

### Stigma & How to Respond to Questions About Your Loved One – Issue 4 (May 1, 2020) *Summarized from our family groups by KJ Thomas, MSW, RSW*

It is encouraging to be able to say that we can celebrate the movement of mental health awareness, and new strides we are taking globally in bringing recognition, and understanding to mental health issues. Work places and other communities are beginning to recognize symptoms of mental health, and even be proactive in investing in mental health wellness. The reality is, although we've taken great strides in awareness, stigma still exists. No one knows this better than those who are directly affected by it. Stigma is a difficult and painful connection to mental illness, it is all too often tethered to shame received by others, and even ourselves. This week we wanted to spend some time discussing the reality and consequence of stigma, and how we can contribute to chiseling stigma out of society.

#### Tips for Reducing Stigma

- Be mindful of your language. Replace words that can make light of, or make fun of mental health issues. Rather than using words like “crazy, or nuts”, use words that reflect your meaning such as “unlikely, surprising, unexpected, or uncharacteristic”. When you hear other’s using language that you know could be hurtful, consider if there is an opportunity to raise awareness. Sometimes just gently speaking about your own understanding and experience can help others be more aware.
- When possible, join a group or take part in opportunities to raise awareness of the efforts to break stigma towards mental health. When we take opportunities to discuss and learn ourselves, we naturally grow more aware, and our opportunities to share with others grows as a result.
- Remember that mental health is a part of someone, but it is not the entire person. Do not mistake the symptoms of a mental illness as a full representation of who that person is. Often those living with mental illness have lived through some of the toughest circumstances, they have dug deep to find their own strength to help them cope, and they have become resilient in doing so. Furthermore, all people are multifaceted with various skills and characteristics.
- Caring for your own mental health, and finding a safe and supportive space to talk about it will help lift the burden of stigma that you may have experienced.
- The recognition of mental health can vary in communities and cultures, being mindful of the background of someone’s perceptions can lend in understanding where their bias stems from. This knowledge can help in eliminating some of the personal attack one may feel, or help equip a person in how to share their experiences and insights respectfully.
- Be aware of bias, and false representations of mental illness in media, such as people living with Schizophrenia being violent, or people living with depression being lazy. Public forms of sharing misconceptions is hurtful for the entire community, and especially those directly affected.
- Become a mental health ally by practicing the above tips, and standing with those who are affected by a mental illness. Show empathy, ask how someone is doing and how you can help, and be mindful of taking care of your own mental health.

### How to Respond to Personal Questions Asked About Your Loved One

It can be a difficult moment when someone is caught off guard being asked personal questions about someone they love. Often these questions come from a place of concern, or even genuine curiosity, but it still can present a challenge when one is wanting to be respectful of the person they care for. A good place to start, is having this conversation directly with the individual you are concerned about. Being transparent is a fair way to open communication and prepare yourself for future conversations with others. It may look like this; “Sometimes I get approached with questions about how you are or what you are up to, I want to make sure I am respecting your privacy, how would you be comfortable with me responding?” It’s okay to ask these questions directly, not only does it show that you respect how another feels, but also that you value their thoughts and opinions. People often remember how we make them feel, more than the specific things we do—seeking clarification and guidance also helps another to be reminded of their own significance and importance.

With mental illness being an invisible issue, sometimes we can find the words to describe what is happening difficult. Other ways of sharing information about your loved one, can be focusing on their abilities, accomplishments, interests, or positive characteristic. For example, if asked “How is John doing? Is he working, or in school?”, you might consider a response like “John has taken a keen interest in music these days, he’s been really happy with the coming of spring, and I continue to love the way he makes me laugh. Thanks for asking”. Or, at times we may have to be more direct, “like all families, we have varying dynamics, and we are working together supporting one another”. A response like this may be easier on someone you don’t see often, or even a stranger- but what about close friends or family members that don’t seem to understand what you, or your loved one is going through?

### Using the tips shared in fighting stigma will help, and for added strength, try to keep in mind these communication tips:

- Limit the time you spend with people you find draining, or do your best to balance with people you are comfortable opening up with.
- While dynamics are ever changing with whom we are speaking to, the skills we have learned to date are transferable skills to any conversation. Resilience grows when learning from one another.
- When in a tough circumstance, before giving your reaction, ask yourself if you are fully understanding the situation. Bypass the words, and listen for the feelings or emotions being expressed. Physically opening your hands, and visualize opening your heart can help generate empathetic responses. We can always validate someone’s feelings, regardless of if we agree with their words, often this leads to de-escalation as a result.
- Pay attention to your tone, avoid sarcasm, and use open-ended questions where possible. Open ended questions also allow more room for another person to express which can enrich our own understanding of them.