How can I fight stigma?

Help your family member:
> Treat him as a person you love and respect, not as someone who is sick. Focus on the person, not the illness.
> Be a role model when it comes to accepting the illness.
> Attempt to help them keep life as normal as possible.
> Be supportive when they face difficulties in daily life.
> Understand that daily tasks may not be easy anymore.
> Help them see that not all problems are related to the illness.
> Find ways to deal with embarrassing situations so they do not feel ashamed or at fault.

Help yourself:
> Join a local self-help group like the Schizophrenia Society.
> Learn all you can about the illness so you can share information and help dispel myths and misunderstandings.

Help others:
> Be active in trying to change attitudes toward schizophrenia and the people who have it.
> Let people know that schizophrenia is a treatable brain disease.
> Promote anti-stigma programs in your community and schools.
> Get involved in advocacy groups and health-related committees.
> Respond to misinformation when you hear it, including in the media.
> Help educate groups like family doctors, health care students, police, lawyers, and clergy about the true nature of schizophrenia.
> Encourage and help people who are living with the illness to tell their stories.

Learn more:
> Become knowledgeable about schizophrenia – stigma is based on ignorance.
> The World Psychiatric Association has a campaign to fight stigma. They’ve developed materials and information for people with schizophrenia, families, and professionals. Visit their website at www.openintheoors.com.

Where can we go for help?
The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario is here to help. We’re a family-based organization that understands what it’s like to live with schizophrenia. Our objectives are to:
> Provide family support and education
> Promote public awareness and understanding
> Advocate for better legislation and services for people with schizophrenia
> Promote research into the causes, treatment and cure of schizophrenia

"to alleviate the suffering caused by schizophrenia"
What is stigma?

Stigma is defined as shame and disgrace. It’s like a stereotype, and because it’s based on myths and misunderstandings, it’s always negative.

Stigma is hurtful and it can be dangerous. It can make it difficult for someone with schizophrenia to be accepted by others, for example, at work or school. It might also prevent people from getting the help they need and deserve. No one should have to hide their illness.

Finally, stigma can lead to discrimination. It limits the amount of resources like housing, employment opportunities, and social interaction for people with schizophrenia. This in turn perpetuates the stereotypes of people living with the illness.

> People with mental illness who are being treated are no more likely to be violent than other people.
> People with schizophrenia are much more likely to be violent toward themselves than toward others. Up to 40% try to commit suicide at some point.
> When people with schizophrenia do commit violent acts, it’s usually because they are not getting proper treatment. People with severe mental illness who are not receiving treatment are six to seven times more likely to be physically violent than the general population.

Why should I be concerned about stigma?

Sometimes, because of the stigma attached to schizophrenia, people don’t want to talk about the illness. For the person with the schizophrenia, not talking about the disease can result in delays in diagnosis and treatment. There are many consequences:

> Self-medication, like using alcohol or drugs.
> Mental or physical health getting much worse.
> Frustration over unmet expectations at school or at work.
> Trouble with the law.
> Social isolation or neglect.
> Trouble getting a job or finding a place to live.

Families are often reluctant to talk about schizophrenia because of past experiences. Families who don’t talk about the illness:

> Often feel guilty or ashamed.
> Have the added burden of trying to ‘cover up’ the illness.
> Suffer alone and in silence.

When people don’t talk about mental illness, society suffers from:

> Loss of productivity on the part of the ill person, and their family members.
> Higher health care costs.
> Misinformation and ignorance.

What are some of the myths about schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is a disease that many people don’t understand. Because of this, people with schizophrenia and their family members have to deal with myths and misunderstandings about the illness. Some of the myths have been around for years. The ones that can cause the most harm are:

> People with schizophrenia are violent.
> People with schizophrenia are lazy or irresponsible.
> Schizophrenia is a character flaw or a moral weakness.
> Poor parenting causes schizophrenia.
> Treatment won’t work.
> Schizophrenia means split or multiple personality.

Sometimes, these myths make people afraid of those with schizophrenia. They don’t understand the illness, so they don’t want to be around people with schizophrenia. When this happens, it’s called stigma.

How media contribute to the myths

The way schizophrenia is portrayed in the media has helped contribute to these myths, especially that people with the illness are violent. Examples include:

> A newspaper report of a “schizophrenic” man who is described as violent and dangerous. The report may not include any information about the disease. But it may paint the person as a criminal.

> Movies where characters with mental illness are killers or psychopaths. These seem to be more common than movies with realistic stories about people with mental illness.

It’s important to know the facts so that you can combat the myth that people with schizophrenia are violent:

> People with mental illness who are being treated are no more likely to be violent than other people.
> People with schizophrenia are much more likely to be violent toward themselves than toward others. Up to 40% try to commit suicide at some point.
> When people with schizophrenia do commit violent acts, it’s usually because they are not getting proper treatment. People with severe mental illness who are not receiving treatment are six to seven times more likely to be physically violent than the general population.

Everyday language has an impact too.

The way we speak about mental illness affects the ideas people have about diseases like schizophrenia. Sometimes psychiatric terms are used in the wrong way, or in ways that reinforce negative stereotypes:

> Psychotic, psycho, schizo, crazy
> Nut house, luny bin
> Schizophrenic (it’s better to say “a person with schizophrenia.”)

For people with schizophrenia and their families, these words hurt.

The word “schizophrenic” is sometimes used incorrectly in day-to-day conversation to mean someone who can’t make up their mind, or has views that conflict with one another. This is not a correct way to use the word. It suggests that schizophrenia means ‘split personality.’ It does not.