

# **Are You a Shining Light of Hope?: Fighting the Stigma of Mental Disorders**

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What do the following people have in common?

Buzz Aldrin (astronaut)

Kelly Clarkson

Abraham Lincoln

Peter Gabriel

Ted Turner

Ben Stiller

Jean-Claude Van Damme

Carrie Fisher

They all have experienced some form of a mental disorder. Many celebrities and even some political leaders are swinging open the doors of mental illness, and using their experiences as a way to remove the stigma that hurts so many. Mike Wallace of 60 minutes experienced a number of debilitating bouts of depression leading to a suicide attempt before he disclosed his recovery in an HBO documentary “Dead Blue: Surviving Depression.” Mariette Hartley, best known for her Emmy winning performances in *The Incredible Hulk* co-founded the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention after several family members completed or attempted suicide. Like her family, Mariette also has bipolar disorder. She regularly speaks publicly but admits, “Bipolar disorder is something that is mine, and it is very difficult to talk about. Breaking the silence has been really wrenching for me; I went into a kind of depression wondering if I really wanted to talk about all this. I finally decided that education is more important.” (USA Today, 2003).

## **The Effects of the Stigma of Mental Illness**

“Stigma” is defined as the mark of shame leading to the rejection by others. The stigma of mental illness is real and its effects are devastating. Thirty years ago, people whispered the word “cancer,” because there was a great deal of fear and shame surrounding these illnesses. Today, cancer is talked about openly and people are much more likely to be identified early and receive effective treatment. In fact, survivors of cancer are often celebrated as heroes. People with mental health issues face the same discriminating stigma today that cancer patients did not too long ago whether it is discrimination in the workplace, stereotypes portrayed in the media, or insufficient access to appropriate treatment. The term “mental illness” itself may contribute to the stigmatization because it implies a distinction from physical illness, which is seen as more legitimate and not “in one’s head.” It is no surprise then that less than one-third of sufferers ever seek treatment (Mental Illness Research Association [www.mirareasearch.org](http://www.mirareasearch.org)).

When someone appears to be different in one way or another, a natural reaction is to view that person in a stereotypical manner. Mental illness is largely an invisible illness, which lends itself to much negative projection and assumptions. Usually, the only way to know whether or not someone has a mental illness is if they disclose this information. Most people do not readily share this information because of the discrimination and personal shame they experience. Despite decades of brain research to the contrary, many people still believe that mental disorders are the result of moral shortcomings and problems with willpower.

When people have a physical illness that manifests itself in an organ of the body other than the brain, they usually go to a doctor, expect to get well, and continue on with their life. People whose brains are affected are not as likely to follow down this same path because they fear rejection from friends, family, co-workers and neighbors. They are concerned about being denied adequate housing, work opportunities, and loans. The media, both news and entertainment, has inflamed the stereotype between mental illness and violence; one that does not bear out by the statistics. The mentally ill are far more likely to hurt themselves or be hurt by others than they are to inflict violence (Levin, 2005 *Psychiatric News*, p. 16), and yet almost 40% of newspaper stories about mental illness focus on danger and crime. The truth is the mentally ill are 11 times more likely to be a victim of a violent crime than the general population.

The stigma affects people in two directions. On the outside, the public part of the stigma creates prejudice and discrimination that become real barriers for people in need of help. On the inside, it creates a negative self image that corrodes one's self-esteem and sense of hope, often leading to a downward spiral of functioning and isolation (Levin, 2001 *Psychiatric News*, p. 8).

### **Combating the Stigma: Becoming a Shining Light of Hope**

How can our campus communities help eradicate mental health stigma? By empowering students, faculty and staff to become shining lights of hope:

- On an individual level – become a role model for mental health and recovery
- On a friends and family level – encourage those who are struggling to get help, promote awareness and compassion by confronting discriminatory comments
- On campus – promote Suicide Prevention Lifelines, participate in Suicide Awareness and Prevention Month (September),
- In the community – become activists in local legislation surrounding mental health issues, participate in community walks benefiting mental health associations.