

Stigma and Discrimination

Mental health stigma and its impact on children and young people

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What is stigma?

Mental health-related stigma happens when people treat someone unfairly or think less of them because they have a mental health condition, show symptoms that could indicate a mental health concern, or access support for one.

Stigma comes from misunderstandings, negative beliefs, or stereotypes. For example, people may wrongly think that someone with depression is lazy, that someone with anxiety is weak, that disordered eating is done for attention, or that people with mental health conditions are dangerous or incapable of recovery. These incorrect ideas make it harder for people to talk about their feelings or seek help.

What is discrimination?

Discrimination is when people act on stigmatising beliefs. For example, a child with ADHD might not be invited to playdates because other parents assume they will be "difficult." An adult with anxiety might be passed over for a job they are perfectly capable of doing.

Types of stigma

Public stigma

The widespread negative attitudes and stereotypes that society holds toward people with mental health conditions. Labels such as "dangerous" or "unpredictable" affect the opportunities available to people — in work, relationships, and communities.

Self-stigma

When a person internalises public stigma and begins to believe the negative stereotypes about themselves. Someone who constantly hears that people with depression are "weak" may start to believe this, reducing their likelihood of seeking help and worsening their mental health.

Stigma by association (family stigma)

When relatives or close friends of someone with a mental health condition face judgment or discrimination because of that connection. Parents may be seen as "bad parents"; siblings may face social exclusion. This can lead to shame and isolation, and discourage families from seeking support.

Structural stigma

Policies, laws, or institutional practices — in governments, schools, workplaces, or healthcare systems — that disadvantage people with mental health conditions, whether intentionally or not.

Why stigma matters especially for children

Children and young people are still developing emotionally and socially. Stigma and discrimination can have a particularly deep impact at this stage.

- **Emotional and social development:** self-worth is shaped by how others respond. Stigma around anxiety, depression, or ADHD can lower confidence, cause isolation, and lead to withdrawal from social activities vital for healthy development.
- **Fear of seeking help:** young people who fear judgment may hide their struggles rather than ask for help. Untreated mental health problems can worsen over time and interfere with school, friendships, and family life.
- **Bullying and exclusion:** children with mental health conditions are at higher risk of teasing, rejection, or being treated differently by peers — intensifying feelings of loneliness and anxiety.
- **School performance:** mental health issues that go unnoticed due to stigma can affect concentration and motivation. Children may be labelled "troublemakers" or "lazy" rather than receiving the support they need.
- **Long-term impact:** children who grow up believing mental health struggles are shameful are more likely to avoid help as adults. Those raised in open, non-judgmental environments are more likely to develop healthy coping strategies.

The role of family

Family dynamics significantly shape a young person's mental wellbeing. Families can be a vital source of support — but they can also be an unintended source of stigma. Preconceived ideas about mental health, influenced by cultural or generational attitudes, can discourage open discussion and make a child feel misunderstood or pushed away.

When families are supportive, empathic, and non-judgmental, this has a profound positive impact on a young person's ability to navigate challenges.

The role of peers

Children often find it easier to talk about mental health with peers than with adults. While close friendships can be a valuable source of support, concerns shared only within the peer group may not reach parents or professionals who could help. Peers can also be a source of stigma — if personal information shared in confidence gets spread around, it can lead to bullying, social exclusion, and lower self-esteem.

The internet and social media

The internet can provide useful information, peer support, and a sense of community. But it can also expose young people to stigmatising views about mental health, cyberbullying, and pressure to maintain a perfect image — all of which can worsen mental wellbeing and increase reluctance to seek help.

Culture, religion, and stigma

Culture significantly shapes how mental health is perceived. In some cultures, mental health challenges are viewed as weakness, moral failing, or spiritual in origin — increasing the risk of discrimination and making it harder for young people to talk openly. Religion and faith can be a source of comfort and support, but in some communities can also contribute to stigma and shame around seeking professional help.

How parents can help

- **Listen without judgement.** Listen more than you talk. It is not your job to fix every problem — it is your job to make sure your child feels heard, accepted, and loved.
- **Talk openly about emotions.** Share times when you have felt overwhelmed and how you managed. Regular conversations about feelings show your child it is OK to feel difficult emotions and that healthy ways to cope exist.
- **Make sure they feel loved and supported.** Your child needs to know they can come to you with anything, and that it will not change how you feel about them.
- **Model healthy coping strategies.** Children often model what they see. Deep breathing, exercise, music, or reflective conversations all demonstrate healthy emotional regulation.
- **Reach out to friends and community.** You do not have to find all the answers alone. Seeking support is a sign of strength, not failure — and it helps to build a community of understanding around your child.
- **Connect with school.** Talk to your child's teacher or SENCO if you have concerns. Framing it collaboratively ("I've noticed some changes and wanted to see if you've observed anything similar") invites partnership rather than defensiveness.
- **Consider professional help.** If your child has been struggling for a prolonged period, professional support can make a real difference — for them and for you.