Misconceptions Of The Mental Illness

As the mental illness continues to be a growing problem in not only adults but children and teens as well, it is important for society to know all the information it can about these diseases and how they actually affect people. Over generations, certain misconceptions have been formed about mental illnesses. In many situations, the stigma that is formed due to these misconceptions is not a true interpretation of mental illness. The false interpretations of mental illnesses have created an ideology that mental illness is unnatural and something to be feared. The stigma of mental illness was formed due to past generations' lack of knowledge about mental illnesses. In order to get rid of this stigma, society needs to be informed of how this stigma affects mentally ill people and what the truths of mental illnesses actually are.

A common question may be, "what is a stigma"? Defining the stigma of mental illness can be tricky because it has changed a little as society has progressed but it must be defined in order to understand why it so negatively affects the mentally ill. According to the article The Stigma of Mental Illness, "the word stigma comes from the Greek word stigmata, which refers to 'a mark of shame or discredit; a stain, or an identifying mark or characteristic'" (Overton and Medina 143). The mental illness stigma is developed through a thought process involving cues, such as physical differences seen by the eye, stereotypes about mental illness that are applied to a person based on cues, and then the development of prejudice or judgment of a person (144). Many that have been diagnosed with mental illnesses face the mental illness stigma daily. People labeled mentally ill or that have mental disabilities are stigmatized more heavily than those with other health conditions ("How Stigma Interferes" 614). The reason for this is because of stereotypes that accompany mental illness and the false assumptions created by these stereotypes.

It is extremely important to be informed about the truths of mental illness to understand what the stereotypes of mental illness are. Mental disorders are very common in all age groups and it is not something that is going away. Mental illness affects 18.6 percent of adults in the United States (Garcia 1). Also, according to a news article in the Austin American-Statesman, "fifty percent of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14" and "the biggest increase in the [mental illness] rates were in girls ages 10-14" (Villalplando 1). Mental illness is also a leader in the list of disabilities, in which "four of the top ten leading disabilities are actually mental disorders" (Covington 1). It is clear by the numbers that mental illness attacks a good portion of society. Mental illnesses are not a fantasy or something that can be willed away. Often, they involve chemistry imbalances in the brain. For example, depression "results from changes in the brain chemistry or brain function…" (Covington 1). Mental illnesses are natural and they affect a multitude of people. Learning the truths about mental illness will raise awareness about mental illness and allow society to differentiate between the truth and stigma of mental illness.

While learning about mental illness, it is also to learn about the actual stigma of mental illness and why it exists. The mental illness stigma originates from a lot of things, but the most common reason for stigma is because many believe that mental illness is something dangerous or something to be feared. According to S. Overton and S. Medina, "…it is normative behavior to perceive people with mental illness as dangerous or violent" (3). This stereotype comes from historical situations before the seriousness of mental illness was known. Often people were put

in prison because of their mental health issues and so naturally, people began believing that mental illness and violence were connected (Szabo 1). This is not always the case, but society often agrees with this stereotype and patients may also apply this stereotype to themselves (“What is the Impact” 1). Being labeled as dangerous makes mental illness seem terrible and therefore, society seems to avoid people with mental illness and avoid talking and learning about it.

Media can often be seen reiterating this stereotype instead of finding ways to stop it. Whether it be on the news, in TV shows, or in movies, mental illness often accompanies the person or character being portrayed as violent. Katherine Garcia, author of End the Mental Illness Stigma gives the example of violence in horror stories and how mental illness is depicted in them. She then goes on to say, “this reinforces the link between violent behavior and mental health issues” (Garcia 1). It seems as if wherever one looks, mental illness is falsely judged. According to an article that lists misconceptions and truths about mental illness, “most people with mental health problems aren’t violent” and only “7.5% of crimes are directly related to symptoms of mental illness” (Morin 1). This stigma affects how society sees the entire group of mental illness patients. By eliminating the stereotype that the majority of people with mental health issues are dangerous, raising awareness about mental illness and the stigma of mental illness would be a lot easier.

