Stigma is a negative or shameful observation that can influences peoples' perceptions

Most people you know likely have a loved one, family member, or friend with a mental illness. In fact, there is a 20 percent chance you will have a mental illness. It's that common. Yet, there is still stigma around issues such as bipolar disorder, depression, and anxiety. Studies show that about 75 percent of those with mental illnesses feel stigma.

Stigma is how people can be viewed negatively due to their culture, circumstances, or illnesses. It's felt through fear and shame by others. It can also come from within a person or externally from society. Stigma can hurt relationships, work, and family, and make a person with an issue more afraid to seek help.

The following questions and answers will help you learn more about the nature of mental illness.

What is a mental illness?

It is an umbrella term for disorders of the mind. These can include event-specific issues that cause post-traumatic stress disorder, depression that is passed down from a parent to a child, or an illness like obsessive-compulsive disorder. The feelings can happen once, many times, or even be ongoing.

Some types of mental illnesses:

- Depression
- Anxiety disorders
- Bipolar disorders
- Psychotic disorders
- Mood disorders
- Personality disorders

Keep in mind that mental illnesses can be as broad and wide as physical illness.

How are mental illnesses diagnosed?

Just like with physical illness, there are some signs to watch for:

- Sudden social issues
- Problems at work or school
- Changes in sleeping, eating, or self-care
- Excessive drinking or drug misuse
- Mood changes
- Talk of taking one's life

Going to a primary care doctor might be the first step. After talking to a primary care doctor, the person might be referred to an expert. From there, the mental health doctor will work with the person to make a treatment plan. This can include therapy, medication, non-drug care, or a mix of them all. Lifestyle changes of eating habits, working out, and quitting smoking might be helpful as well.

Are people with mental illnesses more violent?

This is a myth that is furthered by headlines in the news. When a traumatic event, crime, or manmade disaster occurs, the media is quick to bring up the possibility of mental illness. A person with a mental illness is just as likely to be violent as a person without. It depends on many factors like background, availability of weapons, and motive. Conversely, a person with a mental illness is more likely to be a victim than a person without mental illness.

How do I refer to someone with a mental illness?

The mind and body are linked. People don't want a mental illness any more than they want a physical one. A person doesn't choose depression, just like they don't choose heart disease. Avoid language that is demeaning to a person with a mental illness and assume she is not as smart or as able as you.

Think about labels. We often treat people with cancer or other physical health issues as heroes. Terms like *brave* and *strong* are used to describe their "battle" with the disease. People with mental illnesses are more likely to be referred to in harmful terms like *paranoid* and *delusional*, and that they are "suffering from" their disorder. This may make those with mental illnesses feel hopeless.

People are not defined by their disorder but rather, have one. For example, a person is not *schizophrenic*—he has schizophrenia. Just like a person has the flu, but is not a *flu*. Referring to people as an illness, reduces their personal power and ability to see themselves as separate from it.

How can I help someone with a mental illness?

Treat the person as you would any family, friend, or co-worker. Keep in mind that having a mental illness is the same as having a physical one. Offer to:

- Be a good listener and ask what the person needs.

- Lend a helping hand in seeking treatment or talking with family about their disorder.

- Learn as much as you can about the disorder and help find resources.

Don't forget to help yourself. Being a caregiver or supporting friend can be hard.

How can I help myself?

If you think you have a mental illness, go to a doctor, friend, family member, or anyone you trust. Identifying your health problem will help get you on the path to treatment sooner. Try not to worry about stigma. There is no shame in taking care of yourself. Those that love you will want you to be well. The more you learn about your disorder, the more empowered you will feel.

People can—and do—recover from a mental illness, in the same way they recover from a physical illness.

*Source – Beacon Health Options