

Reducing and responding to stigma

What is stigma?

Stigma is when someone is seen in a negative way because of their symptoms of anxiety and depression. Stigma can make a person feel shame and less important than others. Many people and families are dealing with anxiety and depression and the added impact of stigma. If everyone does what they can to reduce stigma, we can minimise the impact.

Types of stigma

There are different types of stigma:

- **Self-stigma** is when a person believes the bad things people say or think about them. They may feel that they are not worthy of help, are “weak” if they seek help, or are “not sick enough” to seek help.
- **Personal stigma** is when a person holds stigmatising attitudes and beliefs about others. For example, “People who are experiencing depression and anxiety should just ‘snap out of it’”.
- **Perceived stigma** reflects a person’s beliefs about the negative and stigmatising attitudes that other people hold. For example, “All of my friends think people with depression or anxiety are just making it up for attention.”
- **Structural stigma** refers to policies of organisations, governmental institutions and cultural norms that decrease opportunities for people with depression or anxiety. For example, “Mental health doesn’t deserve more funding than other areas of health.”

Reducing stigma

There is still a way to go in reducing stigma in the media, in workplaces, communities, even within health settings. However, some of the most effective ways to deal with stigma are things we can all do.

- **Learn** - The more you understand about mental health and ill-health, the more confident you will be in noticing stigma and then acting on it.
- **Language** - Sometimes people use words that reinforce stigma. Comments such as “crazed”, “deranged”, or “suffering” are not helpful. Try to stick with factual words, such as the person “has a diagnosis of depression” or “sees a psychologist.”
- **Speak up** - If you hear someone using stigmatising language, challenge it or correct them.
- **Be supportive** - Be aware that everyone has bad days. Show the person that you are interested in how they are feeling and offer support.

Responding to stigma

Everyone's response to experience stigma is different. Here are some tips that you might find helpful for when you or the person you support experiences stigma

- You and the person you support can decide who to tell about the anxiety and depression and what to tell them.
- Support the person to get the help they need, and make sure you seek out help and assistance for yourself, for example, joining a support group.
- Stay active and surround yourself with supportive people, let them know how they can be helpful to you.
- Try not to feel shame. Stigma often comes from ignorance, it is not because you or the person you support is “weak”.

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Making a complaint

If you feel that something you saw, heard or read in the media is stigmatising towards people with mental ill-health, you can submit a complaint to [SANE StigmaWatch](#). The SANE website has tips and advice about making a complaint and sample letters to help you get your point across.

For stigma experienced when using health or community services, it is important to follow up directly with the service to ensure they are aware of the stigmatising behaviour. Speaking with the healthcare professional might be the quickest and easiest way to resolve the issue. You may find that writing the complaint is easier – either way, is fine. Each health service or community organisation will have their own complaints procedure, which should be made available to you.

Your rights

You and the person you support have the right to live without discrimination. Discrimination is the behavioural part of stigma – it occurs when a particular group of people is treated differently and unfairly, and their access to resources and opportunities is restricted.

If you feel that you or the person you support has experienced discrimination, you can make a complaint to (depending on the nature of the complaint):

- Health Care Complaints Commission of NSW (or other relevant state-based service)
- Ombudsman NSW
- Anti-Discrimination NSW (or other relevant state-based Human Rights Commission)
- The Australian Human Rights Commission.

Each of these services has information on their websites about making a complaint as well as telephone numbers so that you can discuss the nature of the complaint. If they cannot deal with the complaint, they will try their best to advise you of where you can make the complaint.

More information

For more information about stigma, visit the [SANE](#) website. Another useful resource is the [Carer Gateway](#) website.

