

Overcoming Stigma: How To Do It

Ms. L S Chan

Mental Health Advocate and Board Member of Silver Ribbon Singapore

In the space of mental health stories, people are looking for a ‘superhero’ person recovered from mental illness who can provide lessons learnt and who is ‘brave and inspiring’.

This is what some people mean when they say that mental health stories are in fact ‘inspirational porn’. Persons with mental health issues on stage are something of circus animals. There is an objectification of such persons and their lives.

I do not want to be a superhero schizophrenic for people to gawk at. I want to live.

But I must also speak for myself, rather than waiting for others to speak on my behalf.

I feel that in conferences such as these, it is too easy to focus on the success stories, on how people have overcome their mental health struggles and stigma in society.

But so many people try hard to recover and still struggle a lot, in their daily lives and work.

Today, I want to share this space with my friends in mental health who still struggle. I want to say that it’s okay to be vulnerable.

In 2008, I experienced an episode of psychosis. I suffered from delusions and was out of touch with reality. Because of this singular episode, I was diagnosed with schizophrenia.

This is 2019. Eleven years later. I have not had a relapse since 2008. Yet, people continue to

perceive and label me as a “person with a mental health condition”, or a person with schizophrenia.

I do not deny my past. I did have an episode of psychosis. It was important for me to make sense of that experience. I became a mental health advocate. From 2012 - 2016, I worked to raise awareness about mental health and stigma in society.

But I am not my past. I am not my past behaviour. I am not my past symptoms. I am in fact, officially recovered from mental illness in the sense that I have not had a relapse in years. Yet I continue to be labelled.

For years after my episode of psychosis, I found myself stigmatised by employers who were aware of my history. I was expected to be unpredictable. I was not given responsibility in case I was overstressed.

I had wonderful employers too. My former employer NCSS was encouraging, partially sponsoring my further studies in creative writing.

Later, my work in higher education in Bangladesh was utterly rewarding. I was tasked to lead a team to provide academic support to students in a university, and I taught undergraduate courses in writing.

My boss never referred to my history of mental illness and kept giving me more and more responsibility.

It felt liberating to be abroad, where I was not recognised primarily as a person with mental health conditions. I was very happy.

Ms. L S Chan

Returning to Singapore, I find that I can't escape the label. The problem is that I still cannot escape my past.

Here in Singapore, no one is willing to take a chance on me. I can be employed, but only in a junior position pegged far below my qualifications and experience.

I continue to feel the stigma.

I have achieved a lot, but I continue to hear my psychiatrist telling me my diagnosis for the first time in 2008, telling me that I must lower my expectations for the rest of my life.

I know, that people are not born, to believe that persons diagnosed with a mental illness must always be ill.

With public education, most people will understand that a person diagnosed with a mental illness is not always ill, and that such persons have a lot to give.

What I've come to realise, is that my greatest enemy is myself. Even as a recovered person, I continue to see myself as a person with a mental health condition.

I believe that I suffer from what in the mental health industry is called self-stigma. In a 2016 research study on self-stigma in Singapore, almost half of the interviewees suffered from moderate to high levels of internalised stigma. I've been unconscious of my own self-stigma for a very long time.

Today, I would like to let everyone know about this internalised stigma that I've noticed in myself and others around me. I may have recovered, but I may not yet have the confidence to fully believe in myself.

I am experiencing various mental blocks that serve as barriers to living the life I truly want.

But if I could only stop seeing myself as a person with a mental health condition, if I could stop stigmatising myself, if I could stop doubting

my capacities and abilities, and if I could be a little kinder, to myself and others...

Only then would I be in a position to reach my fullest potential.

I think we all recognise that there is a tremendous need to address social stigma and self-stigma.

What causes stigma?

It is to equate an experience of mental illness with the identity of a person as a person with mental illness.

But people with past episodes are not their past.

The past does not define us, nor does it determine our future.

Do not tell me that I am unworthy. I will no longer believe you.

Let us go beyond the label.

How might we do that? I think that persons diagnosed with a mental health condition can start by asking three essential questions to address their self-stigma. These are questions that I have personally found helpful to me.

For mental health professionals in the room, these questions may be helpful to your clients who need to address their self-stigma. And for family members, if these questions will be helpful to your loved ones, do share it with them.

We might begin by asking the question, "What is my story?" What has happened? Why was it important? What does it mean for who I am and who I will become? Your story can be about mental health, but it does not need to be.

It is only when we identify our story that we can change it if necessary. And as we begin to answer this question, we will become more aware of ourselves and our perceptions of ourselves.

Second, we can ask, "How may I be of value to others?" It can be as simple as listening

Overcoming Stigma: How To Do It

to someone speak about their day, or helping someone else with a need. This is a question about ways in which we can contribute to the lives of others and be involved in activities and conversations outside of ourselves.

When we take the time to be involved in other people's lives, it helps us to build a stronger supportive network of people around us. Self-perception is more than just how we think about ourselves - it is also how others perceive us and their reflecting it back to us.

When we deliberately seek to create a robust network of friends and family, and succeed in doing so, it strengthens how we feel about ourselves. This is what people mean when they say "Let's turn the 'I' in illness to 'we' in wellness".

But many of our friends do not currently have supportive family. If this is the case, that we are currently stigmatised by the people around us, then we must reach out to find others - no matter how far from our comfort zone - who are able and available to support us.

Thirdly, we might begin to ask ourselves, "Am I pursuing a challenge right now?" If yes, then how am I doing in tackling this challenge and can I do better?

And if not, what would be a challenge, and how might I get there? It's important to keep active and do something in your life, and not simply ruminate about life.

It could be as simple as waking up at a regular time each day, or it could be as hard as running a marathon or writing a novel, or seeking the divine.

Whatever your inclination might be, do something with your life. Taking steps to meeting a challenge can give hope, build self-esteem, and provide meaning and purpose.

To end, I hope these three essential questions can act as a springboard from which we can begin to address self-stigma, a challenge which I see as just as important, if not even more important than social stigma.

To go beyond the label, society needs to recognise that we are not merely our past experiences of mental illness. Society needs to see beyond the stereotypes.

But we cannot wait for the rest of the world to catch up. And so, let us start with ourselves. We must let go and move on.

I had schizophrenia in the past, but my past doesn't define who I am today. I see myself: as a writer and mental health advocate, an agent of change and wellness for others.

I continue to feel the stigma, but I will nevertheless move on. Regardless of my doubts and insecurities, it is necessary to move forward.

I am not waiting for the rest of the world to catch up.