



Before you start ...

There are some important things to know before continuing.

Voices of lived experience

This fact sheet is part of a series we created with families who have been through tough times to spark hope and new ideas about how to stand up to stigma.

We hope these resources have something to offer all families, but recognise they are simply a snapshot reflecting the lived experiences of the families who helped us create them – other families will have different experiences and stories.

We also intentionally create resources that reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of *knowing, being and doing* with guidance from our National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Consultancy Group and partners.

For more information please see emergingminds.com.au/working-with-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples

Language notes: 'Parents'

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. In our resources, the term 'parent' encompasses biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising children. Our resources aim to support families and the children in their care. We acknowledge that every child is unique and has different strengths, vulnerabilities and experiences that shape their health and development.

It is easy to be caught up in stigma and stigmatise others without realising. Even when we don't want to, or don't think we are doing it, sometimes we make assumptions or think negative thoughts about someone, or a group of people, based on their identity or experience. Stigma can show up in our thoughts about strangers, people we know and even members of our own family. These thoughts can happen automatically without us questioning them. But with practice we can learn to notice and be curious about these thoughts, which helps us to stand against stigma in our families and communities.

Before you continue, take a moment to think about ...



- Can you think of a time in the last week when you made an assumption or judgement about someone because of stigma?
- Is there anything that makes it easier for you to notice when stigma shows up in your thoughts about others?

Take a moment to think about ...



- What stood out to you from the Stigma Stevie video?
- Have you ever experienced any of the assumptions or beliefs that Stigma Stevie was calling out?
- What is making it possible for the characters in the video to change their responses to stigma?

In the following video from StigmaBeat (3 minutes, 34 seconds), Stevie and Sam work together to challenge stigma.



- Hey, Sam, what's with the jacket?

Noticing stigma

Unlike in the video, we don't usually have someone to show up and let us know when a thought or belief about others comes from stigma.

The following stories share some of the things to look out for that might help you recognise when stigma shows up.

Fear and discomfort

If we notice that we feel fear, discomfort or distrust, or find ourselves avoiding someone based on how they look, it's possible stigma has us believing that person belongs to a group of people that is dangerous or less worthy of compassion. Sometimes stigma can show up as a feeling in our body before we even notice any thoughts attached to it.

'I remember when I was a little kid feeling a bit freaked out by my grandparents. I used to feel uncomfortable or reluctant going into their houses and confronted by the ways in which their bodies had aged.

'Now I can see that those strong feelings were shaped by the way mainstream Australian culture devalues older people, as well as those who are sick and disabled, and that we've lost a reverence for all contributions and wisdom they offer to our families and communities.

'They died before I had a chance to unlearn that stigma and I missed out on having a stronger connection with them and learning more from them, which is such a loss. Now I try hard to make sure my child fosters strong, mutually respectful relationships with their grandparents because I appreciate how much richness that will offer to all our lives.'

Credits: 'Stigma Stevie' by StigmaBeat (2022)

youtu.be/wn6yBysl3PE

StigmaBeat is a dynamic, youth-led, storytelling project that aims to create positive social change to end the stigma that is often associated with mental ill health. Co-created with young people from Gippsland, Victoria with Monash Health and the Satellite Foundation, these films share the participants' insights and perspectives on the various kinds of stigma they experience day-to-day.

'My mother is from a Muslim country and she came to visit us in Australia. She wears a hijab to cover herself. We went to the beach as a family and because of her culture and beliefs she wore her hijab swimming. My son, myself and my mother all felt judged by other people at the beach. We stood out and were different. We know that people don't have the correct information about our culture and religion and that leads to them being scared of us or even hating us. This has led to my child feeling shame, low self-esteem, isolation, or feeling the need to try and explain and educate people.'

