

OPINION

The stigma of mental illness

By Iris Carroll
GUEST COLUMNIST

Have you ever wondered what lies buried beneath the stigma of mental illness?

Is it fear?

Maybe. But in spite of the media's tendency to sensationalize crimes committed by people who have been treated for mental illness, studies have shown that as a group, people living with mental illness are no more likely to be violent than the general population.

In fact, our country's own history includes people who have made major contributions to our society while at the same time struggling with mental health problems.

So why do we put so much distance between ourselves and other human beings who are obviously suffering and in need of comfort, instead of reaching out to them to help or offer support?

At Programs For People, clients recount stigmatizing events, painfully endured. They have lost friends after being hospitalized for psychiatric reasons. They have been ostracized

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by co-workers following a psychiatric hospitalization.

They say they have been stigmatized for being unemployed, been called "lazy" by family members, and pressured endlessly to get a job. They have even been asked inappropriate, probing questions by non-psychiatric, medical professionals.

It seems as though effects of stigmatization are almost as toxic as the illness, itself.

Why do kids pick on other kids who seem different? Why do adults denigrate others who appear to fall out of the norm?

Is it something deeply imbedded within the human psyche, some perverse Darwinian striving for survival of the fittest? Does it make us feel more sure of our own sanity to question the sanity of others?

In truth, relating to the strengths of anyone is much more personally rewarding than focusing on perceived weaknesses. In spite of our need for individuality and uniqueness, we all long to

feel connected. We yearn to belong, to be understood, and to fit in somewhere.

Often when clients at Programs For People finally get up the courage to express the way they feel, they are absolutely amazed to find out that others have felt the very same way. When staff tell them that "lots of people, not just those with mental health issues, feel that way" they are incredulous.

Stigmatizing has lessened to some degree because, fortunately or unfortunately, these days almost everyone knows a relative, friend, or co-worker who has experienced mental illness.

In those instances, when we know and care about someone, it's easier to see them as a person who happens to have a mental illness. Too often, however, those whom we do not know are defined, in entirety, by the illness.

We need to look deep inside of ourselves about this, with greater compassion. What if it happened to us?

Once a client leaned forward and said to me, with incredible emphasis and feeling, "Do you know what it's like to

hear someone whispering in your ear all the time?"

Even though I knew through my work that some people with mental illness hear voices, I was stunned. For the first time, I really imagined and felt what that would be like.

Put yourself there. Not easy to handle.

What helps people who have experienced mental illness feel better about

themselves is knowing that there are people who care, understand, and stand by them - people who know that even with the illness, we are all still much more alike than different from each other.

Iris Carroll, MPH, is director of Programs For People, a Framingham-based agency that helps people to recover from mental illness and become employed.

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