

## THE STIGMA OF MENTAL ILLNESS

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary that I found online, the definition of stigma is *“a set of negative and often unfair beliefs that a society or group of people have about something.”* Over the nearly 20 years that I have been a licensed counselor, the stigma of having a serious mental illness and how to challenge this has been frequently discussed and debated. There remains a great deal of fear and negative thinking related to serious mental illness and in particular symptoms of psychosis and schizophrenia.

Over the years, I have worked with many clients and families who were struggling with the effects of the diagnosis of schizophrenia and its symptoms. I’ve witnessed the fear and concern from both clients and their families as to how this diagnosis may affect the client’s current and future functioning. At times, clients fear letting others know what they are experiencing or what their diagnosis is due to the continued stigmas and myths that our society still holds about schizophrenia and related symptoms of psychosis.

The reality is that the stigma that others place on this diagnosis is based on false information. For the vast majority of individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia, they have no intention of harming anyone. They are often embarrassed by and fearful of their symptoms and the impact on their lives. Many want to be able to return to work or complete their education. Still others, want to either start or continue to build their own families. They simply want a life like anyone else and to not be defined by their symptoms.

Through the efforts of our First Episode Psychosis program, I hope over the next year to educate our communities about the realities of schizophrenia and its symptoms. By reducing the stigma towards serious mental illness, we can encourage those individuals affected by the diagnosis of schizophrenia and related symptoms to come forward and seek help more rapidly. We can more quickly engage with families in order to promote increased support for and understanding of the client and what they may be experiencing. Combined, these changes may aid in reducing the negative impact that these symptoms may have.

If you or a family member are experiencing the symptoms of schizophrenia for the first time, please contact us as soon as possible to begin seeking treatment. Our goal is to help you, your family, or other members of your support system in the process of learning about and coping with the symptoms of schizophrenia.

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