

Challenging stigma and preventing mental harm

Explain dangers

Stigma is a set of negative beliefs and prejudices about a person or group of people. It is often based on myths and outdated social norms and can lead to **discrimination**—unjust treatment and behaviours directed toward a person or group.

Many people are stigmatized or discriminated against for more than one reason, including sexual orientation, gender, culture, or physical disability.

Experiencing stigma and/or discrimination can:

- Lead to mental health or substance-use problems—or make existing issues worse
- Cause people who already face discrimination (for any reason) to be even less able to find help or access services

People living with mental illnesses often face stigma and discrimination. A recent study found that*:

- Just under half of Canadians thought a mental illness was just an excuse for poor behaviour.
- Only about one in three Canadians would continue to be friends with someone with an alcohol-use problem.
- Only about one in four would remain friends with someone with a drug-use problem.

This stigmatization can make people with mental illness feel ashamed, hopeless, and distressed. They may be reluctant to seek or receive help and may feel like they are to blame for their illness.

Identify controls

Mental illness and addictions are stigmatized because, for centuries, these illnesses were not well understood. We did not know how they influenced a person's brain or affected their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

People with mental illnesses or addictions were rarely offered support. In fact, they were often considered outcasts or even dangerous.

There are a number of ways you can challenge stigma in order to prevent mental harm in others:

- Understand and accept that mental illnesses and addictions are like any other medical

condition and need the right treatment.

- Consider your own feelings about mental illnesses or addictions. Do you have biases or judge people?
- Be aware of language. Avoid using words that can be hurtful, like “psycho,” “crazy,” or “druggie.”
- Think about and discuss what you see in the media. People with mental illnesses or addictions are not always depicted fairly or accurately.
- Learn more about mental illnesses through trusted organizations like the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) or Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH).
- Explore opportunities for relationships with people in your life who have mental health challenges and illnesses, including addictions.

Use the **STOP criteria** to recognize attitudes and actions that stigmatize mental health conditions. This involves asking yourself, does what you hear:

- **S—Stereotype** people with mental health conditions (i.e., does it assume they are all alike, rather than individuals)?
- **T—Trivialize** or belittle people with mental health conditions and/or the condition itself?
- **O—Offend** people with mental health conditions by insulting them?
- **P—Patronize** people with mental health conditions by treating them as if they were not as good as other people?

Demonstrate

Reinforce the understanding of mental illness and addiction as medical problems. You would never say to someone: “Just think positively and your diabetes will go away.” But you have likely heard: “Do not be so depressed. You have so many good things in your life.”

Speak up and challenge outdated thinking and harmful behaviours—whether at the workplace or in your own life. Put a **STOP** to stigmatizing language and discriminatory behaviours.

*Canadian Mental Health Association, B.C. Division

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Facilitator support resources

Prepare

- Review IHSA's [Mental health safety talks: facilitator's guide \(W131\)](#) for advice on how to talk about mental health with workers, encourage participation, and become a workplace mental health leader.
- Watch the video [Seven Common Mental Health Myths Debunked](#), which aims to break down stigma by correcting misconceptions about mental health. Stigma surrounding mental health makes people less likely to seek help when they are in need.
- Read this [brief explainer about mental health stigma](#) and how it can be reduced in the construction industry.
- Bookmark this recording of [a virtual town hall](#) discussion from the American Psychiatric Association's Centre for Workplace Mental Health that features construction industry-specific advice for ending mental health stigma.
- Post these [thought-provoking questions](#) from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health's website. (Find the questions by scrolling to the bottom of the page).

Reinforce

Continue to emphasize the idea that mental illness and addiction are medical problems. Learn more with online resources from these trusted associations:

- [Canadian Mental Health Association](#)
- [Centre for Addiction and Mental Health](#)

Continue to speak up and challenge outdated thinking and harmful behaviours among your team members. Put a [STOP](#) to using stigmatizing language and discriminatory behaviours.

Next steps

- Encourage your team to view [IHSA's free, on-demand webinar on combatting mental health stigma in the trades](#) (33 min.).
- Consider participating in the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety's [free eLearning course](#) (approx. 30 min.) on reducing mental health stigma in the workplace.

Questions

Consider asking your crew these questions after delivering the safety talk:

- What is a common mental health myth you learned while growing up that you now know is untrue? How did you learn that it was not true?

Prior to asking the question above, you may wish to watch the [Seven Common Mental Health Myths Debunked](#) video and select a few examples to share with the group and encourage discussion.

- How have the ways that workplaces address mental health issues changed since you started at your first job?
- How does mental health impact the workplace today?
- What is one thing you can do to help tackle mental health stigma at work or in your personal life?

Do *you* have questions? Did your crew have questions you could not answer? Remember, it is okay to not have all the answers. **For further support, please contact IHSA by email: info@ihsa.ca.**