Mental Health Stigma

What is stigma?

Stigma is negative stereotypes, labels, judgments and prejudice that can lead to discrimination. There are many stereotypes about people living with mental illness including: they're unpredictable, violent or dangerous; they can't hold down a full time job; they're not reliable; and they will never be able to recover.

Stigma reflects prejudice, dehumanizes people with mental illness, trivializes their legitimate concerns, and is a significant barrier to effective delivery of mental health services. Because of stigma, individuals and families are often afraid to seek help.

Progression of stigmatizing ideas:

- **Stereotypes:** Generalized belief; "People with mental illness are violent"
- **Prejudice:** Judgment based on that belief; "They're violent, I'm scared and don't want anything to do with them"
- **Discrimination:** Action based off those judgments and beliefs; "I won't hire or rent to a person with mental illness because I'm scared of them"

Types of stigma

- Public stigma: Stigma faced externally from a system, group or individual
- Self-stigma: internalized public beliefs that effect self-esteem and self-efficacy

Effect of stigma

Stigma is the biggest reason why people do not seek treatment for their mental health conditions. Often people do not want to be seen as one of "those" people so they aren't likely to seek help if they need it.

Stigma is pervasive and can negatively affect many areas of people's lives, including:

- Employment
- Housing
- Healthcare
- Educational opportunities
- Diminished care seeking & treatment engagement
- Worse outcomes for recovery

How to combat stigma

- Use person first language- such as "a person living with a mental illness" vs "a mentally ill person" and avoid stigmatizing words like "crazy" or "psycho"
- Contact based strategies: Listen to people with lived experiences and their stories of recovery; they are the best teachers and experts about their own experiences
- Education: Learn about the facts and experiences of people with mental illness
- Protest: Speak up when you see stigma in the community and have your voice heard by writing letters and getting involved with policy change!

Through programs and services at NAMI Chicago many people living with mental health conditions are empowered to share their stories, challenge stereotypes, and fight stigma. To learn more about how you can get involved, call NAMI Chicago at 312-563-0445.