

Stigma and Mental Health By Donna Henry

What do celebrities and artists Robin Williams, Francis Ford Coppola, Jim Carrey, Sting, Sheryl Crow, Eric Clapton, Drew Barrymore, Kim Basinger, mystery/ thriller writer Patricia Cornwell, and political historical figures Winston Churchill, Theodore Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln, and John Quincy Adams have in common? These creative, gifted and famous people, just to name a very few, suffer from a variety of mental health issues ranging from clinical depression to anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, and anorexia nervosa/ bulimia. If you were to describe these people, do you think of words such as crazy or irrational? Probably not. Most likely you see skilled people seemingly unlimited in their abilities, rich in character, with some very admirable qualities. You probably don't see men and women afraid to seek behavioral health services.

How much do you know about mental illness and mental health issues in today's world? What about counseling? Not a lot? Many people know very little about mental and behavioral health and seldom know what counseling entails. Oftentimes, we see the words mental or behavioral health and immediately think about the most recent television episode we've watched in which someone with a serious mental illness is portrayed in a negative light and where nothing ever seems to help them. This is incorrect. This is a stigma that is perpetrated by television and movies today. It is not the truth. To stigmatize is to taint, disgrace, dishonor, or use a negative label to describe a person living with a mental health disorder. It is disrespectful and shameful. Most of all, stigma is a barrier to help.

Having a mental illness is NOT the same thing as experiencing a mental disorder. An estimated 50 million Americans experience a mental disorder in a single year. This can include anxiety, depression, OCD (think of a calmer version of Monk), serious adjustment difficulties, post-traumatic stress, and ADHD. More serious mental illnesses include schizophrenia and bi-polar to name just a few. That means that one in four adults, and one in five children experience a mental health problem at any given moment. Sadly, only about one fourth seek help due to stigma and feelings of discrimination. The next time you think or speak negatively about someone with mental health issues, keep in mind that you are probably also using words that affect someone you know.

How can you combat stigma? Stop using negative words or language when discussing mental and behavioral health. If you know someone who is seeking services, be respectful of that. It takes great courage to begin taking steps toward feeling better and to choose to improve your life. Admire them for it! Oftentimes, receiving the help and professional support to be healthier and happier is just a matter of changing your mind about behavioral and mental health treatment. Early intervention and appropriate treatment can make a tremendous difference in the life of someone suffering with a mental health illness. If you know someone or you feel that you could benefit from behavioral health services, contact a local counselor to begin feeling better now.