Breaking the Stigma in Mental Health

May is Mental Health Awareness month, and it is a good opportunity to work towards dismantling the mental health stigmas individuals face daily. Each year 1 in 4 adults suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder and that number only goes up when adding in adolescents. It is hard to believe with statistics like that mental health stigmas still exist, but they do. Although the culture towards mental health awareness has definitely shifted there is still more work to do. These stigmas typically come from misinformation, lack of information, stereotypes in the media, or just simply fear. There are three different types of stigmas to be aware of, institutional, public, and even self-stigmas.

Institutional stigma is a systemic issue regarding policies set by organizations and government that directly affect people with a mental illness—this can happen intentionally or unintentionally. Public stigma refers to how an individual is perceived throughout their interactions in their community. This can include negative labels, negative attitudes, and even discriminatory actions towards an individual struggling with their mental health. Then there is self-stigma, which is an individual's own negative perception or shame they feel when navigating their mental health. All of these things can lead to worsening symptoms and delay or even reduce the likelihood of even getting the treatment they need.

One very important thing we can do to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health is just by simply talking and sharing our own experiences. Putting faces and stories to a sometimes-daunting subject can help normalize, reduce the fear that some individuals have, and create a sense of comfort knowing there are others with the same experiences. A great way to do this and reach a wide audience is to use social media platforms. This can have a huge impact. Especially on teens and young adults as they are frequently online and looking for relatable information. In fact, a study done by Hope Lab and Well Being Trust found that teens and young adults suffering from moderate to severe depression are turning to the internet for help—specifically looking up personal anecdotes from individuals who have suffered in the past[1].

While not everyone may have personal stories about their own mental health to share there are several other things you can do to help. The National Alliance on Mental Illness suggests a series of things you can do to fight the stigmas that surround mental health[2]. Like previously mentioned, talking openly about mental health is huge, but it is just as important to educate yourself and others on the subject. Making a point to address misinformation when you come across it can have a far-reaching impact on how things are perceived going forward—this can be with individuals or even media outlets.

One of the most important things to be aware of is the language you are using, even when just talking with your friends. Saying things like "you're crazy" or "this weather is depressing" can uphold negative stereotypes surrounding mental health issues—simply put, our words matter. We also need to encourage and promote equality between physical and mental illness. A mental illness should be treated with the same respect as other more physical ailments such as heart disease or cancer. We need to make sure we are showing compassion for individuals who may be struggling. This may look different in various settings, but merely taking the time to listen to an individual's story can go a long way. Looking at a person as not just someone that needs help, but as someone's daughter, mother, aunt, etc. Asking yourself how would I want someone to treat my loved one?

Overall, just choosing to empower others as well as ourselves instead of living in silence and shame. Simple things like saying I see a therapist or psychiatrist can not only help you own your narrative, but help others find normalcy in such things as well. We wouldn't even think twice about saying we have a dentist appointment so why should treating our mental health be any different?

While there are things on a systemic or institutional level that seem to be out of our immediate control you can now see there are several things we can do as individuals to help reduce these biases that surround mental health. It is my hope that our culture continues to move towards the acceptance and normalization of all thing's mental health because quite frankly there are so many lives that are depending on it!

[1] Well Being Trust. (2022, February 8). Digital Health Practices, social media use, and mental well-being among teens and young adults in the U.S. Well Being Trust. Retrieved from https://wellbeingtrust.org/bewell/digital-health-practices-social-media-use-and-mental-well-being-among-teens-and-young-adults-in-the-u-s/

[2] 9 Ways to Fight Mental Health Stigma. NAMI. Retrieved from https://www.nami.org/blogs/nami-blog/october-2017/9-ways-to-fight-mental-health-stigma