Stigma and its Consequences for Youth

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Stigma is a growing policy issue world-wide

Stigma a key barrier to mental health and mental health reform. The fight against stigma and its consequences is the most important challenge of our time.

Learning Objectives

At the close of this presentation, you will have a better understanding of:

- the stigma process as it pertains to people with a mental illness
- The implications of stigmatization for the self, family members, and broader systems
- The importance of targeting anti-stigma efforts to youth
A Tour of Terms

Prejudice
- A negative attitude that is resistant to change
- Reflects negative stereotypic characterizations

Discrimination
- Unfair and unjust treatment

Stigmatization
- Not a mark or an attitude, but a complex social process involving prejudice and discrimination
- Only powerful groups can stigmatize
- Embedded in a social justice framework

Literacy
- Knowledge about symptoms of mental illnesses, their treatments, and available services
- May be adversely affected by stigma

Escher: Tower of Babel
The Nature of Stigma

- **Structurally Imposed**
  - Social and organizational structures
  - Overt and covert

- **Socially imposed**
  - Individual and group interactions

- **Self-imposed**
  - Internalized stereotypes
General Consequences of Stigma

Human Rights Violations

- Social marginalization & exclusion
- Inequitable access to health and social services
- Unemployment & under-employment
- Poverty & disadvantage
- Lack of stable or safe housing
- Premature mortality (all cause)
Stigma reverberates widely....

- Among people with a mental illness
- Family members and friends
- Mental health professionals
- Mental health delivery systems
- Mental health research community
- Businesses and workplaces
- Educational systems
Why Focus on Youth?

- Youth at high risk for mental health problems/illness
- Most international anti-stigma programs target youth
- Opening Minds Anti-stigma Initiative – youth among the first target groups addressed
- Canadian youth, at particularly high risk of mental health problems
12-month Stigma Impact by Age Group (weighted % of those treated for a mental health condition in the past year who reported some stigma impact)

Students have leverage
Stereotypes begin early…
Media socialization begins early

- **Television as teacher**
  - TV occupies more time than any other activity
  - By the time children go to school they have watched the equivalent of three school years of TV
  - By the time they are adults, they have witnessed many thousand media murders involving someone who is mentally ill

- **Media images teach children**
  - How to think about mental illness & treatments
  - What words to use to refer to mental illness
  - How to react to people who are mentally ill
  - What will happen to them if they become mentally ill
  - Whether to feel embarrassed ashamed, or guilty if they have a mental illness
Programs aimed at children under 10

• 50% of programs aimed at children under 10 contain references to mental illness
• One in five main characters are portrayed as mentally ill or unbalanced
• Mentally ill characters are objects of amusement, derision, & fear
• Disparaging terms are used to link mental illness to loss of control
• Denigrating language is used to segregate & alienate
Disney Cartoons

85% contain verbal references to mental illness or characters that act in ‘crazy’ ways

• Dumbo’s mad elephant mother was killed
• Belle’s father in Beauty and the Beast was crazy and needed to be locked up
• Hyenas in the Lion King were depicted as crazy and the craziest bit its own leg
High School Stereotypes

Source: Youth Pilot Projects, Opening Minds, Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2013
Stigma entrenched by adulthood

Stigma
Donna, Canada, 2003
Schools are an important intervention point

- The majority of mental disorders begin during young adulthood so youth are a high risk group for stigma
- Students are interested in mental health and eager to learn
- Access to youth in schools makes targeted programs feasible and cost-effective
- Students bring a sense of social justice to the table that is important in fighting stigma
- Schools can create mentally healthy environments and model non-stigmatizing behaviours
Yet...

- Traditional school-based public health programs avoid mental health issues
- School bullying and violence is an increasing problem
- Mental health education seen as outside of the mandate of “education”
- Materials often outdated and inaccurate
- Teachers do not feel confident to provide materials (need training)
- Links to the mental health community are often weak

1 out of 5 children has a diagnosable mental health disorder
Stigma reduction should be an important educational goal

- School curricula must routinely address mental health and mental illness
- Contact-based education reduces stereotypes and socially distancing intentions
- We need to think about ways of creating mentally healthy schools where stigma does not impede disclosure and help-seeking
- We can empower students to actively pursue anti-stigma programming
A summit brings together students from various schools, along with school staff (teachers and administrators), to learn about mental health problems and mental illnesses and stigma, and to challenge the stereotypes and misconceptions that fuel stigma. Students learn to lead anti-stigma interventions in their own schools and communities.

Source: Mental Health Commission of Canada, Opening Minds Anti-stigma Initiative
• Contact Based Education (Talking About Mental Illness Programs) in High Schools Work

• Results from Opening Minds Youth Pilot Projects shows that interventions—though heterogeneous—tend to have a positive (moderate) effect on attitudes and behavioural proxies

Source: Koller and Stuart, 2016
It is time to...

- Advocate for anti-stigma programming in schools
- Support local advocacy groups (such as TAMI-like programs) in providing contact based education
- Help teach youth be critical of stereotypical images of mental illness
- Help youth look at things through a mental health lens and ask if they are fair
- Empower youth to be anti-stigma advocates
- Help teachers to gain the skills and confidence needed to include mental health and illness into lesson plans
Take Home Messages

- Three levels of stigma – structural, public, self
- Stigma has important health and social outcomes for people with a mental illness, those around them, and mental health support systems
- It is important to target anti-stigma efforts to youth
- Schools are an excellent point of entry
- We can all advocate for school based anti-stigma programs