

# insights

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## Reducing the Stigma of Mental Health Disorders

**The good news in mental health care is that more and more outcome research is being conducted to provide practitioners with better information about effective treatments. The bad news is that large numbers of teens and adults never seek treatment that could reduce their suffering because of the deeply-rooted stigma that continues to be attached to mental health disorders.**

A study described in the October issue of *JAMA Internal Medicine* reported that over 70% of adults in the U.S. who experience depression do not seek or receive treatment for their symptoms. There are numerous reasons why people do not seek help, including a lack of understanding about mental health symptoms and disorders, a lack of information about community resources, no health insurance, and the reluctance to burden family members and friends. Overwhelmingly, however, it is shame and the stigma associated with admitting mental health symptoms that prevent individuals from seeking treatment.

Behavioral scientists who have studied stigma point to a fear of rejection, of being labeled crazy or weak or imperfect, of being treated differently by family, friends and the community, as factors that interfere with help-seeking behavior. Parents of children experiencing emotional or behavioral problems often feel shame, and fear being labeled as bad parents by family, friends, school and mental health professionals.

A recent study offers hope that school-based mental health literacy programs such as the curriculum known as "Healthy Living" can increase positive attitudes about mental health and reduce barriers to accessing care. The curriculum includes six teacher-delivered modules including The Stigma of Mental Illness, Understanding Mental Health and Mental Illness, Seeking Help and Finding Support, and The Importance of Positive Mental Health. This curriculum can be downloaded free of charge from the website [www.teenmentalhealth.org/curriculum](http://www.teenmentalhealth.org/curriculum).

Even in the absence of a formalized mental health literacy curriculum, however, teachers can significantly impact their students' attitudes about mental health disorders and treatment. Science classes that address brain chemicals and function, literature, history, current events and sociology classes

all can provide opportunities to discuss and de-stigmatize mental health disorders. Some concepts to emphasize when speaking with students about mental health and mental illness include:

1. Anyone can experience mental health problems, and these are not a sign of weakness, laziness, or a flawed character.
2. Mental health disorders are caused by a complex combination of both biological and environmental factors.
3. There are effective treatments for mental health disorders, both medical (medications) and psychological/behavioral, and as with medical illnesses, the sooner that someone obtains effective treatment, the better the outcome.
4. Mental health disorders can affect one's thinking, emotions, perception, behaviors, social functioning, and physical health.
5. Most people with a mental health disorder are not violent or dangerous.
6. Just like people who live with chronic physical illnesses such as diabetes or asthma, people with mental illness can manage their symptoms and lead positive and productive lives. ■

### Resource:

M. Olfson et al. Treatment of adult depression in the United States. *JAMA Internal Medicine*. Vol. 176, October 2016, p. 1482. doi:10.1001/jamainternmed.2016.5057.

Milin, R., Kutcher, S., Lewis, S. P., Walker, S., Wei, Y., Ferrill, N. & Armstrong, M. A. (2016) Impact of a mental health curriculum on knowledge and stigma among high school students: A randomized controlled trial. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 55, 383-391.

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