



8 ways to deal with social stigma associated with COVID-19

The media has reported instances of carers of COVID 19 being stigmatized, and has also reported instances of racial discrimination against north-east citizens of India. People who are stigmatized tend to experience loss of their identity, affecting their self-esteem.

What is social stigma?

Social stigma in the context of health is the negative association between a person, or group of people, who share certain characteristics and a specific disease. In an outbreak, this may mean people are labelled, stereotyped, discriminated against, treated separately, and/or experience loss of status because of a perceived link with a disease. Such treatment can negatively affect those with the disease, as well as their caregivers, family, friends and communities. People who do not have the disease but share other characteristics with this group may also suffer from stigma.

The current COVID-19 outbreak has provoked social stigma and discriminatory behaviours against people of certain ethnic backgrounds as well as anyone perceived to have been in contact with the virus.

Why is COVID-19 causing so much stigma?

The level of stigma associated with COVID-19 is based on three main factors:

- 1) it is a disease that's new and for which there are still many unknowns
- 2) we are often afraid of the unknown
- 3) it is easy to associate that fear with 'others'

It is understandable that there is confusion, anxiety, and fear among the public. Unfortunately, these factors are also fuelling harmful stereotypes.

What is the impact?

Stigma can undermine social cohesion and prompt possible social isolation of groups, which might contribute to a situation where the virus is more, not less, likely to spread. This can result in more severe health problems and difficulties controlling a disease outbreak.

Stigma can:

- Drive people to hide the illness to avoid discrimination
- Prevent people from seeking health care immediately
- Discourage them from adopting healthy behaviours

A few tips for dealing with stigma related to COVID-19

1. Understand that stigma related to COVID-19 is due to ignorance. Although it is easy to react to derogatory comments, this would not achieve anything. Instead take this as an opportunity for educating people about the COVID-19 virus and the importance of social distance and staying away from people.
2. Don't take things personally: if you react to derogatory comments, people feel that you are threatened and become easy prey for their comments.
3. Tell your story/ document your experience of being stigmatized, which would help you in ventilating your negative feelings.
4. If you are frustrated, lock yourself away for few minutes, to escape from a dialogue or conversation where you would end up reacting to comments.
5. Share your feelings and frustrations with a trusted friend using social media/mobile/ rather than meeting physically/personally.

6. Don't give up and encourage negative thoughts, always remember that our body has the ability to cope with the virus, it is possible to recover and lead normal life.
7. Read more about COVID-19 from a reliable source. Do not believe in all Whatsapp groups/Facebook messages, check for its authenticity before forwarding such message.
8. Do not recognize, or address the person through the COVID-19 virus. Always remember that a person has an identity, hence, address the person always with their personal identity.

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