



# Towards a Road to Greater Mental Health Debunking the Myths & Stigma



# Along the Road to Greater Mental Health Debunking the Myths & Stigma

## Creating the Core for Good Mental Health & Well-Being

If we are to cope well with life demands and develop as fully healthy human beings, then a major shift is required, where our mental health is accepted and responded to as a natural and essential part of who we are and how we live. To achieve this, the deeply seated detrimental beliefs and negative behaviour, which exists around mental health, have to change

This inevitably involves the development of accurate knowledge and understanding, along with the creation of adequate mental health structures and professional services. A transformation such as this, is far from easy, so how do we gain significant change and why is it so hard to shift our thinking and behaviour about Mental Health?

## Why Change is Such a Challenge

Changing negative messages and myths about mental health is tough, not only because these are deeply rooted and often established from very early on in life, but is further compounded by the fact, that in our culture we are very uncomfortable and unfamiliar with talking about our troubled mental status. We then understandably possess a very strong tendency to avoid doing so.

When someone asks how's it going? the automatic response for many of us is "oh fine", "great", "couldn't be better" or when things are getting to us a strained "okay I suppose". Low and behold if you were to share what an absolutely terrible week it's been so far with your youngest child struggling with ADHD, your mother just being diagnosed with cancer, you feeling overwhelmed with having to meet your department's unrealistic targets and beginning to experience low mood, anxiety, exhaustion revealing signs of depression

Even tougher still if you are a leader, manager or head of an organisation who adheres to the belief and expectations that you cannot reveal signs of weakness or vulnerability or you will lose your authority and no longer be respected.

## Making Taking Care of Our Mental Health a Daily Habit

If we break a leg or have an operation, we do not have such fears or negative beliefs, as our physical illnesses are more readily accepted and supported. Putting our mental health on an equal footing with our physical health is vital for our overall wellbeing

Brushing our teeth on a daily basis is something that we all know is good for us and we need to do, in order to maintain good oral hygiene for healthy teeth and gums. In the same manner, in which we are taught to brush our teeth, we need to learn and develop the normal every day habit of talking about and taking care of our Mental Health

## The Need to Challenge Myths & Eliminate Mental Health Stigma

One of the biggest barriers to improving a person's mental health is the stigma

*Nearly nine out of ten people with mental health problems say that stigma and discrimination have a negative effect on their lives". [1]*

Many people feel unable to talk about their issues through fear of being judged, unfairly treated or not understood. They remain silent, attempting to cope with problems by themselves and unable to receive appropriate support

Removing the stigma of mental health and changing negative reactions requires better understanding through rectifying the misinformation and myths, which exist around mental health

This relates to myths such as; mental illnesses are not real illnesses, it's a weakness, weak personalities bring on mental illness, it's shameful, it's embarrassing, there's no hope once you develop a mental illness, it's means you are not worthy or as good as someone else, it's under your control and you should pull yourself out it, it makes you more dangerous, unreliable or unpredictable, along with many more

## **The Importance of Knowing the Facts About Mental Illness**

Take for example the belief or myth that “mental illness makes you less effective as someone else”. Although people experiencing a mental health issue may have difficulties in aspects of their lives, this does not mean that they are

unable to perform competently and therefore it should not be generalised. This varies and is dependent on a number of different personal and social factors and circumstances, along with a person's coping, intervention and support strategies. It is in fact the case that someone who is experiencing a mental illness can be just as effective or even more so, than someone else

*“Research has proven that diagnosis and severity of symptoms are not an indicator of work outcomes, but having had a job, wanting to work and believing you can work are better indicators of success (Grove and Membrey, 2005)”. [2]*

## **A Path Towards More Constructive Responses to Mental Health?**

Incorrect information, stereotypical thinking and beliefs, pre-judgements, societal reactions and our own biases can greatly hinder our ability to talk about our mental health and prevents us from effectively understanding those in need of support. We can then gain insight through reflecting on where we think our beliefs and attitudes around mental illness originate

These can relate to our own or family experience, friends or people we know, cultural and social influences or the media. As negative and false ideas strongly contribute to the stigma associated to mental health understanding and challenging these can promote more positive attitudes and behaviour  
Taking a comprehensive approach to understanding and promoting better mental health

## How Can We Bring About Change?

An effective approach taken by Time to Change, one of the UK's largest Mental Health Campaign Organisations, focuses on implementing an on-going social and cultural movement, which instigates a fundamental and wide-reaching shift in attitudes and behaviour. This involves mental health education, media exposure, collaboration with organisations with mutual interests and utilising a variety of strategies, which support employers and employees in the workplace, schools, community champions and national, as well as global campaigns, along with the provision of training and resources, which enable open, active and practical participation

## Recent Findings on the Impact of Mental Health Campaigning

The National Attitudes to Mental Illness Survey 2016 findings, released by Time to Change in May 2017 found that between 2008 – 2016 there had been a 9.6 % positive change. This constitutes an estimated 4.1m people with improved attitudes towards people with mental health problems in England. The survey revealed that people's willingness to work, live and continue a relationship with someone with a mental health problem have improved by 11% since 2009. [3]

## How do We Adequately Support Our Mental Health?

The developments of an increasingly more positive perspective on mental health are encouraging, nevertheless this is the start of a much larger transformation, which is required. The implementation of adequate support services and of effective collaborative, long-term strategies involving the tackling of the wide spread and deep-rooted stigma, negative stereotypes and discrimination associated with mental illness, are essential. This is necessary if we are to create a more open, accepting, safer, supportive and inclusive society, in which people and workplaces can benefit and thrive

# Seven Approaches to Promoting Positive Mental Health

## Attitudes & behaviour

1. **Education:** Learning from detailed and factual knowledge helps to reduce negative thinking and behaviour towards mental health
2. **Contact:** Having contact and engagement with people, who have experience of mental health problems, has been shown to increase awareness and understanding resulting in a more positive response [4]
3. **Challenging Assumptions and Stereotypes:** This helps to eliminate false and harmful attitudes and encourages a more open and accepting mental health perspective
4. **Collaboration / Partnerships:** Working together with relevant professionals and organisations can assist in the creation of strong, appropriate and effective support structures
5. **Inclusive Cultures:** Investing in diverse and inclusive environments enable people's differences and mental health needs to be considered in the most productive way

6. **Training:** Providing relevant knowledge, skills and resources greatly contributes to a more positive and effective response towards mental health
7. **Policy & Procedures:** Establishing clear information and strategies offers clear guidelines and appropriate responses for mental health issues

## References

[1] [www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/s/stigma-and-discrimination](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/s/stigma-and-discrimination)

[2] [www.personneltoday.com/hr/changing-attitudes-to-mental-health/](http://www.personneltoday.com/hr/changing-attitudes-to-mental-health/) Changing attitudes to mental health By Personnel Today on 3 Sep 2012 (Grove and Membrey, 2005)

[3] [www.time-to-change.org.uk/news/significant-improvement-public-attitudes-and-behaviours-%E2%80%93-latest-research-shows](http://www.time-to-change.org.uk/news/significant-improvement-public-attitudes-and-behaviours-%E2%80%93-latest-research-shows)

[4] [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK384914/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK384914/) Corrigan PW, Kosyluk KA, Rüsçh N. Reducing self-stigma by coming out proud. American Journal of Public Health. 2013;103(5):794–800.

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