

# How to Deal with Mental Illness Stigma

By MICHAEL HEDRICK



I've seen the worst of it. I've been asked if I've ever killed anybody and I've seen the disgust on people's faces when I disclose the simple fact that I have schizophrenia.

Nine years in and this illness is so much a part of who I am. I imagine it's the same for others in my boat, that not disclosing feels like I'm leaving a major part of myself out of the conversation. It's become such a defining characteristic that I feel like I'm lying to people if I don't eventually tell them.

The thing with me, though, is that I'm so practiced in social interaction that you would never be able to tell that I have schizophrenia. A lot of other people in my boat have a good deal of trouble performing in public. It's easy to tell there's something off. But I've worked relentlessly at trying to appear normal. I think I've pretty much got it down.

That's the thing, if you don't show that it hurts you and that it has power over you, it's not such a huge deal to disclose.

In today's society there are so many different ways of life that it's impossible to function without an open mind. That's the one thing that I think has helped with mental illness stigma in the last decade. I think this collective open mind that society has been forced to take on helps people understand differing viewpoints. So if you don't want to be a jerk, you have to accept that people are different from you.

<http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2015/01/06/how-to-deal-with-mental-illness-stigma/>

This notion has helped immensely with stigma across the board as well, not just mental illness stigma but LGBT stigma and racial stigma and really anything that gives a person a different view of their life.

That said, there are still the select few out there who are closed-minded. Those are the ones that make living with a mental illness a hard thing to disclose.

As I said, though, showing that the diagnosis doesn't define you helps lessen any potential stigma you may face. Even just throwing in the words "but it's not a big deal or anything" after you tell them you're schizophrenic can do major work in allowing them to be comfortable with this often-undisclosed part of you.

Making friends and forming relationships is incredibly hard for anyone, even if they don't have to worry about some major stigma hanging over their heads. The thing to remember is that, in the words of Dr. Seuss, those who matter don't mind and those who mind don't matter. The good ones are out there. Even if you wade through a pool of stigma for most of your life, you will find people that couldn't care less whether you have a mental illness.

If you're comfortable with that part of you, others will be comfortable with it as well. Once you find the good people, stick by them and keep them close. We all know the world is hard enough. Having people who understand your quirks and the things that make you who you are can help even those who suffer the most.

Just because you have a mental illness, it doesn't make you any worse than anyone else. Everyone has quirks and things they're afraid of disclosing. Your illness is what gives you character.

Embrace it.