Overcoming the Stigma Around Depression and Seeking Help

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The Stigma Around Depression and Seeking Help

A barrier to depression recovery is society's predisposition and attitudes toward mood disorders. The stigma around depression is the reason why so many suffer in silence and do not seek out help.

Understanding the Stigma Associated with Depression

Social stigmas are labels we use to identify groups based on their behavioral traits, especially if those traits differ from cultural norms. Much like the mark of Cain, depression appears to have its stigma.

People with depression find themselves experiencing stigma in some cases at high levels. The stigma associated with depression is complicated but is related to specific factors including:

- The condition itself
- Age and gender of the person
- Culture
- Beliefs held about depression

People with depression often report the stigma associated with depression is far worse than the condition. Stigma appears to come from a variety of sources, including family and friends, society, government and even one's personal beliefs about depression.

Evidence the Stigma Exists

Numerous research studies find many people have stereotypes towards people who suffer from depression. These views exist because from childhood; many are us told feeling this way is "not okay," or "crazy," or "abnormal."

One research study reported in *Depression Research and Treatment* found up to 58% of the study participants with mood disorders had significant stigma experiences.

Mood disorders fall under a group of diagnoses where a person's mood is believed to be the main characteristic. Depression is one of the most common and researched mood disorders.

Another study reported in the *Journal of Community Psychology* aimed to determine whether race played a part in the stigma based on both public and personal attitudes about depression and treatment.

What they found was that race played little part in attitudes about depression, both public and personal views about depression, and depression treatment played a much bigger role.

Why Does the Stigma Exist?

Despite its prevalence in modern society depression is still a taboo topic.

Which is shocking, considering that in 2015, 16.1 million American adults were diagnosed with major depressive disorder, according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America.

Major depressive disorder, also called clinical depression, is characterized by depressed mood and/or loss of interest, causing a significant impact on daily life.

The stigma around depression exists for many reasons, but most notably because of ignorance and misinformation and inflexible attitudes, stereotypes, and prejudices.

Ignorance and Misinformation

People tend to be ignorant about what they don't know, especially if they have never been depressed. While they are lucky, it is not an excuse to judge others who suffer from depression.

Others who stigmatize depression haven't taken the time to educate themselves about it.

Taking the time to understand what causes depression, how it manifests and how is treated will allow someone who has never experienced depression to recognize the warning signs, help a loved one who is suffering, and to offer empathy towards those living with depression.

Next page: Learn more about the attitudes and prejudices towards depressions, the specific types of stigma, and how to help yourself overcome the stigma around depression.

Attitudes and Prejudices

Society often has an inflexible view of what constitutes normal behavior, and depression doesn't fit that mold. Social stigmas tend to turn into stereotypes about depressed people, such as:

- They don't have willpower.
- Their emotions are out of control.
- They are a danger.
- They are either broken, defective or crazy.
- This person is antisocial.
- They are just making excuses.

Just like so many of you, I have been victim to these attitudes and stereotypes, sometimes coming from those closest to me. These views are dangerous because they can become self-perpetuating because we start to view ourselves in the way others perceive depression and that keeps us from seeking out treatment.

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Specific Depression Stigmas

There are different types of stigma associated with depression. These include:

- **Personal**. This view one held by people who believe people with depression can just snap out of it.
- **Perceived**. The view is based on the notion that everyone, or most people, believe that people with depression can and should just snap out of it.

- **Self-stigma**. This view is the one we hold about ourselves. We think that we can just snap out of depression.
- **Structural**. This is the public policy view which is reinforced when our politicians and government agencies discount the need for mental health services and research.

The Effect on Healing

Studies show fear of judgment deters many people from seeking treatment for depression.

One study from the *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* aimed to find out the impact that stigmatizing beliefs about depression had on seeking help for depression. What the researchers found was that self- and perceived-stigmatizing responses were present in these people's lives, and these beliefs were associated with their reluctance to seek out help.

Many of the study participants conveyed they were embarrassed to seek out help and believed that people in their lives would have negative responses to their doing so. Some even felt mental health professionals would respond negatively to them as well.

Most people who have undergone depression treatment have reported it has helped them. But according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only a third of people with major depressive symptoms report seeing a mental professional.

Considering that 90% percent of people with severe depression report difficulty at home and work due to depression symptoms, you would think that more people would seek out help. However, having the courage to seek treatment when the messages about depression are negative is a tough thing.

The consequences of untreated depression can be scary and even fatal. Untreated depression manifests into worsening depression which is more challenging to treat, thoughts of suicide that get worse without treatment, and other medical problems, including chronic pain that has no known source.

How to Help Yourself

It is important you educate yourself on the symptoms of depression, some coping skills for depression, and not wait until they are severe to seek out help. The longer you wait, the harder depression will be to treat even with both therapy and medication.

Symptoms of depression include:

- Feelings of hopeless and helpless
- Sleep problems, including sleeping too much or insomnia
- Loss of energy and motivation
- Withdrawing socially

If you don't know where to start in seeking help, ask your family doctor to recommend a mental professional who can help you. Most communities and hospitals also offer free and low-cost assistance.

If you are worried about family and friends won't be supportive, you can decide who and if you will reveal your depression too. And once you reveal you suffer from depression, you should expect that people will approach you with the stigma.

Don't let these types of people discourage you. Focus on surrounding yourself with people who are helpful and supportive, rather than disbelieving and judgmental.

Try to stay positive and knowledgeable about your condition. As some who lived with depression and struggled with the stigma surrounding it, I can tell you that it is possible to function and enjoy life despite depression but you

have to seek out help.