

Soul-Stirring Ways to Reduce the Stigma and Shame of Mental Illness

When someone you love is diagnosed with a mental illness (major depression, bipolar, schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder, PTSD, OCD), something ugly tends to rear its head, the two-headed monster of stigma and shame.

This monster gets its life from those who don't understand. They're either uninformed or misinformed. Has that been your child's teachers? Their friends? Their friend's parents? Your friends or co-workers? Family? When stigma and shame are directed at your son or daughter, or at you, the hurt runs deep. You become protective. Defensive. Angry. Sad. Embarrassed. At a loss for how to respond.

But if you were honest, maybe you'd admit that the monster has taken up residence in your mind too. It did in mine.

You need to hear these things. Write them down and look at them often:

- Don't believe your child's value in this world is diminished because of their mental illness.
- Refuse to accept embarrassment from those who have stereotypes—they may not realize they have them.
- Resist isolating because pulling away would be less painful. In the long run, withdrawing will hurt you and them even more.
- Affirm your child's worth regardless of their diagnosis. They're no less of a person.
- Accept that you have no control over what others think. Don't give them this power over you.
- Choose to build a supportive community. We need each other. We're not supposed to travel this road alone.

How can we lessen the stigma and shame society associates with mental illness?

I have two suggestions:

1. **Education and information.** Knowledge corrects misconceptions. Being informed leads to increased understanding, lessening fear and prejudice. It creates greater compassion and empathy. This was my experience. After I attended NAMI's Family to Family class I finally understood better what my daughter was going through. The result—more compassion and realistic expectations. Be sure to check out NAMI (the National Alliance on Mental Illness,) for resources and information.

2. **Honest and open dialogue.** When we hear empowering stories, they have a positive effect. Honest conversations reduce anxiety on the part of those who were previously uninformed. When we have no experience with something, we tend to shy away and avoid. We fear it. The topic of mental illness can be uncomfortable if we're ignorant, uninformed, or misinformed. We feel awkward, unsure of ourselves, of what to expect, of what to do and how to respond appropriately.

Authentic sharing helps everyone. Family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors will be less likely to treat those living with mental illness with attitudes of prejudice.

As we share our experiences, Mary Widdifield and Elin Widdifield say in their book *Behind the Wall*, that each can be "a little victory as we break through the stigma." Their book is a collection of stories of mental illness as told by parents. I think this sounds like a good book for my summer reading list.

The stigma attached to mental illness can be reduced when we do our part to learn all we can, talk about our experiences and encourage others to do the same.

Together we can make a difference.

We can create a more hopeful, welcoming world for those who struggle.

For more help check out: –The National Alliance on Mental Illness

This Bible verse encourages me:

“Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have held me by my right hand” (Ps. 73:23). {eoa}

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