Mental Illness Stigma Begone!

May 13, 2010 By David Evans

I wish I could just wave a wand like Harry Potter and banish the stigma associated with mental illness. While this isn't likely to happen anytime soon, we might have a new less magical tool for reducing stigma. Researchers from the University of Haifa in Israel, the City University of New York and Indiana University report that they've developed a cognitive psychotherapy intervention that effectively reduces self-stigma among people with serious mental illness, thus increasing their self-esteem and quality of life. In short, the new therapy is geared to help people better integrate integrate into society and reduce isolation:

> [We] developed what [we] term "Narrative Enhancement Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (NECT)", which is aimed at giving people with a mental illness the necessary tools to cope with the "invisible " barrier to social inclusion - self-stigma.

What struck me was how the researchers described the impact of the stigma of mental illness, and how it is not unlike the barriers that physically disabled people have had to confront to be fully participating members of society. They point out that we've begun to help disabled people to engage socially through wheel chair accessibility in homes and public buildings, TDDY technology and hearing aids for the hard-of-hearing, and Braille and text-to-voice technology for the visually impaired. Unfortunately, identifying the mechanisms that keep people with mental illness socially isolated has been a lot more difficult.

The stigma of mental illness has most certainly affected my education, my career options and my social life, and I know this has also been the case for friends and acquaintances who have milder forms of psychological disorders--though to a lesser degree. Stigma doesn't slow me down so much anymore. I've had some good therapists who have enhanced my resilience, boosted my self-

esteem, and strengthened my resolve not to let my illness limit me. I can't help from wondering sometimes, however, where I would be in my life if stigma (both that imposed on me by society and that which I put on myself) hadn't been such a powerful force in my younger days.

"Just like wheelchairs and Braille have increased social integration for people with physical handicaps, there is also a need to identify and remove the barriers to community inclusion for people with serious mental illness," says [David Roe, PhD, from the University of Haifa.]

Much attention has been given to providing accessibility to all facilities intended for the public, in striving to gain equality for people with physical disabilities. But while the obstacles facing the physically challenged can be relatively easily identified, pinpointing the obstacles that persons with a mental illness must overcome is much harder.

Roe and his colleagues have now proved that a therapy can help undo the terrible torment of self-stigma. Now, we've just got to eliminate the stigma that comes from outside ourselves.

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