

SHATTERING
MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA

by Karlie Intlekofer, Ph.D.

Mental health stigma refers to negative beliefs and stereotypes about those who suffer from mental health issues. Understanding stigma — and how to fight it — can help you better serve all the people at your fitness facility, whether that means offering a helping hand to members, staff or even those in leadership positions.

The Foundations of Stigma

Stigma around mental health originates from several types of basic beliefs. First and foremost is the belief in an underlying cause of mental health issues that is easily fixable or under a person's control. Next is the perception of danger, in which it is assumed that mental health issues mean a person is likely to commit violent acts. Finally, there is an aspect of rejection and aversion, wherein others believe that those with mental health issues should keep to themselves. All these beliefs are harmful, and more importantly, patently untrue. Worse yet, because of these beliefs, stigmatized individuals are often hesitant to disclose their condition for fear of harsh judgment or stereotypes. As a fitness professional, it's important to remember that mental health issues are common, occurring in almost a quarter of adults each year.

Battling Personal Stigma

Mental health stigma can be internalized when we recognize the symptoms of mental health issues in our own behavior. Much like stigma from others, a consequence of personal stigma is a reluctance to seek help. Additionally, personal stigma often causes individuals to exclude themselves from social situations. This tendency to self-isolate when coping with symptoms occurs at all ages, including children and the elderly. Worst of all, studies reveal that the combination of high personal stigma and low social support are two of the top indicators of suicide risk. Lowering stigma, both personal and external, is an important target because many studies show that those with the lowest personal stigma are also the most willing to seek help when they need it.

Ending Stigma with Empathy

Empathy is the practice of putting yourself in another's shoes. When we imagine what another person is going through, we can better understand their emotional landscape. Studies suggest that empathy is an interpersonal skill that neutralizes negative attitudes about those around us. It reduces reluctance to connect to those with mental health issues and helps us feel closer to others.

As a fitness professional, one way to better develop your empathy is to get to know people who have mental health issues. Public disclosures from elite athletes have also helped reduce stigma, because they underscore how common these symptoms are, regardless of status or gender. Even pop artists who disclose anxiety or depression in their music can help us relate to the internal struggles many of us share.

Signs of Progress

Over the past few decades, surveys suggest that society is making headway in reducing stigma. This positive shift is most evident for major depression, which affects about one in 10 adults. For other conditions, stigma persists even though there are signs of progress. For example, surveys reveal that people are beginning to recognize that biology plays a role in conditions like schizophrenia and alcohol dependence. And compared to previous decades, people are now more willing to disclose symptoms to medical professionals. Best of all, those who seek treatment significantly improve their emotional stability after reaching out for help.

Fighting Stigma in the Fitness Industry

Whatever role you fill at your fitness facility, you can start combating mental health stigma today by simply opening the conversation with the people you serve and work with. By destigmatizing mental health issues with the people you see most, they'll be more likely to seek appropriate care when they need it. Ultimately, you can help everyone view visits to your fitness facility as an essential part of their self-care routine that improves both physical and mental health while satisfying the need for social support.

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