

# Overcoming the Stigma of Counseling

## Session One "A Different Understanding of the Causes of Stigma"

### 1. Understanding "Mental Health" and its relation to "Mental Illness".

#### a. What is "mental health"?

Mental health refers to the status of a person's "emotional, psychological, and social well-being". (American Psychiatric Association)

- i. Mental health encompasses the mind, emotions, will, aspirations, etc.
- ii. *Good* mental health sits over against "mental illness".
- iii. Good mental health is most commonly determined by a person's inner sense that things are right and good or by feelings of "happiness" but will also include concepts like "success", especially in the various relationships of life (e.g. family, work, friends, community, etc.).

#### b. What is "mental illness" and what does it encompass?

##### i. Mental illness is difficult to define.

*"Mental illnesses are health conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking or behavior. Mental illnesses are associated with distress and/or problems functioning in social, work or family activities." "Mental illness...is a medical condition, just like heart disease or diabetes." (APA)*

*"A mental illness is a condition that affects a person's thinking, feeling, behavior or mood. These conditions deeply impact day-to-day living and may also affect the ability to relate to others." (National Alliance on Mental Illness)*

*"Mental illness, also called mental health disorders, refers to a wide range of mental health conditions — disorders that affect your mood, thinking and behavior...a mental health concern becomes a mental illness when ongoing signs and symptoms cause frequent stress and affect your ability to function." (Mayo Clinic)*

- ii. Mental illnesses encompasses any "disorder" of life whether in relation to the way a person feels, behaves, or relates to others, etc.

## 2. What is understood to be the “stigma” associated with mental illness?

- a. Negative judgments associated with mental illness.

“Far more than any other **type of illness**, mental disorders are subject to negative judgements and stigmatization. Many patients not only have to cope with the often devastating effects of their **illness**, but also suffer from social exclusion and prejudices.” (National Library of Medicine)

- b. Corresponding stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination.

“Stereotypes refer to prefabricated opinions and attitudes towards members of certain groups, such as ethnic or religious groups, whites and blacks, Europeans and Latin Americans, Jews and Muslims, **and the mentally ill.**” (National Library of Medicine)

## 3. The resulting stigma of counseling and corresponding resistance to help.

- a. There is wide recognition that the stigma attached to mental illness is a key cause of the stigma associated with counseling more specifically.

- b. But reasons for resistance go beyond what we would identify as matters of “stigma”.

According to *Psychology Today*, the following are the most common reasons people give for not seeking “therapy” (pay attention to the connections with what we’ve said thus far):

- Counseling is an admission that “something is wrong with me”.
- I’m afraid that people will think I’m “crazy”.
- Counseling makes me look weak.
- I afraid of what might be uncovered about me.
- I don’t want to be “labeled” or have a diagnosis affect future opportunities.
- I should be able to “tough it out” on my own.
- My friends or family can help me.
- I don’t want to go on medication.
- Change will require hard work; it’s easier to stay stuck.
- It’s too expensive.
- It requires too much time.

#### 4. A different way of looking at the problem.

- a. Consider the following in reference to the reasons given above:

It has been said loud and clear that mental health issues are treatable *medical* conditions, which is to say that they are indications that something is physiologically “wrong”.

Help is termed “treatment” or “therapy”-- terms which imply something is “wrong”.

*Professional* help is required which indicates that the issues are extraordinary and cannot be worked through apart from someone with an advanced degree and a license. Because these problems have been classified as health issues, insurance companies are often involved, and this has meant that providers must assign a “diagnosis” (a label) if a person’s insurance is going to cover the treatment.

Because much psychoanalysis has been oriented toward childhood experiences, is it any wonder that people are worried that something will be “uncovered”.

Because mental illness is largely viewed as *illness*; medications are often prescribed and sometimes as a first step.

Friends, family, pastors are warned against trying to provide “treatment”.

- b. The work of de-stigmatization may be a big part of the problem:

- i. The work of “education”.

“Mental illness is...just heart disease or diabetes”, but these are things “wrong”.

- ii. The work of “normalization” (platforming Hollywood).

But people don’t need professionals unless the problem is serious or complex.

- iii. The identity loop (remember the “stereotypes”):

“I am black” is in the same as “I am anxious.” “I am Jewish” is the same as “I am depressed.”

- c. The adoption of identity terminology itself leads to stigma.

- i. By definition a subset.

- ii. By definition different.

- iii. The adoption of an identity creates an emotional connection.

“I am...”