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Stigma shadows mental illness

In the run-up to last week's World Mental Health Day, I had a feeling that we would soon hear the word "stigma" in connection with mental illness.

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In the run-up to last week's World Mental Health Day, I had a feeling that we would soon hear the word "stigma" in connection with mental illness.

Sure enough, the project manager for Rashid Hospital's Community Mental Health, Paula Keenan, declared: "There is a lot of stigma surrounding mental health, where people would rather attribute a problem to a physical illness than a symptom to mental health."

To be labelled as someone experiencing a mental health problem can carry a stigma, and can cause others to keep their distance. Many people think that if they admit to a mental health problem, they may not get a job, a promotion or keep a position. And so they don't talk about it.

It means crossing a certain line into a world of medication and mental health support, where people may see you as "damaged goods," an individual who will never be fully normal again. And so a world of secrecy begins.

Burnout

In cases of prolonged stress, leading to "burnout" or nervous breakdown, this can unfortunately be true.

Sadly, people may slip into dangerous addictions like alcohol, drugs or gambling in order to escape from their problem and that can be the slippery road to burnout. And once they are in the burnout zone, they may never completely recover back to full-time work again. They may end up seeing a psychiatrist for mental health support.

Early identification

Could the problem have been identified earlier? Usually there are warning signs but invariably they're often ignored.

The person may be demonstrating irrational behaviour, lacking concentration, experiencing panic attacks and these signs are often there for us to see. However, it is often the person who doesn't acknowledge them.

Action can be taken in the workplace, as the signs usually show up in the form of absenteeism. One way of getting a firm handle on the problem is that repeated absenteeism should be managed by a "return-to-work" interview where the manager of the individual focuses on possible stressors, either at work or home.

It is helpful that some celebrities talk about their own stress and personal mental health issues. They do this to take the lid off of the stigma which gives encouragement to others

to do the same and keeps the topic open for discussion.

I am delighted that World Mental Health Day held annually on October 9 gives us the opportunity to do this and I am also encouraged to hear that the UAE government has been urged to formulate a national strategy for addressing the mental health issues faced by the working age population and make counselling services in workplaces mandatory.

I would be interested to hear readers' views.

Key points: Mental health

- Even a suggestion of mental illness can give you a label
- The consequence is a secret world of hidden medication
- Prolonged denial can be as dangerous as the root problem