Blame, dismissal and disbelief

Sometimes we might find ourselves wondering "why can't they just get a job/do better at school/make more friends/stop doing that/make healthier choices?" about others in our lives who seem to be struggling. If we find ourselves thinking this way, it's possible stigma is stopping us from understanding the barriers they are facing and what they are already doing to address them. We might respond in the form of unwelcome advice about how they should fix their problems. But if we can recognise this stigma, we can make the choice to listen and support them instead.

'I used to tell my daughter to just go out and get involved in life instead of wasting away in her room isolated from the world. I thought she was just being lazy. She had no friends and I used to tell her it was her fault because she wasn't trying hard enough in my eyes, and if she would just try I was sure she would make friends. I did blame her. I used to think that mental illness was just an excuse – now I know better.'

'My daughter's friend has schizophrenia. He hears voices that call him names and make him feel bad. I always thought, to myself, that he made this stuff up for attention. He said the voices were driving him crazy and that he wanted to commit suicide because he just couldn't deal with it anymore. I didn't believe him, I thought he was just saying that for attention. Then he did try, really badly too, he was in hospital for a few weeks. I finally understood how bad it was for him. I should have believed him.'

Judgement

When we are quick to assess others as bad or wrong, and feel negatively towards them, it's often due to stigma. It's easy to jump to conclusions based on default stigmatising ideas about which people, and which ways of living, are 'good' and 'bad'.

'During high school, I regretfully admit that I used to make disparaging remarks about kids who were different, not realising that they might have been neurodiverse. I gave in to peer pressure because I was afraid that if I didn't fit in, my friends would make fun of me. Even as an adult, I never understood why parents would be "allowing" their children to throw major tantrums in shopping centres. It wasn't until I had neurodiverse children of my own that I finally understood that it was not bad behaviour, but sensory overload.'

'I was doing peer support and I was helping a lady, she was young, she had two beautiful kids and she was not attached to her kids. She was doing things that really traumatised me. Leaving them at home all night, not feeding them properly, never cuddled or kissed them. I saw that disconnect. Initially I was very angry. I judged her inside me. I had some sort of hate and I just couldn't understand. But again, knowledge helped. Talking to my supervisor, my colleague helps me a lot [to understand] that's her way to heal because she was in a trauma, she was in a healing process.'



KAYLA, 11 YEARS OLD

Pity

When we feel [pity](#) (instead of [empathy](#)) for someone because of a difficult experience they've had or because of their identity, it's possible stigma is stopping us from seeing them as a whole person. We can miss the ways they are responding to what they are up against and ignore their many other identities, experiences, skills and knowledges outside of any challenges they are facing.

'My child's primary school teacher had anorexia. Other parents would talk about it and I remember feeling sorry for her. Sorry for her that she couldn't stop doing that to her body. I pitied her. It always felt uncomfortable that I felt this way. Over time I came to realise that I don't know her full story and she is probably standing up to lots of things outside her control. She probably has stories of survival that I have no idea about. And the longer she was my child's teacher, the more I realised how amazing a person she was. The classroom has a positive and respectful feeling. The children were engaged in beautiful creative projects. And she was able to help kids who were struggling navigate things like friendship difficulties with a lot of skill. I realised she is a strong and capable human being who doesn't need my pity, and my child is better for having her as her teacher.'

'Sometimes, when we were living in refuges and needing a lot of assistance from different services I would find that we often got two opposite responses from people who were in our orbit, particularly at schools because they would know we were living in a shelter. We would often get either the "cold shoulder", unfriendly response or the over-the-top helping response. I used to dread going to new school meetings because of this – the over-the-top helping response was often the worse because we would feel so singled out. The kids hated it, and it made them and me very uncomfortable.'

'I've had times where I've been talking to people who I've considered safe and fairly understanding, and they've suggested things like I should move out, for forging independence and all that. I couldn't live in a house by myself, are they insane? Their stigmas against me don't understand that I have a parent that I care for who is autistic and that is not simply only a negative thing. I rely on my autistic parent almost as much as my autistic parent relies on me. We live together, we have a symbiotic relationship. It's not always someone leeching off another, but sometimes it is, when things are really bad. But there's an ecosystem to the ways that these things work. The solution is more complex, but they don't see it that way, they want to help you to a point where you're not a problem anymore, I guess.'

