

# Smashing the stigma about mental health

**“You may feel like a broken individual in a million pieces. But you are still worthy of love – not just from other people, but also from yourself,” Mitch Wallis said.**

In a classroom of 30 students, seven will be suffering from some form of mental illness. Of those seven, only two will feel comfortable speaking up about their struggles and seeking help. That means five kids in every class are suffering in silence<sup>30</sup>.



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In ancient Greece, slaves were marked in order to identify their position in the social structure and to indicate that they were of less value. These marks were referred to as *stizein*, from which we get the word *stigma* – a socially constructed term referring to a distinguishing mark of social disgrace, attached to others in order to identify and to devalue them<sup>31</sup>.

Although the Greeks did not seem to have stigmatised the mentally ill, they nevertheless thought that being mentally ill carried a connotation of shame and weakness of character.

Things haven't changed much over the course of history.

Soldiers who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder often do not receive the treatment they need. Popular culture and Hollywood still depict mentally ill persons as being “crazy” or in need of an asylum. Even the term “mental” has a negative connotation about it.



When I was at high school in the early 2000s, I was unaware of mental health issues. It wasn't something that was spoken about. Our idea of a mental breakdown, and what it might look like, would have come from movies or TV shows.

Growing up in that kind of environment has had long-term impacts upon how I talk with my schoolmates about these issues. They're all supportive, and want to see me well. But a lot of them don't really know how to talk about it.

It creates a different kind of stigma; one that means I may feel like I can't talk to my mates for fear of them not understanding, or not being able to offer anything constructive in response.

Things are improving ... but there is still a long way to go.

Jerome Doraisamy



Even in this day and age, 86% of working professionals would rather suffer in silence than tell their boss that they are struggling, for fear of being fired or passed over for promotion<sup>32</sup>.

Fear of negative consequences not only reinforces a sense of isolation, but it stops you from seeking help from people who, ironically, would do anything to help you.

That fear of what other people may think can often lead to a sense of shame about what you're experiencing.

"I think kids are not seeking help because there's such a stigma around depression. Sometimes it can feel like a life sentence – if you're depressed, you're always going to be depressed," Flynnne said.

Awareness of mental health issues is high, as is understanding and appreciation of how it can affect you. But there remains a disconnect between students' recognition of health problems and their willingness to actually go and do something about it.

Four out of five Australian teenagers think people their own age may not seek support for depression or anxiety because they're afraid of what others will think of them<sup>33</sup>.

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“Young people still feel ashamed of their feelings [in spite of efforts to reduce stigma in high schools], and they’re reluctant to admit to their peers, their family, and particularly their school, that they’re struggling. I’ve seen that in many of my friends who experience severe anxiety in high school,” said Sophia.

Sam C. agreed, noting how his own struggles impacted upon his friendships. “We’re bombarded with suicide statistics, but we often forget about the huge number of people that suffer in silence, and go about their daily business as if nothing were wrong, out of stigmatised fear,” he said.

“The stigmatised nature of mental illness ruined a number of my early high school relationships because, being so young, many of my friends did not understand how I felt. Some of these relationships never recovered.”

I can understand why you would be fearful of telling your friends about struggles you’re facing.

High school is a time in which fitting in with the group is crucial to your sense of self-worth and wellbeing. Any point of difference between you and others may be the line in the sand which means you’re excluded.

As a result, those who do see the school counsellors, and run into each other in those offices, may feel like they have to hide it.

“There seemed to be the idea that you should be embarrassed about it, which is dumb,” Holly M. said. “Serious mental health issues were to be kept to yourself and the professionals,

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as you risked being judged as weak or a freak if you saw a professional about what you were going through.”

But self-stigma can be just as damaging.

“There’s almost this mentality of if you’re not coping now [at school] then you won’t cope at university. And you won’t cope with a job. There’s a spiral effect, and you think you’ll end up on the street and probably die,” Flynne said.

Overall, 36.9% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young persons are worried about discrimination – either lived experience or perceived – compared to just 24.9% of the rest of the youth population<sup>34</sup>.

And it’s not just mental health issues that you might feel the need to hide.

LGBTQI students may be impacted by a feeling of isolation, which can’t be escaped.

