



The Impact of Stigma on Suicide

What is Stigma?

Stigma around mental health and suicide is widespread in the US, which makes it more difficult for people struggling with mental health issues or thoughts of suicide to reach out for help. Stigma is generally defined as “a mark of disgrace which sets an individual apart from others.”¹ Stigma as it relates to mental health and suicide comes in many different forms, like self-stigma, when individuals internalize or adopt the negative attitudes of society; and public stigma, the discriminatory set of beliefs held by general society and consisting of labelling and stereotyping certain groups of individuals.¹

The stigma of mental illness is a complex construct with emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components that affects attitudes and behavior patterns at both the individual and population levels. It often leads to people distrusting, shunning, or avoiding those who have been affected by suicide.^{1, 2}

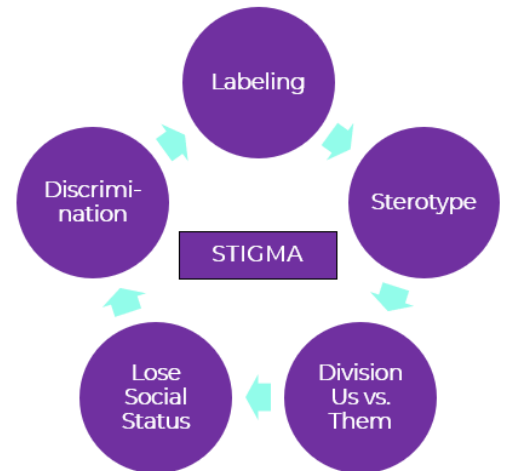
Why is Stigma a Problem?

“IN OHIO, NEARLY FIVE PEOPLE DIE BY SUICIDE EACH DAY, AND SUICIDE IS THE SECOND LEADING CAUSE OF DEATH FOR PEOPLE AGES 10-34.”

However, many people are still reluctant to discuss suicide due to stigma.^{2, 3} Research shows that people who are affected by public stigma and self-stigma are more likely to lose self-worth, have a higher degree of hopelessness and shame, experience higher rates of unemployment and/or discrimination when applying for jobs, and are more likely to experience bullying, harassment and physical violence. Those bereaved by suicide report

higher levels of rejection, shame, and blame than other bereaved people.³ For all these reasons and more, stigma creates a barrier to help-seeking behavior for people who have suicidal thoughts, have previously attempted suicide, or lost a loved one to suicide.^{1, 2}

Figure 1: The Cycle of Public Stigma¹



What Can Be Done to Combat Stigma and How Can You Help?

If stereotyping, discrimination, and isolation are risk factors for suicide, then we can reduce the risk of suicide by responding to suicide ideation and attempts with compassion, support, and connection. Breaking the stigma starts with awareness and education backed by a multilevel approach of policy, programming, and resources.

Figure 2: Combatting Stigma³



To eliminate stigma, we need to start by understanding why suicide occurs and advocating for mental health awareness within our communities. There are suicide hotlines, mental health support groups, online community resources, and many mental health professionals at the local and national level who can help individuals struggling with unhealthy thoughts and emotions. Advocating and funding for these crisis resources, as well as funding to support prevention programs, is of upmost importance to increase awareness and decrease stigma.⁴ Another important cornerstone against stigmatization is advocating for antidiscrimination legislation.

This resource is brought to you by the Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation (OSPF) with funding from the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. Learn more about OSPF at [OhioSPF.org](https://ohiospf.org).



Additional Resources

Guidelines on how to develop a stigma reduction initiative are available from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and may assist in the development of anti-stigma campaigns. Other helpful resources include:

- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suicide prevention resources
- Crisis Text Line (Text 4hope to 741-741)

Reference List

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2. Suicide in Ohio: Facts, figures, and the future. MHA Advocacy . <https://mhaadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Installment-1-Suicide-in-Ohio-Facts-Figures-and-the-Future.pdf>. Published August 2020. Accessed December 16, 2021.
3. WISE. "Suicide: The Ripple Effect as a Prime Example of Stigma Resistance – WISE Initiative for Stigma Elimination." WISE Wisconsin April 1, 2018, <https://wisewisconsin.org/blog/suicide-the-ripple-effect-as-a-prime-example-of-stigma-resistance/>. Accessed December 6, 2021.
4. CDC. "Preventing Suicide." CDC, August 31 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/pdf/preventing-suicide-factsheet-2021-508.pdf>. Accessed December 6, 2021.