What is stigma?

Stigma means a mark of disgrace associated with circumstances, quality or person (dictionary.com). Is mental illness any more a disgrace than a physical illness?

How does stigma occur?

1. Stigma is often founded in false beliefs and stereotypes. People can blame mental illness on drug taking, addictions and reckless lifestyles. People believe that the mentally ill should be excluded from society for their own benefit and also the benefit of society.

2. Lack of education, wrong information and perceived concepts also results in stigma and discrimination. There may be campaigns and education to look out for the early signs of heart disease.

Stigma often is the focus of many jokes. Terms such as ‘nutter’, ‘cuckoo’ and ‘psycho’ are derogatory and not funny to someone challenged with mental illness. The media and film industry sometimes use ‘psychos’ to their advantage and to the distaste of those really challenged with the disease.
attacks, say, but how many exist for the mentally ill? Many think for example schizophrenia is split personality. Many think mental illness is something one can pull themselves out off.

**Effects of Stigma**

1. Stigma prevents those challenged or their loved ones seeking help that they need. It can be a barrier to seeking treatment.

2. As social beings, we love company; we love to be surrounded with friends and family. When people don’t fit our ‘mould’, they can often be made to feel isolated and unloved even. Families are affected too and can feel shame, loneliness and even self blame. Children can be teased because of their parent’s condition. Even courting couples may break up once the other party reveals that they have mental health challenges because of pressures and concerns from well meaning friends and families.

"Those with mental illness are often robbed of opportunities in life. These include jobs, career prospects, educational opportunities, housing and even underfunded health care".
Now and again, we hear of uncompassionate health care professionals who treat their own patients with a roughness. How sad! Psychiatric Medical professionals are also looked down on too or seen as abnormal.

3. Socially, others may relate to the mentally ill like they would to children thinking they are stupid. Someone with mental illness does not mean they are stupid. However, society can think mentally ill are perhaps brainless, which can be a little unfair. There are very intelligent people who have been challenged with mental illness yet have made global impact in their works and inventions. Beethoven, Charles Dickens and the acclaimed Isaac Newton are examples, to name a few.

4. Stigma often leads to discrimination in the workplace. Avoidance due to not understanding the disease makes it easier for employers simply not to hire. For those already in employment, after returning to work after an episode, they may find a change in how their colleagues relate to them. This results in them feeling awkward. Sometimes mentally ill workers may find themselves being retrenched or even demoted in their jobs. It is amazing how loopholes can be found to facilitate this.
5. Stigma can make those challenged with mental illness feel they are second class citizens, not part of the click, outsiders and so on. They may feel inferior, not good enough, feel rejection, have low self esteem, low self worth, lack confidence, hopelessness, loneliness and blame.