

CHECK THESE OUT...



Mental Health America:

Stigma; Building Awareness and Understanding-tools and resources to reduce stigma through awareness and understanding.

[Mental Health America](#)

NAMI: Fight Stigma- Information and resources regarding busting stigma and mental health myths.

[NAMI](#)

Healthy Place- consumer mental health site, providing comprehensive, trusted information on psychological disorders and psychiatric medications from both a consumer and expert point of view.

[Healthy Place](#)

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focus

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TOPIC WATCH

Each month we will feature a different topic: expanding the knowledge, resources, and peer networking in targeted areas. These target areas will include workforce development, transition, supported education, leadership, organizational development, sustainability, and others as they are identified.

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Labeling

Seeing things in terms of labels has become a regular way of life around the world. We label clothes, canned goods, cars, and even people. Many of the labels we see every day are required by law, such as labels on food listing ingredients or the infamous labels on our pillows that warn "Do not remove under penalty of law." Labels are also used throughout our society to put people into certain categories: fat, skinny, smart, athletic, disabled, mentally ill . . . the list can go on and on. Labeling of people starts the minute you are born and becomes a part of life. By Kindergarten you have labels that are in permanent records. They follow you as you transition from one developmental change point in your life to another. For some, labeling has a profoundly negative impact on their lives. Whatever label they end up with limits their options by "pigeon holing" them, and restricting them to a reduced set of expectations for life. This issue tends to be especially prevalent among people with mental health needs, and the negative labels society attaches to them contribute to stigma, discrimination, and bullying.

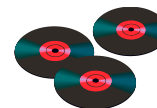
Labeling has long been known to promote stigma and discrimination among people with mental health needs. Through a label, individuals can face harassment, stigma, discrimination, and insult. It has been reported that there are over 250 negative labels relative to mental illness. These labels are used by bullies on the playground, by the media in reporting news, and as insults by individuals who have issues of their own in accepting persons who may learn, act, feel, or think differently. A study within the past decade indicated that the primary sources of negative labeling for persons with mental illness can be found in the media, and from family and peers (Wahl OF. Depictions of mental illness in children's media. *Journal of Mental Health*. 2003;12:249–258.). They report that derogatory references about people with mental illness appear commonly in the print, broadcast and cinematographic media. For television and newspaper items about mental illness, for example, between one third and two thirds refer primarily to violence. The highest rate of such negative coverage occurs in children's animations, where up to two-thirds of all references are to violence. Images were 'typically used to disparage and ridicule' those with a mental illness.

There are two important differentiations that are critical to ensure that labeling is not done as a stigmatizing action. First, there is a difference between a “diagnosis” and a “label.” According to the Bing Dictionary (www.bing.com) “diagnosis” is:

1. The identification of illness: the identifying of an illness or disorder in a patient through physical examination, medical tests, or other procedures.
2. The identification of problem: the identifying of the nature or cause of something, especially a problem or fault.
3. A decision reached by diagnosis: a decision or conclusion reached by medical or other diagnosis.

On the other hand, a “label” is:

1. An informative item attached to something: a piece of paper, fabric, or plastic attached to something to give instructions about it or identify it.
2. A descriptive word or phrase: a word or phrase used to describe a person or group.



The name of record company: the name of a record company, especially when displayed on a record, CD, or cassette.

As we can see, there is a major difference between a diagnosis and a label! A diagnosis is an identification of a problem whereas a label is a description of something. Programs, as well as our society, often interchange these two words, thus inappropriately confusing a label with a diagnosis.

Unfortunately, in day-to-day use these two terms can get confused. Some people might state that access to appropriate services is dependent upon a label. What they actually mean is that eligibility generally requires a “diagnosis” based upon medical tests, evaluations, and assessments. Few, if any, programs accept self or society imposed labels as an eligibility factor for services and support.

How to Ensure Labels Do Not Negatively Impact Your Life

There are many ways that consumers of mental health services can protect themselves from some of the negative aspects of labeling.

- Never refer to a diagnosis as a label. This opens the door for others to inappropriately use labels as a diagnosis and vice versa.
- Make sure that the terms “label” and “diagnosis” are not used interchangeably. If a diagnosis is required, make sure that is the term used. Remember that a diagnosis is identification and a label is a description.
- Periodically monitor records that are kept regarding your services and supports. Watch for and ask for removal of labels and have them replaced with a diagnosis, wherever appropriate.
- Correct others (even professionals) who use labels instead of a diagnosis when discussing your needs. Examples of label substitutions for a diagnosis might include:
 - “Disturbed” as a general label for an individuals with a diagnosis, or;
 - “Demented” as a description of a mental illness symptom.
- Know your diagnosis. Do not use general terms or labels as a replacement for not knowing and understanding your diagnosis.

In addition, consumer-run organizations can help minimize the inappropriate use of labels as a way of reducing stigma and discrimination.

- Promote the use of appropriate language when discussing mental health issues at meetings, conferences, and policy development activities.
- Educate partners on the differences between labels and diagnoses.
- Integrate education regarding inappropriate use of labels in anti-stigma campaigns.
- Eradicate negative terms used to describe persons with a mental health care need from your community. Correct media, partners, and become associated with a “no tolerance” policy when it comes to certain negative labels.



Remember, while labels may have become an accepted way of identifying the ingredients in canned goods, they don’t have a place in grouping people by mental health diagnosis. While it may be necessary to have a diagnosis to understand and treat a mental health condition, the use of labels to categorize people with mental illness only leads to stigma, stereotyping and scapegoating. By working together to help end the practice of labeling people with mental health needs, individuals can promote understanding and acceptance, and begin to end the destructive stigma that hinders the lives of so many people with mental health needs in our society.

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