**Op-Ed**

**Target Audience:**

* people with a mental illness
* those who are close to someone with a mental illness
* potential clients

*NOTE: This article could serve as a public service article rather than an op-ed. It offers tips people with a mental illness can use to overcome some of the stigma and discouragement of having a mental illness. The article below was written mostly by the Mayo Clinic staff. You can make it stronger by including your own story about addressing a mental illness—whether your own or a loved one’s illness—and the views of clients or others. Personalizing articles with quotes and examples that illustrate the points made in the article will increase the chances that the article will be considered for publication.*

**Tips for Overcoming the Stigma of Mental Illness**

Diseases of the body move others to sympathize, send get-well cards, and sometimes even help with daily tasks while the ill person regains strength. Not so with many diseases of the mind.

People with bipolar disorder are called psychotic, those with OCD are disparaged as anal-retentive, and other belittling catch-all terms denigrate anyone with any type of mental illness. “Wacko,” “demented,” “loony,” “nuts”— these are just a few of the 250 labels used to stigmatize people with mental illness (see a 2007 article published by *BMC Health Services Research,* <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1925070/>.

Unfortunately, negative attitudes and beliefs toward people who have a mental health condition are common. These reflexive and often unfounded beliefs create a stigma that leads to discrimination and adds to the challenges faced by people struggling with mental illness.

Discrimination may be obvious and direct, such as when someone makes a negative remark about your mental illness or suggests that mental health treatment is only for those too weak to tough it out on their own. Or it may be unintentional or subtle, such as when people avoid you because they assume you could be unstable, violent, or dangerous due to your mental health condition. You may even judge yourself harshly.

If you suffer from a mental illness, have you experienced any of these ways that stigma can be harmful to you?

* It can make you reluctant to seek help or treatment.
* You may feel isolated or poorly understood by your family, friends, co-workers, or others you know.
* Opportunities for jobs, schooling, or social activities may be limited, or you may have trouble finding housing.
* You’ve faced bullying, physical violence, or harassment.
* Your health insurance doesn't adequately cover your mental illness treatment.
* You believe that you'll never be able to succeed at certain challenges, or that regardless of effort, your situation is hopeless.

**Take the Sting Out of Stigma by Following These Seven Steps**

*\*\*The renowned Mayo Clinic has identified several tips to address stigma so the op-ed authors using this information can say they agree with those ideas and tips and the author can use them as examples and add examples from personal experience to illustrate some of the points made.\*\**

If you have a mental illness, here are some ways to overcome stigma and help regain mental health:

1. **Get treatment.** You may be reluctant to admit you need treatment. Don't let the fear of being labeled with a mental illness prevent you from seeking professional help. Treatment can provide relief by identifying what's wrong and reducing symptoms that interfere with your work and personal life.
2. **Prevent stigma from causing self-doubt and shame.** Stigma doesn't come only from others. You may mistakenly believe that your condition is a sign of personal weakness or that you should be able to control it without help. Seeking care from mental health professionals such as clinical mental health counselors, educating yourself about your condition, and connecting with others with mental illness can help you gain self-esteem and overcome destructive self-judgment.
3. **Avoid isolating yourself.** If you have a mental illness, you may not want to tell anyone about it. Your family, friends, clergy or members of your community can offer you support if they know about your mental illness. Reach out to people you trust for the compassion, support, and understanding you need.
4. **Refuse to equate yourself with your illness.** You are not an illness. So instead of saying, "I'm bipolar," say, "I have bipolar disorder." Instead of calling yourself "a schizophrenic," say, "I have schizophrenia."
5. **Join a support group.** Some local and national groups, such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org), offer local programs and Internet resources that help reduce stigma by educating people with mental illness, their families, and the general public. Some state and federal agencies and programs, such as those that focus on vocational rehabilitation or the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), offer support for people with mental health conditions.
6. **Get help at school.** If you or your child has a mental illness that affects learning, find out what plans and programs might help. Discrimination against students because of a mental health condition is against the law, and educators at primary, secondary, and college levels are required to accommodate students as best they can. Talk to teachers, professors or administrators about the best approach and resources. If a teacher doesn't know about a student's disability, it can lead to discrimination, barriers to learning, and poor grades.
7. **Speak out against stigma.** Consider expressing your opinions at events, in letters to the editor, or on the Internet. It can help instill courage in others facing similar challenges as well as educate the public about mental illness. (1)

Be aware that negative judgments about mental illness almost always stem from a lack of understanding. Learning to accept your condition and recognize what you need to do to treat it, seeking support, and helping educate others can make a big difference to your mental health and sense of well-being.

(1). <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/mental-illness/in-depth/mental-health/art-20046477>]

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