**Mental illness myths and facts**

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**Help fight the stigma associated with mental illness**

Mental illnesses and addictions are very common. They are also widely misunderstood. People with mental illnesses and addictions are frequently stigmatised by others for a variety of reasons: they may think mental illness is an uncommon condition or that addictions are the user's own fault. The truth is, mental illness and addictions can happen to anybody.

By countering the stigma of mental illness, we not only aid our consumers’ recovery, we also help make our services an attractive, safe and inspiring place to work for our staff.

We encourage you to join with us in educating those around you and we hope the following information will aid you in doing so.

**Myth:** There is no hope for people with mental illnesses and/or addictions.

**Fact:** There are more treatments, services, and community support options than ever before, and more are being developed. People with mental illnesses lead active, productive lives as do people who are undergoing or have sought help for their addictions.

**Myth:** I can't do anything for a person with mental illness or an addiction.

**Fact:** You can do a lot, starting with how you act and speak. You can create an environment that builds on people's strengths and promotes understanding. For example:

- Don't label people with words like "crazy", "wacko", or "loony" or use terms like "junkie" or "drunk" or define people by their diagnosis. Instead of saying someone is "a schizophrenic", say he or she "has schizophrenia." Don't say "s/he's an alcoholic" say "s/he's a person with alcohol dependence." This is called "people-first" language, and it's important to make a distinction between the person and the illness
- Learn the facts about mental health and addictions and share them with others, especially if you hear something that isn't true
- Treat people with mental illnesses and addictions with respect and dignity, just as you would anybody else
- Respect the rights of people with mental illnesses and addictions and don't discriminate against them when it comes to housing, employment, or education.

**Myth:** People with mental illnesses are violent and unpredictable.

**Fact:** Actually, the vast majority of people with mental health conditions are no more violent than anyone else. People with mental illnesses are much more likely to be the victims of crime. You probably know someone with a mental illness and don't even realise it.

**Myth:** Mental illnesses don't affect me.

**Fact:** Mental illnesses are surprisingly common; they affect almost every family in New Zealand. Mental illnesses do not discriminate - they can affect anyone.

**Myth:** Mental illness is the same as mental retardation.

**Fact:** These are different conditions. Mental retardation is characterised by limitations in intellectual functioning and difficulties with certain daily living skills. In contrast, people with mental illnesses - health conditions that cause changes in a person's thinking, mood, and behaviour - have varied intellectual functioning, just like the general population.
Myth: Mental illnesses and addictions are brought on by a weakness of character.

Fact: Mental illnesses and addictions are products of the interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors. Social influences, like the loss of a loved one or a job, can also contribute to the development of various mental health problems including the harmful use of alcohol and other drugs.

Myth: People with mental illnesses cannot tolerate the stress of holding down a job.

Fact: All jobs are stressful to some extent. Anybody is more productive when there's a good match between the employee's needs and the working conditions, whether or not the worker has a mental health problem. It can be challenging for people with mental health and addiction problems to get paid employment and to be accepted by employers and work colleagues.

Myth: People with mental health needs, even those who have recovered, tend to be second-rate workers.

Fact: Employers who have hired people with mental illnesses report good attendance and punctuality as well as motivation, good work, and job tenure on par with or greater than other employees. Studies show that there are no differences in productivity when people with mental illnesses are compared to other employees.

Myth: Once people develop mental illnesses and addictions, they will never recover; "once an addict, always an addict".

Fact: Studies show that most people with mental illnesses and addictions do get better, and many recover completely. Recovery refers to the process in which people are able to live, work, learn, and participate fully in their communities. This doesn't mean that they no longer require medications or support from services. For some individuals, recovery is the ability to live a fulfilling and productive life. For others, recovery implies the reduction or complete remission of symptoms. Studies have shown that hope plays an integral role in an individual's recovery.

Myth: Therapy and self-help are a waste of time. Why bother when you can just take a pill?

Fact: Treatment varies depending on the individual. A lot of people work with therapists, counsellors, friends, psychologists, psychiatrists, nurses, and social workers during the recovery process. They also use self-help strategies and community supports. Often they combine these with some of the most advanced medications available. Self-help includes the development of a positive identity, a sense of empowerment and agency - these are all important aspects of recovery.

Arm yourself with the facts and use your knowledge to educate others and reach out to those around you with mental illness. Understanding and support are powerful, and they can make a difference in the life of a person who needs them.

We thank you for playing your part in addressing stigma.

Helen Wood
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