TIPSHEET | CARING FOR HEALTHCARE TOOLKIT

How to create an effective anti-stigma program

Discussions of stigma about mental illness usually focus on the patient. Importantly so: societal stigma often prevents people from accessing the care they need. But stigma is also present in — and has a damaging effect on — healthcare environments. According to an article published by the Canadian College of Health Leaders:

Research with healthcare providers in Canada indicates that the level of stigma regarding their own willingness to disclose and/or seek help for a mental illness is consistently higher than their level of stigma for other dimensions such as negative attitudes and preference for social distance. Also, within the workplace context, people with mental illnesses are perceived as less competent, dangerous, and unpredictable and that work itself is not good for people with mental illnesses.  

A well-designed anti-stigma program can help reduce stigma by increasing self-awareness, busting harmful myths and shifting organizational and professional culture.

Tips for a successful anti-stigma program

Get leadership on board.
Having buy-in from senior leaders in your organization helps set the tone and sends a clear message that reducing stigma is a priority. It can also make sure you get the resources you need to make your program a success. A solid business case that shows how similar programs have succeeded can help convince senior management of the value of the program.

Take a person-first approach.
Focus on people instead of pathologies to help participants connect with and understand the experience of mental health issues.

Include “contact-based” education.
In plain language, that means inviting trained speakers with lived experience of a mental illness who are currently living in recovery to address your teams — ideally in person, so participants not only hear the person’s story but also have the opportunity to interact with them and ask questions.

Focus on behaviour change.
Teach skills that give healthcare providers more confidence in what to say and how to act when working with colleagues experiencing mental health challenges — and to recognize and speak for their own needs as well.

Engage in myth-busting.
Many commonly held beliefs about mental illness are simply not true and lead to negative attitudes and stigmatizing behaviours. Providing accurate information helps change those attitudes and behaviours.

1 Stephanie Knaak, PhD; Ed Mantler, RPN, MSA, CHE; and Andrew Szeto, PhD. “Mental illness-related stigma in healthcare: Barriers to access and care and evidence-based solutions”. Canadian College of Health Leaders. 2017.
Emphasize recovery.
One common element of stigma is that healthcare providers often don’t believe recovery is possible, so it doesn’t matter what they do. Stressing the real possibility of recovery can help alter how colleagues relate to each other and also open people up to sharing their own issues.

Plan for ongoing “booster” sessions.
People tend to fall back into old habits. It’s important to reinforce new ideas and attitudes to sustain change over the long term.

Anti-stigma programs and resources

There are many established anti-stigma programs available, some general and some specific to the workplace. The MHCC has evaluated the following programs and has found them to be effective at reducing stigma.

Evidence-based programs for healthcare provider audiences

- Understanding Stigma is a free online program created by MHCC and CAMH. The program is based on the Ontario Central Local Health Integration Network’s 90-minute workshop, evaluated and revised by MHCC.

- Adult Mental Health Practice Support Program (PSP) is a skills-based program for family physicians created in British Columbia that offers 21 Continuing Medical Education (CME) credits. PSP is now being used in three provinces, with more interested in adopting it soon.

- Cognitive Behavioural Interpersonal Skills (CBIS) is an award-winning education component of the PSP for working healthcare professionals. Download the program resource manual.

- Combating Stigma is an online CME program for doctors, developed in partnership with Mood Disorders Canada, the Canadian Medical Association and others. Participants can apply for four CME credits.

- The Mood Disorders Series is an online continuing education program for nurses and allied health workers modelled after the physicians’ course.

- The Working Mind: Workplace Mental Health and Wellness is an evidence-based workshop program designed to address and promote mental health and reduce the stigma of mental illness in a workplace setting. It is available in versions for trainers, for managers/supervisors and for employees/frontline staff. The program has been adapted for healthcare settings, with interim results indicating three quarters of participants exhibited less stigmatizing behaviour after the workshop.

University programs

NOTE: Although these are not available as toolkits, their creators may be willing to share their syllabi, assignments and other course materials.

- The Recovery Narrative is part of the Psychiatric Rehabilitation and Recovery course in Brandon University’s Psychiatric Nursing program. Read more about the program.
• The Client Educator program is part of the University of Alberta’s Occupational Therapy program. Read more about the program.

• Pharmacy School Programs are offered at Dalhousie University, the University of Saskatchewan and Memorial University, where people with lived experience of mental illness are invited to make presentations to classes. Read more about these programs.

For the MHCC’s full evaluation of these programs, visit Opening Minds, or contact openingminds@mentalhealthcommission.ca.

Building and Delivering Successful Anti-stigma Programs for Healthcare Providers: Results of a Qualitative Study

• This study by the MHCC includes background information and best practices for creating anti-stigma programs. It offers many additional tips to help you gain management support, plan, deliver and evaluate an anti-stigma program for healthcare providers. Read the report.