



# ADVOCACY BRIEF

## STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

### Introduction

There is a clear pathway from stigma to discrimination, as outlined in a fact sheet on stigma, discrimination and mental health by the Western Australian Health Department, which noted that stigma is stereotyping which leads to prejudice and ultimately discrimination.<sup>1</sup>

The Canadian Mental Health Association makes this connection clearer, defining stigma and discrimination as follows:

‘Stigma is the negative stereotype and discrimination is the behaviour that results from this negative stereotype. Often, individuals with a mental illness are faced with multiple, intersecting layers of discrimination as a result of their mental illness and their identity. For example, a woman with a mental illness may experience discrimination due to sexism as well as her illness, and a racialized individual may experience discrimination due to racism in addition to their mental illness. In addition, living with discrimination can have a negative impact on mental health.’<sup>2</sup>

A SANE report on stigma has noted that, ‘Stigma does not affect everyone with a mental illness in the same way ... It can vary from person to person and some groups appear affected more than others. There are, for example, ‘degrees’ of stigma and discrimination experienced by people with different diagnoses and for people within different social, age, cultural, or religious groups.’<sup>3</sup>

### Discussion

It is an undisputed fact that individuals who experience mental health issues are often faced with discrimination resulting from misconceptions of their illness or stigma. The negative outcomes from this can include:

- people who could benefit from mental health services not seeking treatment for fear that they will be negatively viewed
- employers not offering employment to people known or suspected to have mental health issues
- housing services, real estate agents and landlords discriminating against people with mental health issues seeking stable housing
- schoolchildren being denied opportunities or labelled as kids with “problem behaviours”
- police perceiving people with mental health issues as trouble-makers/criminals
- hospital staff perceiving people with mental health issues as “manipulative” and “time wasters”, especially after repeat admissions



- misrepresentation in the media of people with mental health issues as uncontrollable, dangerous, violent and unpredictable
- people with mental health issues being shunned, isolated and experiencing verbal and physical abuse in the community
- mental health professionals not exhibiting understanding and respect towards people with mental health issues but instead displaying the same stigmatising behaviour as others in the community
- families rejecting people with mental health issues and blaming them for their own condition
- insurance companies making it difficult for people with mental health issues to get health or life insurance.

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## Recommendations

Consumers and carers have a role to play in creating a mentally healthy community – one that is inclusive, rejects discrimination and supports recovery. Ways to help include:

- Counter and challenge the myths when you hear or read stereotypical or inaccurate comments about mental illness.
- Share your own experience of mental illness to help dispel myths. Encourage others to do the same. Mental illness is not something shameful that needs to be hidden.
- Be aware of the legislation against discrimination and the international conventions that protect the rights of people with mental illness. These include:
  - The Federal [Disability Discrimination Act 1992](#)<sup>4</sup> (DDA) which makes it illegal to discriminate against someone if they have a disability.
  - The [Australian Human Rights Commission](#),<sup>5</sup> a Commonwealth Government agency that promotes human rights and deals with compliance and discrimination.
  - Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commissions in most states, which promote equal opportunity and can help address unlawful discrimination.
  - At the international level, the [United Nations General Assembly](#)<sup>6</sup> has '[Principles for the protection of persons with mental illness and the improvement of mental health care](#).'<sup>7</sup>  
The [World Health Organization](#)<sup>8</sup> also has information on mental health and human rights.

## Other recommendations:

- A national mental health anti-stigma and anti-discrimination education campaign needs to be funded and then implemented, using those with lived experience in its creation and delivery.



- Government agencies and professional bodies need to foster and demonstrate respect for the rights and dignity of consumers and carers.
- Discrimination, prejudice and stereotyping must be identified, challenged and eliminated from mental health services.
- The development of a positive and supportive workplace culture for employees with mental health issues must be encouraged
- Personal stories of mental illness from both consumer and carer perspectives need to be shared publicly, including as part of all levels of mental health training.
- Mental health literacy education must be provided across the community – in schools, workplaces and the general community.

## References

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- <sup>1</sup> Western Australia Department of Health (2009). *Stigma, Discrimination and Mental Illness: Fact sheet*, [http://www.health.wa.gov.au/docreg/Education/Population/Health\\_Problems/Mental\\_Illness/Mentalhealth\\_stigma\\_fact.pdf](http://www.health.wa.gov.au/docreg/Education/Population/Health_Problems/Mental_Illness/Mentalhealth_stigma_fact.pdf)
- <sup>2</sup> Canadian Mental Health Association (2017). *Stigma and Discrimination* <http://ontario.cmha.ca/mental-health/mental-health-conditions/stigma-and-discrimination/>
- <sup>3</sup> SANE Australia (2013). *A life without stigma: A SANE Report*, [https://www.sane.org/images/PDFs/2013-ALifeWithoutStigma\\_A\\_SANE\\_Report.pdf](https://www.sane.org/images/PDFs/2013-ALifeWithoutStigma_A_SANE_Report.pdf)
- <sup>4</sup> Australian Government (1992). Disability Discrimination Act 1992, <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Series/C2004A04426>
- <sup>5</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/>
- <sup>6</sup> General Assembly of the United Nations <http://www.un.org/en/ga/>
- <sup>7</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1992). Mental Health Legislation and Human Rights, [https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/Mental\\_health\\_legislation\\_and\\_human\\_rights.pdf](https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/Mental_health_legislation_and_human_rights.pdf)
- <sup>8</sup> World Health Organization <http://www.who.int/en/>

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