Being perceived as dangerous is not the only way mental health patients are harmed by stigmatization. Persons who have been diagnosed with mental illness are often stripped of their confidence and self-worth due to stigma. This is called self-stigma. More often than not, diagnosed patients have lower self-respect because they apply the stigma of mental illness to themselves (“What is the Impact” 1). They tear themselves down because they believe that people see them as abnormal and for some reason, being different makes society view them as outcasts. Forty-one percent of schizophrenic and other mental disorder patients have self-stigma (Horsselenberg et al. 1). Over time, “mental illness has been viewed as a character or moral flaw” (Overton and Medina 143). For this reason, diagnosed patients find it more difficult to carry out certain things in everyday life, because of the way society views them. For example, it is harder for patients to get a job because it is believed they will be absent more or bring danger to the workplace. This leads to more lack of confidence in mentally ill patients (Overton and Medina 145). When diagnosed patients are unable to get a job, they are unable to pay for medication or treatment services (145). The stigmatized ideology of mental illness even has the mentally ill believing stereotypes, and the lack of confidence and self-worth in these mentally ill patients is only contributing to the problem.

When mentally ill patients learn of the stereotypes about their diseases it may affect their decision to seek out treatment because they are fearful of how people may look at them or judge them. The mental illness stigma has caused people to be afraid of their own disabilities. Around thirty-five percent of people who have been diagnosed with a mental disability fear seeking help (Goldberstein et al. 3). According to the article How Stigma Interferes With Mental Health Care, “Many people who might benefit from these [treatment] services choose not to obtain them…” (“How Stigma Interferes” 1). This means that their mental illness symptoms won’t be alleviated. In the article Perceived Stigma and Health Care Seeking, the authors wrote, “24% to 29% of individuals with an apparent need for help reported being afraid of what others might think as a reason for not seeking care (Goldberstein et al. 1). Being too scared to follow up on their prescriptions written by doctors, these patients won’t get over their disease and the problem of stigma and how mental illness is perceived by society will not change.

While a lot of the reason mental illness patients don’t get the treatment they need is that they are afraid of how society looks at them, this is not the only reason they don’t receive adequate treatment for their diseases. Another reason they don’t get the treatment they need is that there is a lack of institutions that will actually help them. Robert Pierattini is quoted in the article Cost of Not Caring: Stigma set in stone, “It's common for mentally ill patients — who go to the hospital in search of treatment for a psychiatric crisis — to languish for weeks in emergency rooms” (Szabo). Mental illness is not always taken as a serious illness that needs to be taken care of as urgently as others due to the stigma that almost creates the idea that mental illness is not as “real” as other diseases like cancer. However, mental illness is “real” and it is a problem. Sixty percent of adults in need of treatment don’t receive treatment and a big reason for this high of a number is simply because they can not find the help they need (Szabo). Whether it is because people are afraid to seek treatment and choose not to, or because they just don’t have the access to treatment, stigma is somewhat responsible for all of it. People will not begin to get the treatment they need for their mental health issues until the stigma is erased.

Mental illness stigma not only affects the way society views mental illness, but it also affects the way people with mental illnesses view themselves. The only way to get rid of the negative stigma towards mental illness is to change the stigma. One way that this can be done is by creating stereotype awareness about mental illness. According to a study done on creating stereotype awareness, “dealing with stereotype awareness may be a useful way to diminish self-stigma in moderate to high levels” (Zelst et al. 1). The article explains that when people are aware of stereotypes they are less likely to believe them because it allows people to understand that the stereotypes being made about them allow them to make an unbiased decision about their illness (2). Another way that society can change the current mental illness stigma is to “redefine the way mental health issues are discussed and studied” (Garcia 1). In the same article, Garcia also suggests that society stop linking violence with mental illness, stop using demeaning words like “crazy”, and also for mental illness patients to stop using their own stories to bring awareness to their disease (1). All of these ways are great in terms of erasing the mental illness stigma, but before these ways will work, and the public can act against stigma they must be informed about the truths of mental illness in general.

The stigma of mental illness has allowed society to discriminate against a lot of common diseases that are not only existent in the United States, but also in the world. As more research is done on mental illness and more and more people are being diagnosed with mental illnesses, it is important that the public understands the seriousness of the mental illness and how it affects people. The false stereotypes that are made about mental illness has led people to fear mental illness. It is not something that should be feared, rather something that should be accepted the same as physical illness. In order for this to happen, stigma and mental illness awareness need to be more common so that society can diminish stereotypes formed in the past about mental illness. Mental illness is not going away. It is up to this generation to change the mental illness stigma and get rid of all general misconceptions made about mental illness and the people it attacks.