Is “stigma” stigmatising?

The Like Minds, Like Mine programme has spent the past two decades tackling the “stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness”. But is the word stigma problematic in itself? Katrina Mathers, who has worked on the programme for close to a decade, looks at the pros and cons of using the word.

*stigma* noun 1.

a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person.

"the stigma of mental disorder"

It’s telling that the first hit when you Google “stigma” gives the example “the stigma of mental disorder”. The association of mental distress and stigma has so penetrated the public psyche that the latter almost immediately brings the former to mind.

To some people, this is concerning.

For the ancient Greeks, a stigma was a mark placed upon a slave’s body to denote ownership. You could read the social status of a person by seeing that mark. It was permanent and considered shameful. Citizenship could be denied to anyone bearing it.

If we see the stigma of mental illness in those terms, it is a metaphorical mark placed upon a body that is permanent and shameful. The term ‘citizenship’ is often used in mental health circles to describe “a life in the community” which is more than just inclusion. Dr. Michael Rowe of Yale University defines *citizenship* as “involv[ing] the person’s strong connection to the “5 Rs” of rights, responsibilities, roles, resources, and relationships”. Could it be argued that holding this invisible stigma can potentially deny an individual these rights in the same way that holding a visible one did in Greek times?

Mike Smith, vice-chair of the International Mental Health Collaborating Network believes that the word should not be used in mental health campaigns: “The word stigma generally applies when we are talking about people’s moral choices and behaviours, and that others may pass a moral judgment upon... this harks back to the times of the “moral defective” as the primary diagnosis and reinforces a bigoted attitude”.

So if we stop talking about stigma, what do we lose?

There are some reasons not to abandon the term just yet. Because etymologically the word is derived from the mark made by Greek masters upon their slaves, it could be argued that any ‘blame’ lies with those unjustly imposing, rather than receiving, the mark.

Use of the word can also avoid provoking the defensiveness many will quite naturally experience when being told they are discriminating. Acknowledging that, yes, the experience of mental distress has a stigma in the public consciousness may help those who discriminate to become cognisant of the fact that they are part of a more general failing to treat others with due care.

Another issue with abandoning the term is one of consensus. Who decides? A quick glance at the plethora of terms for those with experience of mental illness (patient, consumer, tangata whaiora, client, mad person) shows that consensus among the passionate people who make up our communities is hard to find.
A further problem is one of precedent – because the term stigma has a long history in both activism and academia, can we stop using it without undermining the research that has already been done?

For now, the jury is still out.

*We encourage your feedback on this issue. Email likeminds@mentalhealth.org.nz to give your perspective.*