

► **Family members of people with mental illness harmed by stigma (USA)**

Parents, spouses, siblings and children of people with mental illness all experience stigma, based on stereotypes that place blame on them for some form of failure associated with their ill relative, according to an article in the *Journal of Mental Health*. As a result, family members frequently suffer from social avoidance, including loss of friendships, and other harmful effects.

The report is based on a review of literature about the impact of stigma on family members of people with mental illness. The authors describe the complexity of the phenomenon, and compare the public stigma toward parents, spouses, siblings and children of people with mental illness, highlighting the stereotypes each group commonly experiences.

Parents experience the stereotype of blame, which holds them responsible for their child's mental illness, typically on the assumption that they have poor parenting skills. The authors cite compelling evidence that this stereotype was learned from mental health providers of previous generations whose theories, although diminished in current academic and medical circles, have continued to influence public notions about parenting.

Spouses and siblings face the stereotype that places blame on them for the lack of recovery by the person with mental illness. They may be held responsible for management of the illness and blamed when the illness is not managed well. Studies of family members show that those who do not live with the person with mental illness experience less shame than those who do.

Research shows that children of people with mental illness experience the stereotype of contamination, the notion that the close parental association leads to a diminished ability by the child to succeed academically or socially. The authors say that future research needs to sort out whether such perceptions are accurate, since children of family members with mental illness may indeed face greater challenges in life, or whether these are stigmatizing misperceptions.

The report identifies avoidance as the most frequent and harmful result of these stereotypes. While people with mental illness experience avoidance in all social areas (home, work, community), family members seem to be most affected by loss of friendships.

The report recommends public education to reduce stigma experienced by family members, through the dismantling of myths and stereotypes and through moral appeals to stop disrespectful images. Research indicates that actual contact with people with mental illness is the best way to improve attitudes, and the report suggests that public interaction with family members would also help to diminish stigma.

See "Shame, Blame and Contamination: A Review of the Impact of Mental Illness Stigma on Family Members," *Journal of Mental Health* (December 2004; 13 [6]: 537-548). An abstract with paid access to the full text is available at [journalonline.tandf.co.uk](http://journalonline.tandf.co.uk).