at large that are based on social values. “Stigma” is like a ‘stamp of disapproval’ carried by an individual, like the mark of shame and disgrace. Too often ‘stigma’ leads to ‘discrimination’.

‘Discrimination’ is the *‘unfair treatment* of a person, racial group, minority, action based on prejudice.

Discrimination has people with a mental and/or physical illness evicted from their place of residence, fired from their jobs, distanced and treated with shame from their friends, family and colleagues – and ostracised from their communities.

Is it any wonder then that when people are struggling to fight the discrimination they face in their own communities – that many people experience difficulty in dealing with the self or internalised discrimination going on in their own heads?

Self or internalised stigma can be defined as, ‘negative thoughts towards yourself that are based on the fact that you have a mental and/or physical illness.’

Recent research by the Mental Health Foundation (NZ) has noted that there is a difference between self-stigma and self-discrimination.

‘Self-Stigma’ has been described as an attitude, for example that you think you are useless because you have a mental and/or physical disability. ‘Self-discrimination’ is behaviour that arises from this attitude, for example, you stop yourself from applying for a job because you feel you are useless.

And so people with a mental and/or physical illness not only need to combat societal stigma and discrimination, but also their own.

This is why it is so important to combat the stigma and discrimination that occurs on a daily basis in our communities. But that is only part of the problem. We also need to ensure that health authorities and professionals work harder towards helping people combat self-stigma and self-discrimination. This is just as important, perhaps more important, than the provision of the best and most expensive therapies and medications available.

The price of self and internalised stigma is too high and too damaging to be left to chance.

Next year the Mental Health Foundation will work towards developing guidelines on how to overcome self or internalised stigma. In the meantime, the Foundation is saying, “believe in yourself and your own ability to fight negative stereotyping, whether it is in your head or someone else’s.”

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