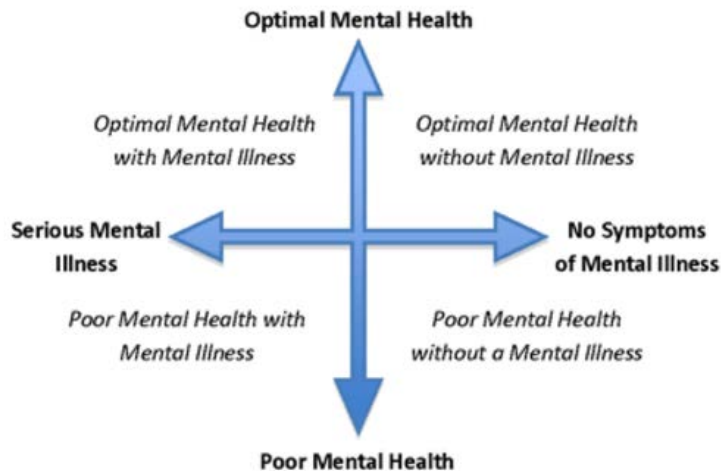


Stigma Busting STARTS with Youth

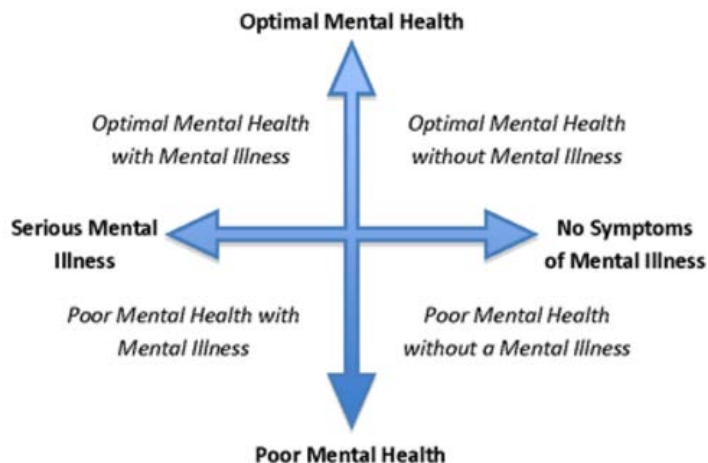
The single most important barrier to overcome in the community is the stigma and associated discrimination towards persons suffering from mental and behavioral disorders. (World Health Organization, 2001)



The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) estimates 1 in 5 Canadians will experience a form of mental illness at some point in their life (CIHR, 2014), and statistics collected by Bell Let’s Talk Day suggest that *everyone* is affected by mental illness since we all know someone who has experienced it (Bell Canada, 2017). Regardless, the stigma or discrimination attached to mental illness presents a serious barrier not only to diagnosis and treatment, but also to one’s feelings of acceptance in their community.

But before we can understand mental illness, we need to understand mental health. *Mental health* describes a balance of all aspects of life including physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. In contrast, *mental illness* is an imbalance of these aspects of life and can affect our thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Mental health and mental illness are similar but have distinct dimensions, and both contribute to a person’s overall health. Health Canada has adopted the Mental Health Continuum, developed by Corey Keyes, an American social psychologist. The Continuum (below) helps us assess the difference between mental illness and health, and better understand a person’s status.

The *Mental Health Continuum* demonstrates the difference between mental health and mental illness.



Source: <http://wmhp.cmhaontario.ca/workplace-mental-health-core-concepts-issues/what-is-mental-health-and-mental-illness>; Keyes, 2002

The good news is that mental illness can be treated effectively. Patients—including youth—can improve with support from healthcare workers and their families and friends. But we need proactive strategies that reduce stigma and discrimination, such as efforts to raise awareness of mental illness and to create and/or expand existing support systems.

For youth, this means supporting these efforts in the school system. Suicide accounts for 28% of deaths among youths aged 15 to 19 years-old (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2012). We all need to start paying more attention to mental health in youth—with education, youth can grow up with realistic attitudes towards mental health and illness. They need to learn about what stigma really is; that is, negative attitudes (*prejudice*) + negative responses (*discrimination*) = *stigma*. Stigma means thinking less of a person because of his or her condition. Moreover, stigma can make a person feel unwanted and shamed.

There are three main types of stigma: (1) self stigma, (2) public or social stigma, and (3) organizational stigma.

Self stigma is very strong in youth, especially if they are taught at home to suppress and not discuss their feelings. They may often hear: “Snap out of it!”. Youth experiencing depression cannot just “snap out of it”. The depression is often not situational, and can manifest as a biological problem. The youth cannot simply choose to snap out of it.

An example of *public or social stigma* is excluding someone from a group event because of their mental illness. That person needs support from others and inclusion. We need to learn to include those with mental illnesses in a manner that supports their needs.

Organizational stigma describes institutionalized attitudes towards mental illness, and needs to be addressed within schools and youth centres. Organizations need to be vigilant in not stigmatizing youth by having conversations that exemplify transparency. Stigma can be often harder to deal with than the illness itself—for example, stigma can stop youth from seeking help.

Here are five simple ways to help end the stigma around mental illness:

1. Words can help ... but they can also hurt. Pay attention to the words you use.

HOW YOU CAN HELP?

- Explain to friends and colleagues who use words like “psycho” or “nut” without thinking that their comments may be hurtful and provide an alternative view.

1. Learn the facts and myths about mental illness. Be knowledgeable and help fight stigma with facts.

HOW YOU CAN HELP?

- Understand early warning signs in yourself and others and know where to seek help.

1. Small acts of kindness speak volumes.

HOW YOU CAN HELP?

- Don't ignore someone being labelled or bullied—*stand up for them*.
- Treat a person who has a mental illness with the kindness and care you give to people with other illnesses through a friendly smile, a helping hand, a phone call or visit.

1. Sometimes it's best to just listen.

HOW YOU CAN HELP?

- Don't trivialize someone's illness. Instead, say: "I'm sorry to hear that, it must be a difficult time. Is there anything I can do to help?"

1. Start a dialogue, not a debate

HOW YOU CAN HELP?

- Break the silence. Talk about how mental illness touches us all in some way directly or through a friend, family member or colleague. Stories of lived experience are the best way to help eradicate stigma.
- Support mental health and anti-stigma programs in your community.

What else can you do? Let's keep talking ...

- Share resources and information with youth.
- Learn more about mental health at www.camh.ca , www.mentalhealthcommission.ca and www.letstalkbell.ca .
- Watch these two YouTube videos to learn more:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTIZ_aizyk
https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PL1Wcn1HVup5hJ4ao8PeFgpXpiqBMLke1z&v=RN G11KBVu_U

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