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# Fighting the Stigma that Surrounds Mental Health Disorders

## Quick Facts

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### What is “stigma”?

Stigma is the negative emotion we express in response to persons who display characteristics and behaviors that are socially inappropriate, unacceptable, and/or awkward. When a particular behavior is stigmatized, the person or persons who display the behavior are isolated and regarded as frightening and/or unapproachable.

### Why does stigma surround mental health disorders?

#### Lack of information

Too often we have allowed media portrayals—either intensely negative or highly positive—to shape the way we think about mental health and mental health disorders. Unfortunately these portrayals usually describe either end of a very broad spectrum. Many people assume that all people with mental health disorders behave like characters in movies. On the negative side, think of the violent, unpredictable characters such as Hannibal Lector in “Silence of the Lambs”, Mike Meyers in the “Halloween” movies, and Randle Patrick McMurphy (played by Jack Nicholson) in “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.” On the positive side think of the extraordinarily gifted geniuses such as Dustin Hoffman’s character in Rain Man or Russell Crowe’s character in “A Beautiful Mind.”

These portrayals lead us to think that all people with mental health disorders should either be feared or revered, but they don’t really show what it’s like for the majority of people who have mental health disorders.

### Why is stigma a problem?

#### Discrimination

The stigma that surrounds mental health disorders causes many people with mental illness to experience discrimination. Everyone knows it is wrong to discriminate against people because of their race, religion, culture, or appearance. They are less aware of how people with mental illnesses are discriminated against. Although such discrimination may not always be obvious, it exists – and it hurts.

#### Stigma discourages people from getting help

At any given time, one in five children experience a mental health problem. Early and appropriate treatment can be the best way to prevent an illness from getting worse. Many people don’t seek help because they don’t want to be labeled as “mentally ill” or “crazy.”

#### Stigma leads to fear, mistrust, and violence

Even though the vast majority of people who have mental illnesses are no more violent than anyone else, the average television viewer sees three people with mental illnesses each week – and most of them are portrayed as violent. Such inaccurate portrayals lead people to fear those who have a mental health disorder.

### What YOU can do to reduce stigma

- Create artwork that increases understanding about mental health and mental health disorders and display it in public places such as school hallways, classrooms, and libraries.
- Refuse to discriminate against people with mental health disorders.
- Refuse to use words like “crazy,” “nutty,” “schizo,” “psycho,” and “loony” to describe people who may have a mental illness.
- Talk to a parent, teacher, or other trusted adult if you think you or someone you know may be experiencing a mental health disorder.



#### How One Class Worked to Reduce Stigma

Students at Hayden Heights Elementary sculpted a mythical, three-headed creature to raise awareness in their community about mental health disorders. Each head was designed to represent a symptom of a mental health disorder. They created a creature that was monstrous enough to show the seriousness of mental health disorders, but not so strong that it looks undefeatable.

