



Know! Compassion and Caring to Reduce COVID Stigma

COVID-19 continues to present new challenges, burdens, and consequences in our daily lives and that of young people. A sneeze or cough in a public setting may have once elicited a “bless you,” but nowadays it’s more likely to prompt heads turning with looks of disapproval. For people who have, or have had COVID, they may feel as if they contracted the plague, based on the way others treat them. They may experience feelings of isolation, depression, and abandonment. The stigma that surrounds this disease must end, not only for the physical health and mental wellbeing of those who have COVID, but in order to help bring an end to this pandemic in communities throughout our nation and world.

How Stigma Impacts Young People

Young people, especially, may struggle in dealing with a positive COVID test. With more than 15 million COVID cases in the U.S. alone, there are endless stories of youth sports teams on quarantine, social events being canceled, close contacts being pulled from school, classrooms having to close, and so forth due to one or more youth testing positive; it can be devastating for a young person who feels this weight upon their shoulders. Though it is not anyone’s fault, a child may feel as if they somehow did something wrong by getting COVID. They think they are responsible for disrupting the lives of others, which can lead to intense feelings of guilt, shame, and embarrassment. Even worse, others may treat the affected young people as if it is their fault, which only deepens the negative feelings they’re already experiencing.

It is unacceptable for young people to be labeled, stereotyped, discriminated against, treated differently, or lose status because of an illness, any illness – including COVID.

According to “[A Guide to Preventing and Addressing Social Stigma](#),” shared by the World Health Organization, the level of stigma associated with COVID-19 is based on three main factors: 1) it is a disease that’s new and for which there are still many unknowns; 2) we are often afraid of the unknown; and 3) it is easy to associate that fear with “others.”

It is vitally important that young people know that anyone, anywhere, and of any age can get COVID-19 by no fault of their own. They also need to know that if people act unkindly, it is coming from a place of fear and misinformation, and that the negativity is really about the disease itself, not the person who happens to have caught it.

Research from past epidemics show that stigma can also undermine efforts to test for and treat disease. Parents may be hesitant to have their child tested for fear of their son or daughter being ostracized, having to face the consequences of being the one that ended their team's sports season prematurely, or taking the blame for another child catching the disease. And young people may be less inclined to even let their parents know if they are experiencing symptoms out of similar fears. If no one knows they are experiencing symptoms, and if they aren't tested, they feel they are immune from the COVID criticism. This approach hinders prevention and treatment efforts and helps no one.

The need to reduce COVID stigma is critical. Education and knowledge are the key to change, as well as compassion over condemnation.

Know! What You Can Do to Reduce COVID Stigma:

- Get the facts about COVID-19 from reputable sources such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO). Share them with your family and friends.
- Speak up if you hear or see inaccurate statements about COVID-19 and certain people or groups.
- Reach out to people who may feel stigmatized. Ask how you can help. Listen to them and show that you understand and support them.
- Show support for health care workers and others who are caring for people with COVID-19. Thank them for their work and share positive messages on social media.
- Show support for and thank all who continue their essential jobs to help you and your community, such as police officers, bus drivers, grocery store clerks, food bank workers, and delivery people.

While COVID stigma impacts all ages, youth do not have the same filters as adults. We must model behaviors that reflect how we would want young people and our family to be treated in the event that we acquire the disease. Teach kindness and compassion over condemnation and criticism. As shared by the Mayo clinic, "The COVID-19 pandemic will be over sooner if fears and rumors are replaced by facts, proper action, and a show of support for one another."

If you or your child are feeling depressed, despair, or are thinking about suicide, contact the Ohio CareLine at 1-800-720-9616 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). You can chat with someone at the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat/>. Prefer to text? Text "4hope" to 741741.

Sources

- [Mayo Clinic: COVID-19 \(coronavirus\) stigma: What it is and how to reduce it. Apr. 2020.](#)
- [Medical Express: They survived COVID-19, then faced stigma. Sept. 2020.](#)
- [Simon Nicholas Williams and Kimberly Dienes, Medical Express: Coronavirus: new social rules are leading to new types of stigma. July 2020.](#)
- [World Health Organization: COVID-19 Stigma Guide. Feb. 2020.](#)