

COVID-19: Preventing Social Stigma

Social stigma in the context of health is the negative association between a person or group of people who share certain characteristics and a specific disease. In an outbreak, this may mean people are labelled, stereotyped, discriminated against, treated separately, and/or experience loss of status because of a perceived link with a disease. Such treatment can negatively affect those with the disease, as well as their caregivers, family, friends and communities. People who don't have the disease but share other characteristics with this group may also suffer from stigma. The current COVID-19 outbreak has provoked social stigma and discriminatory behaviours against people of certain ethnic backgrounds as well as anyone perceived to have been in contact with the virus.

Here are a few things that are suggested to curb this social stigma during these times:

- Misinformation about COVID-19 can create fear and hostility that hurts people and makes it harder to keep everyone healthy. Thus, relying on and sharing trusted sources of information is important.
- When talking about coronavirus disease, certain words (i.e. suspect case, isolation) and language may have a negative meaning for people and fuel stigmatizing attitudes. Choosing careful vocabulary locally as well as on social media will be an antidote to stigmatization. e.g. DO - talk about the new coronavirus disease (COVID-19) but DON'T - attach locations or ethnicity to the disease, this is not a "Wuhan Virus", "Chinese Virus" or "Asian Virus". The official name for the disease was deliberately chosen to avoid stigmatisation - the "co" stands for Corona, "vi" for virus and "d" for disease, 19 is because the disease emerged in 2019.
- Governments, citizens, media, key influencers and communities – all have an important role to play in preventing and stopping stigma surrounding people from certain ethnic backgrounds or professions. We all need to be intentional and thoughtful when communicating on social media and other communication platforms, showing supportive behaviours around the new coronavirus disease (COVID-19).
- Speak out against negative behaviours, including negative statements on social media about groups of people, or exclusion of people who pose no risk from regular activities.
- Amplify the voices, stories and images of local people who have experienced the new coronavirus (COVID-19) and have recovered or who have supported a loved one through recovery to emphasise that most people do recover from COVID-19.
- Sharing sympathetic narratives, or stories that humanize the experiences and struggles of individuals or groups affected by the new coronavirus (COVID-19) will inculcate the true essence of response.
- Show compassion and support for individuals and communities most closely impacted and anyone who might be sick.
- Health officials should ensure that patient confidentiality is protected even as authorities take steps to identify those who may have been exposed to the virus.

References

- <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/covid19-stigma-guide.pdf>
- <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/19/human-rights-dimensions-covid-19-response>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/reducing-stigma.html>