Healthcare

Breaking the Stigma: Why mental health awareness matters



"Mental health is defined as a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well, work well and contribute to their community."

-World Health Organisation

The weight we carry in silence

Mental health challenges do not discriminate. They affect the engineer and the farmer, the executive and the school teacher, the young and the old. The World Health organisation estimates that one in four people globally will be affected by a mental health condition at some point in their lives. In sub-Saharan Africa, the burden is significant, yet the treatment gap remains among the widest in the world, with fewer resources, fewer professionals and enormous cultural barriers standing between people and the help they need.

Much of this gap is not medical; it is social. Stigma: the mark of shame attached to mental illness, silences millions. It tells people that struggling means weakness. It tells families that seeking help brings dishonour. It tells communities that those who suffer deserve their suffering. These are lies, but they are powerful ones.



What stigma looks like in real life

Stigma wears many faces. In the workplace, it looks like an employee terrified to disclose burnout for fear of being passed over for promotion. In the household, it looks like a father who drinks himself to sleep every night rather than admit he is drowning in anxiety. In the community, it looks like a young woman labelled 'mad' or 'bewitched' when she is in the grip of a depressive episode.

They are the everyday reality for many people around us. Colleagues, neighbours, family members are suffering in silence because the cost of speaking up feels too high. Stigma does not just cause pain; it costs lives. Untreated mental illness is strongly linked to chronic physical disease, loss of productivity, fractured families and tragically, suicide.

Creating spaces where people can be honest

Breaking stigma begins with the simplest and most radical act: honest conversation. You do not need to be a clinician to play a role. In your workplace, you can normalise mental health check-ins just as you would physical health reviews. In your home, you can create an environment where a child or spouse feels safe saying "I am not okay." In your community, you can challenge language that demeans or dismisses those who are struggling.

Small practices can make a significant difference. Replacing 'You seem fine' with 'How are you really?' costs nothing and could open a door that someone has kept locked for years. Acknowledging your own hard days, especially for those in leadership positions, sends a powerful message that vulnerability is not a flaw; it is human.

A shared responsibility

Mental health is not only a medical issue. It is a social, economic and moral issue. Governments must prioritise mental health funding and integrate it into primary care. Employers must invest in employee wellbeing beyond the physical. Faith and community leaders, who hold enormous trust across the continent, have a unique opportunity to reframe mental illness as a matter deserving compassion, not condemnation.

And each of us, in our own sphere of influence, can decide to be the person who does not look away. Who sits with a struggling friend rather than offering platitudes. Who refuses to laugh at a joke that mocks mental illness. Who treats a person experiencing psychological pain with the same gentleness they would extend to someone with a broken leg.

Mental health is health. The mind and body are not separate. A society that ignores the wellbeing of the mind will always fall short of its full potential. We have the knowledge, the language and increasingly, the tools to do better. What we need now is the will and the courage to start the conversation.



If you or someone you know is struggling, please reach out to a healthcare professional or a trusted person in your life. You do not have to carry this alone.

4731 • 2026-06-Getty Images