

Fighting Stigma **September Guest Column**

In today's society, there are different forms of stigma associated with a variety of people based on gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, or physical disability. According to the Journal of Mental Health, stigma is defined as the "negative effect of a label placed on any group, including those who have been diagnosed as having mental health problems."

Unfortunately, stigma can be a common experience for people suffering with a mental illness or developmental disability. Stigma can show its form in an obvious and direct way such as someone making a negative remark, or subtle such as someone assuming you're unstable or dangerous because of a mental health or developmental condition.

The National Association of Mental Illness offers the following ways you can combat stigma within your community:

- Share your story about mental illness. In doing so, you can model to others that having a mental illness or developmental disability is nothing to be embarrassed about.
- Respond to false statements about mental illness by providing accurate facts and information. Spreading understanding will help teach others about mental illness and developmental disabilities and how to be respectful.
- Become an advocate. Generate awareness about the stigma associated with mental illness by writing letters to newspapers and lawmakers. Not only are you speaking out about the challenges of negative stereotyping, but you're also informing your community about the truth of mental illness.
- Provide professional development opportunities for staff regarding diversity, mental health issues, developmental disability issues, and fostering an inclusive work environment.
- Watch your words and language. Pay attention to the way you talk about people with a mental or developmental disability and refrain from referring to them as their disability.

It's also important for us all to practice what we preach. Unfortunately, research shows that individuals suffering with a mental illness or developmental disability report feeling more stigmatized by mental health providers than by almost any other group. It is vital that mental health systems begin acknowledging stigma and reducing it within their organizations. The Michigan Department of Community Health designed an anti-stigma toolkit to guide providers through the process of ending stigma within their systems. The toolkit and additional resources are available at www.mirecovery.org.

For many people with mental illness or developmental disabilities, stigma is a barrier to seeking treatment and support. There is a fear that if others find out that they are seeking medical help, they will be discriminated against. An article published in *TIME* magazine this passed July touched on this topic. The article highlights the policies and procedures that keep service members from seeking treatment due to the barriers caused by stigma. We need to end the stigma associated with mental illness and begin providing the truth and facts. To receive more information about how you can help fight stigma, please visit www.macmhb.org.