“You feel or face exclusion, an inability to make or keep friends, which leads to isolation, anxiety, and fear of talking to people. It then impacts upon your performance at school, because you’re feeling distracted by a secret that you’re carrying,” said Luke Furness, CEO of Out for Australia, an advocacy group supporting LGBTQI people in the workplace.

“It’s a spiral – if you’re worried about one thing, then you’ll worry about another, and therefore you decide you won’t go to a party with everyone else, which isolates you even further through self-selection of what you go to and whom you’re willing to hang out with.”

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Whether you are a LGBTQI student or not, high school is about developing confidence to carry yourself in the real world. If that development is stunted – by your environment or by yourself – it has the potential to carry through in your life.



“We all get stressed, and therefore a bit of anxiety should be accepted as a normal part of everyone’s life, as it occurs and impacts to varying degrees. As such, it should be openly talked about,” said Debbie.

But ... even though there is stigma in society that we can’t always escape ... there is still reason for you to have hope.

Think about your friendship circle, your family, your teachers and mentors. How many of them would think less of you as a person just because you’re stressed or anxious? And, even if a couple of them did, how many would then use it as a weapon against you?

“None of [the students I tutor] have said, ‘one of my friends has depression – what a pansy’, or, ‘my friend has anxiety attacks ... what a bitch, she’s using it as an excuse’. Never anything like that. It’s always been, ‘Oh yeah,

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I know what that is, but what do I do with it?" Camellia said.

This is where we come to the core issue of stigma.

Unlike other illnesses or injuries, there are no direct physical signs that you might be suffering from psychological distress, anxiety or depression (unless, of course, you have been self-harming).

Having bags under your eyes shows that you're tired, but might not make people realise that you're having anxiety attacks at night.

Losing weight may make people assume you're on a diet, rather than thinking you are suffering from an eating disorder.

Mental health issues are not like having a broken arm, where you can physically recognise and understand what the problem is. They are beneath the surface, making it harder for us to appreciate, and therefore more difficult for others to grasp as well.

In short: if people don't realise, they don't understand. Even if we are more aware of mental health issues, we are not necessarily more attuned to how we can look after ourselves and those around us. This creates fear. And fear leads to stigma.

But mental illnesses are no different to other illnesses or injuries. They still require treatment. You would not ignore the flu or chicken pox. Don't ignore anxiety, depression and other

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mental ailments. Pushing them to one side only makes things worse.



“Healing and getting better starts with being real, and saying, ‘I’m experiencing something’. When you’re real and authentic, and are also supported and worthy of love from your parents, your best mate, and others around you, that takes away so much pain,” Mitch Wallis said.

Don’t suffer in silence. Don’t fall victim to society’s assumptions that suffering from stress, anxiety or depression – no matter how big or small – is somehow shameful or something to hide. Keeping things to yourself will only make matters worse.



## TWD WELLBEING WISDOM

“Expressing how you are feeling helps others to understand your world. It’s normal to experience the full range of positive and negative emotions,” Dr Jenny Brockis said.

Suffering from anxiety or depression, on any level, is traumatic. Feeling like you can’t talk to anyone about it, for fear of punishment or ridicule, makes things even worse. But you should not be fearful ... here are a few reasons why:

**Stigma often arises from not knowing how to respond.**

Learn how you can look after yourself to manage stress and anxiety. Use the chapters throughout this book as a guide for the different issues you will face.

- **Disclosure does not have to be black and white.** While there will be some people whom you need to be wary of talking to, there are friends and family members whom you can trust. You do not have to suffer alone, and speaking up does not mean negative consequences if you pick the right audience.
- **Speaking up shows strength, not weakness.** Just as suffering from mental illness is not a sign of weakness, talking about it does not make you a different person to what you were yesterday. In fact, having the courage to speak about what you’re going through is actually a sign of strength, because it shows you are willing to take steps to get better.
- **Every person suffers to some extent.** There’s

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not a person on Earth who doesn't feel stressed or anxious at some point. Whether you have a diagnosable condition is all just a matter of degrees. As such, you are not alone, and therefore, you are not unusual or weak in any way.

- **Self-stigma is self-defeating.** Getting down on yourself because of struggles in your life will only make those struggles worse. Reinforcing them by thinking of yourself as weak, or stupid, will only increase your anxiety and stress levels.
- **You are loved and cared for.** Your parents, siblings, mates and teachers are not going to think any less of you just because you are struggling. They have your back, and want to see you get better.