Mental Illness to Mental Health: Stigma Interventions

**Objectives**
- To learn about the principles of stigma interventions
- To learn about effects of stigma
- To learn about the three primary types of anti-stigma interventions

*Please refer to the end of the report for content references*

**What are Stigma Interventions and Why are They Important?**

Stigma reduction interventions aim to reduce the public’s stigmatizing attitudes towards people with mental illness. Mental illness stigma is multifaceted, including both (a) negative, inaccurate beliefs regarding people with mental illness, such as they are highly violent or unable to make their own decisions regarding treatment, and (b) negative emotional reactions to people with mental illness, such as fear or pity. Stigmatizing attitudes can in turn lead to discriminatory behavior towards people with mental illness, such as avoiding social interactions with a person with mental illness or being unwilling to hire or rent an apartment to a person with mental illness. Society’s stigmatizing attitudes can be internalized by people with mental illness, causing lowered self-esteem and avoidance of mental health treatment (Corrigan, 2004; Corrigan et al., 2014).

**Theoretical Background**

Below are common theories that can be applied to stigma:

1. **Social Norms Theory** (Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986): This theory predicts that people’s beliefs and behaviors are profoundly influenced by the perceived beliefs of others. Individuals who perceive others to have negative attitudes toward mental illness may themselves be more likely to devalue or avoid people with mental illness in order to fit the perceived social norm (Hackler et al., 2016).

2. **Attribution Theory** (Corrigan, 2006): This model is intended to understand and change stigma through mapping the relationship among signal events, mediating knowledge structures (attributions), emotional reactions, and behavioral responses.

**Assumptions and Behavior Changes**

Corrigan and colleagues (2011) stage model of self-stigma:

1. Awareness: individuals with the disorder are aware of the negative public attitudes toward the disorder
2. Agreement: the stigmatized individual agrees with the negative public attitudes
3. Application: individuals believe the attitudes apply to themselves
4. Harm: negative stereotypes begin to lower self-esteem and self-efficacy
Stigma Reduction Techniques and Interventions

Stigma interventions seek to improve outcomes for people with mental illness by reducing negative attitudes towards this group. The three main types of anti-stigma interventions include education, contact and protest.

**Anti-Stigma Interventions: Protest**

Protest interventions seek to make changes at the structural level. Organizations such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) frequently protest stigmatizing portrayals of people with mental illness in the media. Some examples of NAMI’s protests include those related to insensitive portrayals of people with mental illness in film (“Me, Myself, and Irene”) and television (“Wonderland”), as well as Halloween haunted houses that feature asylum themes. All of these images perpetuate stereotypes of people with mental illness. Although evidence is lacking in terms of whether these protests directly change stigmatizing attitudes towards people with mental illness, these protests can be effective at removing the stigmatizing portrayals of people with mental illness and can serve to heighten awareness among public and those in media about the need to consider how people with mental illness are portrayed (Casados, 2017).

**Anti-Stigma Interventions: Education**

Education programs offer promising evidence of their ability to change stigmatizing attitudes towards people with mental illness (Gronholm et al., 2017). Education programs may be delivered in a variety of formats, including workshops, classes, and media campaigns. Education interventions typically focus on directly dispelling the myths and negative stereotypes surrounding mental illness. For example, many members of the public mistakenly believe that people with mental illness are dangerous and highly likely to be violent; this misperception can be addressed directly in an education intervention with the presentation of research evidence suggesting a weak link between mental illness and violence. NAMI has sponsored a number of media-based anti-stigma campaigns, often involving statements by celebrities or social influencers (see https://www.nami.org/Press-Releases-and-media). In general, education interventions seem to be effective at improving knowledge and attitudes towards people with mental illness. However, programs that focus on the biological basis of mental illness tend to have the opposite of the desired effect—although these programs lead to improved attitudes towards psychiatric medications, they also reinforce the idea that mental illnesses are chronic and that those with mental illness are “different” from the rest of the population (Casados, 2017).

Recently, researchers have raised two critiques of education-based programs. First, although these programs lead to increased knowledge and improved attitudes, more research needs to be done to determine whether these programs actually lead to decreases in discriminatory behavior towards people with mental illness (Corrigan et al., 2015). Second, researchers questioned whether the improvements in stigmatizing attitudes found in program participants was temporary or long-lasting. Although more research is needed in this area, there are promising findings suggesting that stigma reductions persist long after the completion of a program (Corrigan et al., 2015; Mehta et al., 2015).

A recent innovation in education-based interventions is Mental Health First Aid. This structured 8-hour workshop focuses primarily on how to intervene with a person having a mental health crisis. Although the primary goal is not stigma reduction, improved attitudes towards people with mental illness are seen in participants of Mental Health First Aid (Morgan et al., 2018).

**Anti-Stigma Interventions: Contact**

Contact interventions typically involve a structured interaction with a person with mental illness. The purpose of this type of intervention is to firsthand dispel the negative stereotypes surrounding mental illness by providing participants with an example of someone who has mental illness but does not fit into the negative stereotypes (Corrigan et al., 2015). Contact interventions are thought to have a deeper effect on people than education—they change beliefs but also reduce participants’ anxiety about interacting with people with mental illness. An example of this type of program is NAMI’s In Our Own Voice, which involves a 90-minute workshop led by individuals with mental illness who present psychoeducation and share their personal stories of overcoming challenges and recovery (Casados, 2017). Contact interventions have strong evidence of their ability to change stigmatizing attitudes (Casados, 2017; Corrigan et al., 2015), but more research is needed to determine whether these changes persist over time (Corrigan et al., 2015). Further, unlike media campaigns, participants typically must volunteer to attend a contact intervention, requiring some degree of buy-in before the intervention take place. This may limit the reach of this type of intervention (Casados, 2017).
Final Thoughts

In sum, there are a number of promising interventions to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness, though not all programs are created equal. Those interested in implementing an intervention are encouraged to seek research on the effectiveness of specific programs to determine which is most suited to the target population and setting.

Resources 1: Websites

These websites can be used to access information related to mental health literacy. Please remember to get permission to use any materials you find in those websites.

1. National Alliance on Mental Illness: https://www.nami.org/stigmafree
4. NoStigmas – Mental Health Support & Suicide Awareness Community: https://nostigmas.org/

Resource 2: Stigma Reduction Books

Below you can find some examples of stigma reduction books. We added a reference and a visual description for each book if you decide to purchase any of these stigma reduction books.

Book Reference


Stigma Reduction


