You Can Help Fight Mental Health Stigma

Stigma refers to any attribute, trait, or disorder that causes a person to be labeled as unacceptably different. Negative stereotypes of people with mental illness fuel stigma, and they are just as inaccurate and dehumanizing as stereotypes of racial minorities, people with physical and developmental disabilities, women, and people from other diverse groups.

There are many ways that we can all help to fight stigma and make it easier for people with mental health issues to get needed help. Here are a few adapted from Otto Wahl's *Telling is Risky Business: Mental Health Consumers Confront Stigma*.

- **1. Learn more about mental illness.** When you are better informed about mental illness, you will be able to more efficiently evaluate and resist inaccurate and negative stereotypes. Information is available at websites such as www.apahelpcenter.org and our website, www.roosevelt.edu/counseling.
- **2. Listen to people who have experienced mental illness.** Stigma is diminished just by talking with someone who has a mental illness. Moreover, listen as they describe what they find stigmatizing, how stigma affects their lives, and how they would like to be viewed and treated.
- **3. Watch your language.** Don't use terms and expressions related to mental illness that perpetuate stigma, such as "crazy," "loony," or "nuts". Also, put the person before the mental illness: instead of saying "the schizophrenic" say, "the person who has schizophrenia".
- **4. Talk openly about mental illness.** While it is certainly up to you to decide who you're comfortable telling and how much you want to share, don't be afraid to let others know of your mental illness or the mental illness of a loved one. The more mental illness remains hidden the more people continue to believe that it is a shameful thing to be concealed.
- **5. Support mental health treatment**. If you need help, seek it. If someone you know needs help, encourage them to do so. By conveying support that seeking help is OK, you will help diminish stigma.
- **6. Speak up about stigma.** When someone you know misuses a psychiatric term, let them know what it really means. When someone tells a joke that ridicules mental illness or makes disrespectful comments about people with mental illness, let them know that you find such comments offensive and unacceptable.
- **7. Respond to stigmatizing material.** Write, call, or e-mail people who stigmatize. Express your concerns and provide the accurate information that they can use in the future. Maybe a commercial, a show, or a movie is portraying someone with mental illness in a stigmatizing fashion. There are organizations that want to know about these instances. These include: ADS Center at www.samhsa.gov/stigma and StigmaBusters at www.nami.org.
- **8. Demand change from your elected representatives.** Certain policies that perpetuate stigma can be changed if enough people let their elected representatives know that they want such a change.
- **9. Provide support for organizations that fight stigma.** The influence and effectiveness of organizations fighting mental illness depend to some extent on membership size. You can make a contribution by joining or volunteering.
- **10. Contribute to research related to mental illness and stigma.** To the extent that mental illness can be understood and treated, stigma will be reduced. Research will help us advance that treatment.