

Beat the Stigma: Come Out of the Closet

In the past five years, reports from Bill Clinton's White House Conference and George W. Bush's New Freedom Commission have highlighted stigma as a major barrier for people with mental illness. For example, more than half of people who might benefit from psychiatric care chose not to pursue it to avoid the stigma. One might think that education is the best way to beat the stigma; teach people through public service announcements and strategically placed news stories those facts that counter the myths of mental illness. However, research by our group and others suggests contact with people with mental illness is at least as or more effective for reducing stigma. Namely, the public relinquishes its prejudice when it interacts with people with mental illness. At the strategic level, this means people with mental illness should be encouraged to tell their stories at professional, civic, and social groups where public stigma can be challenged. But there is a much broader way to spread the effects of contact; people with mental illness coming out of the closet in the course of their daily lives.

Gays and lesbians adopted this as a way to challenge prejudice and discrimination used against their community more than 20 years ago. But isn't there a difference between the gay agenda and coming out for mental illness? Wouldn't coming out for mental illness fall to a much smaller group of people who are unable to handle the social demands of public disclosure?

These last concerns actually represent two myths of mental illness that are at the base of stigma. First, there is a myth that mental illness is rare. In fact, epidemiological research suggests diagnosis for three of the most serious mental illnesses is higher than the public might expect; in a one month period, diagnosis for schizophrenia is about .5%, major depression about 5%, and anxiety disorder about 7% of the population. This means that a metropolitan area the size of Chicago could conceivably have more than a million people with a significant mental illness. Some might respond with this being scientific nonsense. "If there are so many people with mental illness, how come I don't see them?" It's because they know about the stigma and stay in the closet. Think of the blow to public stigma if even half of these folks came out.

The second assumption is that people with mental illness would be incapable of coming out in any way that would impress the public and challenge the stigma. While it is important to admit that many people with mental illness do have social disabilities, and might find the coming out process difficult, it is erroneous to equate mental illness with incompetence. Many people with even the most serious mental illnesses live full lives with regular jobs, a home of their own, and a spouse and children. These people would be excellent models for coming out. In fact, such people have publicly disclosed including individuals with some notoriety. Tipper Gore admitted to experiences with reactive depression. Rod Steiger, Mike Wallace, and Patty Duke have publicly discussed their trials with depression. John Nash's struggle with schizophrenia was the basis of the Academy Award winning *Beautiful Mind*. Unfortunately, although the courage of these public figures is inspiring, the impact of their stories on stigma is probably muted because of what has been called the Thurgood Marshall effect. When Thurgood Marshall was named the first African American justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, progressive Americans hoped this might force White prejudice about Blacks to be moderated by the appreciation of this great man's accomplishments. Instead, many Whites compartmentalized Justice Marshall's deeds in terms of African Americans in general. "Sure, Thurgood Marshall is impressive. But he is not

like all black men who are ...” In similar manner, hearing John Nash’s story might yield comments like “Sure he was noteworthy; he got the Nobel Prize. But he is not like most people with mental illness; definitely not like the homeless guy out on the street corner talking to himself.”

The impact of coming out is much more pronounced when done by the average person. Public stigma is rocked to its core when neighbors, co-workers, and fellow church goers disclose their experiences with mental illness. “Wow! Harriet is just like me and she has struggled with schizophrenia.” Of course, coming out has its risks. If there were not personal costs to admitting one’s illness, then advocacy efforts to erase the stigma would not be needed nor would this commentary. Fortunately, many average Americans have already stepped up to be recognized. As more do so, the public realizes that people with mental illness are like everyone else, and the stigma will vanish.

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