– Harley, young person from a rural area

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Stand against stigma

It can take practice to begin noticing and challenging stigmatising thoughts. It helps to learn more about people whose experiences are different than our own. But you don't have to know everything about other people's lived experiences to stand against stigma. Remember Stigma Stevie's simple suggestions:

- Don't assume.
- Be curious.
- Ask people more questions and then listen respectfully.

We can also stand up to stigma by:

- paying attention to the feelings in our body when stigma is around so we can get better at noticing when it shows up
- listening to and believing people when they tell us what they are up against
- asking ourselves questions like:
 - What ideas do I have about this person?
 - What am I basing my ideas about them on?
 - Where did I learn these ideas?
 - What *don't* I know about this person's experience?
- spending time in diverse communities and connecting with people who have a different lived experience than our own
- speaking up – stigma thrives in silence. When we are honest about having been caught out by stigma, we can help others to be real with themselves about when they are, and make a change.

What would make a difference to me?

'If people believe what I'm saying. People listening to me. People not assuming that the parent with me is mum or dad. Previous foster kids sharing their stories as adults – not just famous people but everyday people.'

– Child in foster care

In the following stories, families share some ideas for standing against stigma.

Human connection

'I remember years ago I was at the shops and there was a parent with her very upset child. And this parent was obviously stressed to the max and she looked poor, so she had that stigma already. And she was not handling her kid at all. She was yelling at the kid and smacking them, and then she ended up grabbing them by the arm and pulling them out of the shop. It was really, really confronting. But everyone, unfortunately including me, was just kind of standing back and watching.

'I recognised where she was at, that feeling of overwhelm and that feeling of shame, people look at her saying, "Oh, you're such a bad parent." I knew in that moment that I didn't have the courage to do it, but what she needed was somebody to go up to her and say, "Hey, are you OK?" Or "Hey, wow, you're having a really hard time with your kid." Or just some kind of human connection – that's what was needed. That might not have changed things then, but that might've changed things a little bit. That bridge is human connection. Sometimes people need lots and lots of those human connections because they've been on that island for so long, they're in the middle of the ocean and they need a lot of those human connections before anything changes. I'm hoping that somebody was able to make that human connection that I wasn't able to make that day and that people didn't give up on her because it wasn't a happy situation that she or her kid was in.'

Doing the work to address racism

'I grew up with experiences of racism. So did my parents and my grandparents. It looks different in each generation and that is because racism evolves to stay. I am aware that my grandparents gave up culture and language in many ways to "fit in". It hurts to see new and emerging migrant communities experience what my grandparents and parents experienced, and I must also remember that our families migrated, not knowing what was happening to Aboriginal peoples in this country too.

'I now have a son who is 10 and he is exploring his cultural identities and sense of belonging. Some people would describe him as "mixed heritage" or "mixed race" and I distance myself from these terms. I prefer that he can self-identify however he feels, and I will help him along that journey. I prefer to say that he is of Indian and Italian heritage and growing up "Australian".

'My son and I watched the film *The Final Quarter* (thefinalquarterfilm.com.au) and I wanted to have a conversation with my son about this experience of a black man and a white child's racist name-calling in such a public space. This was important because it was also a child that was racist to an adult and so we could also talk about how children learn and repeat this behaviour too.

'This is ongoing work for me and I am very intentional about what we watch, what we learn, what we read and how we learn from our experiences. At home, we have a diverse range of books that show characters that are not white – my son has books with black and brown characters and characters with turbans and stories that showcase our culture, language, celebrations and traditions. For a child to see themselves in a book as the main character is powerful. Equally, it is important that white and non-Indigenous children also have these books. I am intentional that my child has a variety of books from Aboriginal authors. One of my son's favourite books is, *Our Home, Our Heartbeat* by Briggs. If you go to your local shop, you can analyse the toys and books and look for who is represented. Often it is predominantly white. Some of the books I select have been a special order or from a bookstore and often the books are more expensive. This indicates the barriers that come with trying to find books that have diverse representation.

