Social Stigma Of COVID-19

Since the uncovering of COVID-19, we have encountered many things for the first time. As we come out of lockdown, more people are becoming infected daily. With the rise in infections there can also be a social stigma that accompanies the virus.

What Is Social Stigma?
The definition from UNICEF: "Social stigma in the context of health is the negative association between a person or group of people who share certain characteristics and a specific disease."

People who show symptoms of the virus, or are believed to be infected, can be ostracised from society or social groups. They can be labelled as infected, and discriminated against because they are ill. As the person who is being ostracised, this type of treatment is damaging and can cause them to retreat from society. It can also have adverse effects on their caregivers and family. It can prevent sick people from seeking medical attention, which can in turn result in further difficulty controlling the disease.

What Is COVID-19 Stigma Caused By?
The fact that we are dealing with something novel and new, many people don't know how to react to it because the outcomes are uncertain. People have been off work, lost their jobs, been isolated from friends and family. All of this causes uncertainty and fear. We know that patients can recover from the virus, but there is still immense fear surrounding COVID-19, which can be the basis for social stigma. Some of the main reasons for the stigma can stem from this.

- It is an illness that is new and has a number of unknowns surrounding it
- It is an illness that can result in immense pain and even death
- It is an invisible illness
- We are afraid of things we don't understand
- It is easier to associate fear with people who are at a distance from us
- It is easier to blame someone else when we don't fully understand something

How Can We Address These Issues?
When there is fear and stigma associated with a healthcare issue, it has been found that these responses obstruct positive progress to counteract the problem. In order to overcome social stigma, we need to address the reasons behind it. In relation to COVID-19, some of these are:

- Access reliable and relevant healthcare information from reputable sources, such as:
  https://www.healthichoices.com/healthichoices/-covid-19-resources/
- Avoid speaking about COVID-19 using words that incite negativity and fear. For example:
  - Instead of saying "COVID-19 suspects" use the words "people presumed to have COVID-19"
  - Instead of using words like "plague" or "outbreak", use terms such as "illness" or "virus"
- Show care and empathy for those who are affected. Try to understand their challenges from a personal perspective so as to resonate with their experiences
- Calmly address those who appear to be inciting fear or ostracising groups of people and help them get a better understanding of how this can have a negative impact on addressing the problem and finding solutions.

If you are in need of support, counselling or any advice relating to COVID-19, please consult our Crisis Control Centre on 0860 111 646.

Resource: https://www.unicef.org/