

CHANGES MODULE 13:

Stigma and Labelling



Labelling is the practice of using a single word or phrase to describe something or someone. Sometimes we label ourselves, but most of the time labels come from other people. Being assigned a label can be helpful and unhelpful at different times.

When you are labelled with a **diagnosis** it can:

1. Make it easier to access support and treatment for your symptoms.
2. Help you understand your feelings and behaviours as a recognisable condition that you can accept and manage, rather than something you are to blame for.
3. Give you a starting point for researching ways to help yourself, and give you a starting point for explaining your symptoms to others.

However, **labelling can also present difficulties**, and might not be beneficial for everyone. Labels can:

- Make people feel they have no control over their mental health or cannot improve it.
- Can be confusing if you have symptoms across multiple labels as you might receive varying diagnoses (making getting support or treatment more difficult).
- Can result in you or others viewing your thoughts and actions in the context of your label, rather than in a personal and unique way.

When a person is labelled by an illness, they can start to be seen as part of a **stereotyped group**.

Stereotyping and a lack of understanding in society can lead to negative attitudes and beliefs towards a group. This is **stigma**, and it can make coping with a mental illness hard for a number of reasons:

- Others may discriminate against us because our condition is seen as “abnormal”. We may not be given equal opportunities as others because of it.
- We may resist discussing it with others, including friends or family, due to fear of stigma and rejection.
- We may think of ourselves as “abnormal”, punish ourselves and avoid seeking help.
- We may self-stigmatise, making assumptions that because of our illness we are not capable or deserving of certain things (e.g. getting a job, studying, making friends).

There is still a lot of fear and silence around mental illness in wider society, which increases stigma. But in fact poor mental health is very common: 1 in 4 people will experience a mental health problem at some point in their lives.

How to tackle stigma

Everyone has the right to be treated fairly and lead a fulfilled life. Firstly, it's important to recognise that **we deserve this** no matter what people around us might say or feel about our mental health.

Raising awareness of mental illness can help tackle stigma by combatting misconceptions and fear around mental illness and labels. There are many ways you can challenge stigma, such as:

- Speaking openly about your mental health if you are able.
- Seeking support from organisations or advocates.
- Educating others about mental health, e.g. encouraging training or further reading.

Not everyone will feel safe or comfortable tackling stigma, and it is important to ensure your safety first and foremost.

However, talking about your mental health, when you feel ready, can help challenge the negative assumptions and also help you better understand and accept your own mental health.

Discussion Points

1. How easy do you find it to speak about your mental health? How long did you wait before speaking about it?
2. Do you think you self-stigmatise?

Further Reading / Resources

- “Stigma & Misconceptions” from Mind: <https://bit.ly/2Y7bTKg>
- The website Time to Change has useful information about mental health and how we can work towards ending mental health discrimination. <https://www.time-to-change.org.uk/>
- The Ted Talk ‘Overcoming the Stigma Around Mental Health’ by Michaela Mulenga discusses the importance of exposing and overcoming the stigma around mental health - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4V3liXtrWo>