'There is work do as a parent that maybe the school won't do, and I won't wait for the education system to teach this either. That's my commitment to raising my children to recognise and respect the cultural diversity in our community and to see representation in everyday spaces. I want to be intentional, and I understand this is ongoing work. I want my son to see me doing this work too.'

– Renee, person of Italian–Australian heritage, living on Kurna Country

You can find more stories like this in our [Families responding to racism](#) fact sheet.

Empathy and curiosity

'I used to avoid people with intellectual disability because I couldn't relate to them. Same with autistic people. After I experienced severe mental illness which really disabled me, I now feel so much more comfortable not having to judge people and just taking everyone on face value. Having open, curious conversations has really given me a richer experience. I'm now much more comfortable having a conversation with anyone. Always keeping in mind "what has happened?" not "what's wrong with you?" I can see that has flowed on to my kids now they are older. They are fierce allies and advocates for diversity. They are really progressive and make a great effort to be inclusive and empathetic towards minority groups even to the point of pulling me up if I use non-inclusive language.'

Doing what we can in the moment – if it is safe to do so

'One time I was travelling on a tram with my two primary school aged children. There was a man who began racially insulting a woman. The man was quite obviously dealing with poor cognition/mental distress and the woman was trying to ignore him. The man was getting louder and more offensive and everyone on the tram was quite, kind of frozen. I just felt that I couldn't not say anything and I wanted to show the woman (and my kids who were with me) that there is never an excuse for racial abuse and that it is not up to the person on the receiving end to have to defend themselves; that it's up to society to do something.

'I have had poor mental health episodes and at times very limited cognition and I would hope that if I ever did something way out of line when I was in that state I would be pulled in. I would also want other people to say something if I was being insulted and didn't have the ability to say something. So I said: "You can't say that, it's offensive." He said it again, so I said if he couldn't control what he was saying he needed to get off the tram. I was very polite and calm and direct. He said one more thing then got off the tram. The woman got off the tram a little later and said, "Thank you" as she got out.

'I talked about it with my kids after. One of them had been scared, but I was able to explain that I felt it was safe enough as the tram was very busy. And that I had weighed up the risks versus needing to say something. I felt it was showing my kids the power of standing up to something unjust.'

Owning our behaviour

'I remember once being asked by someone in the street for money and I angrily responded, "Well we live in Australia mate so you get the dole too." That was a poor response and I remember thinking to myself that that was an unfair way to treat him. I actually went back and apologised to him and we had a conversation. He needed the money as he was staying in a hotel with his pregnant girlfriend, and they had a two-year-old in their care as well. I would encourage people to remain curious and not just assume you know what is going on in someone else's life.'

Take a moment to think about ...



- Have there been times in your life when you unlearned or challenged stigmatising ideas you had in the past?
- Did anyone help you with this?
- If anything, what did you notice that changed for you or for others?
- Are there times you have noticed other people standing against stigma? What stands out to you about how they did that?
- What's one thing you might do to stand against stigma after reading this?

To learn more about the ways that families are responding to stigma against them, check out our [Families standing up to shame and stigma](#) fact sheet.

Recommended resources on stigma

You can read more stories of families standing against stigma in our following fact sheets:

- [Collaboration and care between families and service providers](#)
- [Striving to be an ally to families experiencing racism](#)
- [Talking to children about family money struggles](#)
- [Talking to children about homelessness](#)
- [Supporting children's social connections in tough times](#)

AVAILABLE HERE

View all Shame and stigma resources



Are you a practitioner wanting to share this resource with a person or family?

First, check out our practitioner guide: emergingminds.com.au/resources/practitioner-guide-shame-and-stigma

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