



STIGMA – YOUTH FOCUS GROUP

*In September 2006, the Centre partnered with **Youth Net/Réseau Ado** to conduct a focus group with youth to talk about the stigma challenges they face dealing with mental illness. The following represents a summary of the thoughts and stories shared by the youth.*



They strongly agreed that storytelling is the best way to illustrate their experiences with stigma and that collectively they feel their message is a strong one. They had real and creative ideas as to how stigma can be broken down.

Discussion around Stigma

- Youth with mental illness fall into a third category of stigma (because they are youth and have a mental illness)
- Stigma exists within families
- There is stigma attached to attending the [name] school because “that’s where the psycho kids go”
- Stigma against gays and lesbians (from a lesbian with a mental illness)
- Dad thinks therapy is a “crook” – he is in denial because of the negative stigma towards mental illnesses within many families

Discussion of Stigma experiences

- The first time one male youth was admitted to hospital, his pediatrician mum couldn't accept that he had depression (that could not be the right diagnosis).
- When another male youth was admitted to part-time college – peers asked why he was exempted (only permitted for medical reasons) – truth would ostracize him, so he lied.
- The Vice Principal gave one female participant a hard time when she registered for school. She ignored her personal situation (“did not listen”), and the fact that she was motivated to learn and stay in school. Instead she stereotyped her and insisted on “school rules”.
- Many schools kick out youth who self-harm (a reaction that results from stigma and ignorance).
- “You mess up and people will say I told you she’s crazy.”
- All participants spoke about stigma in the Emergency room – “you are always put at the bottom of the list – so stigma exists in the health care system, within a hospital where people are supposed to care for you.”
- Another stated: “I have to repress what I want to say because of stigma.”



Written vignettes

- “I was volunteering at a kitchen for the homeless and at the end of the night I had to bus back to the psychiatric hospital where I was an inpatient. The hospital was at the other end of the city. I was at the bus stop and the last bus of the night arrived. I asked if the bus went right to the psychiatric hospital. The bus driver asked why I was going there and I told her I was a patient there. She immediately closed the door and drove away. I then had to walk all the way back to the hospital, an hour and a half walk in the snow during the winter.”

Research Question: "How do we break down stigma individually and as a whole, and is it possible to get in contact with large companies for donations to create a bigger voice?"

- “Dressing up as a Goth I was looked upon as dangerous and unstable.”

Research Question: "Why is there so much stigma around style?"

- My former school felt I made their school unsafe when I returned from hospital, so they asked me to leave because they thought I was dangerous.”

Research Question: "Why me?"

- “It has been difficult to deal with a family member who is unsupportive of a child or other family member suffering from a mental illness, and disowning, or verbally abusing or ostracizing them. My own Grandfather sent my cousin whom I’d been corresponding with via MSN and e-mail, telling her that if we were to ever end up meeting that she should be careful because I’ve been depressed and suicidal, dressing in the gothic style wearing black clothes and large crosses. He thought that I would be a dangerous influence and advised her against seeing me. It makes it difficult spending time with your family. My grandfather also told me not to be telling my grandmother about my issues and what I was going through because he didn’t feel she needed to be bothered with my issues.”

Research Question: "How to educate people not only on mental health issues, but also on the detrimental affect that discrimination can have upon someone with the illness, and how people can learn or share their experiences safely and comfortably”.

- “The words mental illness alone cause arcane images of insane asylums to appear in the heads of many people not properly educated on the topic. Simply telling new friends that I meet through university that I have a diagnosable mental illness causes long conversations that are shockingly biased. Most people my age live under the impression that having a mental illness means you are both crazy and dangerous. I’m often asked how I was able to work for two years in a daycare if I have a mental illness. The stigma is often so harsh that I merely avoid bringing up the topic unless necessary. My parents are careful about the way they word their sentences when speaking about my panic disorder to others. It’s a common feeling that even though I am not ashamed of who I am, that others are.”





Research Question: "What is being done to educate the public about the actual symptoms of most mood disorders, and consequently, how they affect the mentally ill person's abilities, judgment, and grasp of reality?"

- "While in school in grade 11, I began to experience more and more mental health issues around my depression anxiety and increased SI [suicidal ideation]. I was in hospital for around 4 months and upon discharge the school did not want me to return for a fear of the possibility of my committing suicide on the school property. The issue was not that I might take my own life – it was that I might have done it on the property causing a bit of a disruption to the school. The school associated my depression to suicide frowning up on the hospitalization."

Research Question: "I'm not too sure, but awareness is an issue that I see as needing to be raised."

Discussion of Solutions

- If we didn't have to repress we would have a stronger = huge voice against stigma
- Expose people to people with mental illnesses
- Give people information – explain the different illnesses – they are afraid because they don't know – need more symptom awareness
- Good to have popular spokesperson (e.g. Margaret Trudeau)
- Need a youth hero now – thus will make mental illness more acceptable in society for the future
- Show the human side of mental illness = stories
- Need higher risk assessment standards
- Need to FUND the writing and telling of personal experiences and to get them out there and market them
- Need to advocate for the youth – can't just ask them to share their stories without supporting them
- Commercial = Johnny Depp and a random Goth – which one has a mood disorder?
- Normalization, make mental illness socially acceptable like AIDS – need repetition of the concept that everyone can get a mental illness – will take time
- CANNOT be funded by a drug company – not ethical, as they have so much stigma themselves, and don't get it
- Find a respectable company, like a clothing company, to carry the message to normalize mental illness
- MUSIC – publicized, exposed, has lots of credibility
- Need people to influence the money holders – youth and adults have to work together – the only way it will work
- E.g. one fashion designer has a rule that all models must have a minimum BMI
- Need volunteers to call out to companies to get their support – need to frame it really well or stigma will stop them from listening
- Need a magic wand to break stigma – called **STIGMA BUSTING!**

