

QuickLits: The Problem of Stigma in Suicide Prevention

Stigma and how it relates to suicide

On the most basic level, stigma is a “mark of shame or discredit” (www.suicideinfo.ca) Stigma includes unfair and negative perceptions of a specific condition or state.

In many cultures, suicide is stigmatized. This stigma has its origins in misunderstandings of suicide in general and in influential religious sanctions. (Arboleda-Florez, 2001) Misunderstandings include the suggestions that one is automatically mentally ill, weak, sinful and/or immoral (Domino & Leenaars, 1995)

Implications of suicide stigma

Suicide has long been a taboo subject in our society. Because of the stigma surrounding suicide, individuals are hesitant to talk openly with others about their own thoughts of suicide. They fear being judged or misunderstood by friends and family members, or they may judge themselves harshly. Vulnerable individuals may feel so alone that suicide appears to be the only solution (Arboleda-Florez, 2003). Health care professionals, politicians and decision-makers may also be affected by suicide stigma. These influential groups may have misunderstandings or discomfort in discussing suicide and this collective silence can, in many cultures, adversely affect funding, research and prevention efforts (Wasserman, 2004).

Survivor Stigma

Survivors of suicide loss may be particularly affected by stigma. Family members and friends may struggle beyond the basic grieving process. Many may question why the suicide occurred and whether they could have prevented it. Because suicide is a difficult topic for many to discuss openly, friends and family members might not feel comfortable enough to seek support groups or services to aid in the healing process. Otherwise helpful supporters might not know how to approach the subject with grieving friends and family (www.suicidology.org).

Challenging the Stigma of Suicide

Organizations such as the American Association of Suicidology and the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention (afsp.org) help to educate policy makers and health professionals as well as the general public. Working together to better understand suicide and suicide stigma can help reduce its effects.

Mental Health Anti-Stigma Campaign

The Advertising Council has created a partnership with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to launch a campaign aimed at decreasing negative attitudes and stereotypes towards mental illnesses, especially among young adults (ages 18-25). These campaigns urge friends and family members to offer support and compassion to loved ones who are suicidal. Increasing social acceptance of mental illnesses may increase help-seeking behaviors for this population. (www.adcouncil.org)

Works Cited

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