Many myths (misleading and untrue perceptions) exist about mental illness. It is unfortunate that many people believe and support myths because they can lead to stigma (negative attitudes) about a person with a mental health disorder as well as discrimination (treatment of an individual based on personal characteristics rather than merit). Unfair treatment may cause individuals living with a disorder to experience a variety of negative feelings. Stigma and discrimination may lead to feelings of mistrust, shame, fear, rejection, low self-esteem, loneliness, or isolation. Individuals may even avoid seeking medical treatment because they fear exposing their condition and being judged by others. Through awareness, openly discussing mental health, and correcting people’s misconceptions, the negative perceptions of mental illness may be eliminated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What it is</th>
<th>What it is not</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A diagnosable disease and a true illness</td>
<td>The result of personal weakness or lack of character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often caused by disorders of brain circuitry (biological), genetic (inherited) tendencies, environmental causes, and/or social factors</td>
<td>Something that can be overcome through “will power” or the ability to “snap out of it”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatable through medications and/or therapy</td>
<td>A rare illness with little hope of recovery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognized for thousands of years and affects all types of people regardless of age, culture, race, gender, religion, education level, sexual orientation, or income</td>
<td>A condition that limits people to low-level jobs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Common myths regarding mental illness**

**Myth:** *I should be able to take care of my mental health problem by myself.*
**Reality:** Self-help and support can relieve some mental health issues or illnesses like anxiety. However, more severe or persistent problems require help and treatment from qualified mental health professionals.

**Myth:** *Other people will think I’m “crazy” if I seek help for my mental health problem.*
**Reality:** It is crucial to seek treatment for any health issue immediately. Although many individuals are apprehensive to address their mental health, delaying treatment can reduce results or worsen conditions. Seeking help should be seen as a sign of strength rather than weakness.

**Myth:** *People with mental illness live on the streets or in mental hospitals.*
**Reality:** Many people living with mental illness reside in communities and lead productive lives. Some people only seek hospitalization briefly to receive treatment and then are able to return home.

**Myth:** *Stress causes mental illness.*
**Reality:** This is partially true because stress may trigger an episode or cause symptoms, such as anxiety or depression. However, persistent symptoms are often biological. There are many factors that may contribute to mental illness. Although a single cause is not fully understood, mental illness may be a result of several, coexisting causes.
Myths, Stigma, and Discrimination (continued)

Understanding stigma

Stigma is a real problem for people living with mental illness. Negative attitudes may be obvious or direct, such as rude remarks about an individual’s mental health condition or treatment. They may also be subtle, such as assuming that living with a mental illness makes an individual dangerous. Reducing stigma could help improve the awareness, diagnosis, and treatment of mental illness. Public education, societal awareness, and providing support can make a big difference.

How to cope with stigma

Here are some ways a person living with mental illness can cope with stigma:

- **Get treatment.** Don’t let the fear of being “labeled” with a mental illness prevent you from seeking help and getting treatment. If you or someone you care about has a mental health concern, talk to a mental health professional.
- **Do not let stigma create self-doubt and shame.** Trusting family, friends, and caring others can help you find much-needed compassion, support, and acceptance. Avoid the social isolation that may be caused by stigma.
- **Do not equate personal identity with a mental illness.** Appreciate people for who they are, not by their mental illness. A lot of people who live with a mental illness lead successful lives.
- **Use available resources.** Take advantage of local, state, federal, and non-profit resources available, such as school programs, advocacy and support groups, faith-based programs, and Internet resources.
- **Speak out.** Consider expressing personal experiences of stigma in private or public settings to help others. Your voice can help reduce stigma.

How to reduce stigma

Stigma begins when someone is labeled. Everyone can help eliminate stigmatizing language using the following guidelines:

- **DO** use respectful language that puts the person first and not the illness, such as:
  - “Person who has bipolar disorder…”
  - “Person living with a mental illness…”
- **DO** emphasize capabilities, not constraints.
- **DO** tell someone if they express a discriminating attitude or use stigmatizing language.
- **DON’T** use generic or inconsiderate labels such as retarded or the mentally ill.
- **DON’T** use inappropriate terms like lunatic, crazy, normal, or slow functioning.
- **DON’T** ignore myths, stigma, or discrimination: Speak up!

Reference: