Overcoming Stigma in Mental Health

What Is Mental Health Stigma?

Mental health stigma is a set of negative attitudes, thoughts, biases, and unfair beliefs directed toward individuals with a mental health condition. Mental health conditions, just like physical health, are real health concerns that require assessment and evidence-based treatments.

Language Matters

Staff may not be aware that words commonly used to describe residents with a mental health disorder could be stigmatizing and harmful. It also can prevent residents from seeking help, lead to shame, and even worsen their symptoms. Avoid using words and terms like those listed below.

- Crazy
- Antisocial
- Lazy
- Attention-seeking
- A crybaby
- A drama queen/king
- Feeling sorry for themselves
- Should just snap out of it
- Being difficult

Use words to heal, not harm.

Stopping Stigma

Nursing facility staff play a key role in reducing stigma. Use these tips to stop mental health stigma:

- Treat all residents with dignity and respect.
- Avoid using harmful labels and terms.
- Speak out about stigma.
- Provide facility-wide education on mental health conditions.
- Recognize that the mental illness is not under the resident's control.

Health Services Advisory Group (HSAG) is the West Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) Quality Innovation Network-Quality Improvement Organization (QIN-QIO) Region 7.

This material was prepared by the Center of Excellence for Behavioral Health in Nursing Facilities. This work is made possible by grant number 1H79SM087155 from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. August 2025. This material has been adapted with permission by Health Services Advisory Group (HSAG), a Quality Innovation Network-Quality Improvement Organization (QIN-QIO) under contract with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Views expressed in this material do not necessarily reflect the official views or policy of CMS or HHS, and any reference to a specific product or entity herein does not constitute endorsement of that product or entity by CMS or HHS. Publication No. QN-13SOW-XC-09222026-10