Loosening the Grip of Stigma

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As a person who engages in a ministry of healing, I am troubled by how the firm grip of mental, physical, racial, and religious stigma continues to emotionally destabilize human beings in our society.

These stigmas have been weaponized to shame and blame, to justify privilege, or create fear about a specific condition in the minds of humans who, often through no fault of their own, are being judged by them.

According to Healthline.com, "[t]he term stigma originated in ancient Greece, where it referred to symbols burned into the skin of enslaved people and people judged as criminals or traitors. These symbols, or stigmas, suggested the person was 'blemished' and that others should avoid and shun them. The sociologist Erving Goffman refashioned the term in 1963, giving it its modern meaning."

Taking another perspective, verywellhealth.com defines stigma as "a negative attitude or idea about a mental, physical, or social feature of a person or group of people that implies social disapproval."

The level of disapproval or discrimination one may experience from any of these forms of bias can evoke feelings of depression; others may choose to isolate themselves from their community. In

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the worst case scenario, it might result in death by suicide.

It is essential that we understand the distinct types of stigma so that we can work toward their eradication.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness ([NAMI](#)) classifies mental health stigma into seven types: *[public stigma, self-stigma, perceived stigma, label avoidance, stigma by association, structural stigma, and health practitioner stigma](#)*.

Throughout my lifetime, I have encountered the pains of stigma. I had a college friend who died from pneumonia as a complication of AIDS in the 1980s; my mother was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in the 1990s; and my uncle died by suicide in the mid-2000s. Each of these unfortunate incidents brought a cloud of secrecy, shame, blame, and fear into my family system. It was not easy to navigate.

As a Black Queer individual who came out in the 1970s and has been harmed by public stigma, self-stigma, and perceived stigma, I struggled to process life when those occurrences within my family surfaced. There was shunning, finger-pointing, and whispering by people who knew and loved each of those beautiful souls, each one a gift to humanity, their communities, our families, and me.

German pastor and poet Martin Niemöller wrote the famous poem, "[First They Came](#)," in 1946. The last two lines read "…Then they came for me. And there was no one left to speak out for me." His poem addresses the consequences of standing by while something immoral is happening and the responsibility of bystanders.

Further, Niemöller's poem exemplifies a similar harm of being shunned by others, utilizing differing forms of social stigma. In such instances, one may feel compelled to turn one's back on another human being because one believes it will keep oneself safe, which may not be the case in the end.

I invite all who read this editorial to consider the metaphorical mark of shame that stigma leaves behind. It is nothing more than a judgment, not a fact. Begin familiarizing yourself with it so that we can turn the tide against this evil. The lives we save may be our own.

Lastly, if you find yourself struggling with any mental health crisis, contact NAMI's HelpLine at 800-950-6264, text "NAMI" to 62640, or email. In a crisis, call or text 988.

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