

# Mental Health and Stigma: Branding those who need our support

## Greg Lubimiv, E.D., Phoenix Centre

The word stigma comes from early history of man when a person who had committed an offense or was seen as displaying unacceptable behavior would be scarred on a visible part of their body. This ensured that anyone meeting them would see that they were marked and they could in turn could reject that person.

Over the last several hundred years that concept of stigma has become instilled in the area of mental health, which has for many become an invisible mark, branded on a person by society and in the same manner that person faces shame and rejection.

Many in the public do not have an understanding of mental illness and when a person has a mental health disorder label that person by their disorder and push them away.....at a time that a person needs to feel support and belonging the most.

A boy is sitting in the corner, rocking and hitting his head against the wall. A classmate whispers to a friend, "Billy is bi-polar". The truth is that Billy is not bi-polar. He has a diagnoses of bi-polar, but that is only a small part of him. He is also smart, loves art, enjoys listening to rap, dreams of being a news broadcaster and so much more. Yet, all we see is his disorder. When a person has a broken leg, arthritis, heart disease, cancer or so many other possible health issues, they are not defined by the illness. Their illness is something they are challenged by, but we can, first talk about their health issue openly, and secondly, easily see all the other strengths and qualities they bring to the world.

Over the last several years, there has been mounting recognition for the need to have everyone become more aware of mental health, mental illness and in particular stigma. The Mental Health Commission of Canada has led this front in Canada and last year, a new Ambassador emerged as Clara Hughes crossed Canada on her Beautiful Blue Bike, engaging Canadians in a discussion about mental health.

The odd thing is that there are probably very few individuals in our county who are not directly affected by mental illness or are close to someone who is affected.

We need to move to a day where a person with schizophrenia or fetal alcohol syndrome or is experiencing anorexia and openly state this to a friend, a teacher or an employer and not feel like they have been branded with a stigma.

That day will only be possible if we all engage in a discussion, in education and awareness about mental health, and in recognizing that mental illness is not the whole person.