**‘Fighting My Demons’: Prince Harry and Mental Health Stigma**

In a candid and courageous interview with Bryony Gordon for *the* *Telegraph*, Prince Harry disclosed that he sought professional care after struggling with psychological distress for over two decades following the death of his mother.

Professor Sir Simon Wessely, president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, praised the prince for his bravery, saying he “had achieved more in terms of communicating mental health issues in a 25-minute interview than he had in a 25-year career.” Prime Minister Theresa May also lauded the Royal’s honesty, describing his disclosure as a“really important moment for Britain.”

Prince Harry hoped that “by talking so frankly about fighting his demons” it would encourage people to break down the stigma attached to mental illness. But just what is stigma, how far-reaching are its consequences, and what can we do to challenge it?

Stigma is a Greek word that, in its origins, refers to a scar from a burn or cut to the skin of criminals, slaves or traitors. The mutilation was a sign of disgrace, indicating to all that these people should be avoided and shunned. More recently, renowned 20th century American sociologist Professor Irving Goffman defined stigma as *“*a deeply discrediting attribute that reduces the bearer from a whole and usual person to a tainted and discounted one… The individual [is thus] disqualified from full social acceptance.”

Stigma is an umbrella term that can be deconstructed into three main components: Problems of knowledge (ignorance), problems of attitude (prejudice) and problems of behaviour (discrimination).

People with mental illness are often stigmatized by family, friends and broader society during a time when they are vulnerable and most in need of their love, care and support. These people are also discriminated against by employers and landlords, resulting in unemployment and homelessness, both of which are social determinants of mental and physical ill health.Stigma can exacerbate pre-existing mental illness, which can drive people to ending their own lives.

Indeed, on the 9th October 2000, Dr Daksha Emson, a brilliant psychiatrist with bipolar affective disorder, tragically killed herself and her three-month-old baby daughter during a psychotic episode. An independent inquiry into Dr Emson’s death concluded that she was the victim of stigma in the NHS. Succinctly put: Stigma is killing people.

Stigma is a barrier to accessing and using mental healthcare services, and many people with mental illness continue to suffer in silence despite the availability of effective treatment.

Ashamedly, even those deemed “lucky” enough to reach healthcare services have another formidable obstacle they must surmount: healthcare professionals. Staff working in the healthcare industry have themselves been reported to be a common source of stigma by people with mental illness, and this has important implications.

Doctors can and have been responsible for misattributing physical symptoms as part of a patient’s mental illness, a phenomenon known as “diagnostic overshadowing.” For example, patients with a psychiatric history have lower rates of referral for coronary revascularization and consequently their life expectancy is reduced by a staggering 20 years.

The three main strategies to challenge stigma are through protest, education and contact.Stigma expert Professor Patrick Corrigan conducted recent research in the US revealing that the most effective way of reducing public stigma in adults was through social contact. Corrigan argues that service-users are “experts by experience” and as such should operate at the vanguard of any campaign to reduce stigma. He adds that healthcare professionals with first-hand experience of mental illness, or “Wounded Healers” could play a powerful and special role in reducing stigma.

Pioneered by Professor Patrick Corrigan and colleagues, the Honest, Open and Proud program (HOPp), formerly known as Coming Out Proud (COP), offers support to people with mental illness who must make the difficult decision between concealment and disclosure. Research has revealed that COP is associated with immediate reductions in stigma stress-related variables.

Celebrities, such as former All Blacks captain John Kirwan (who, although not a member of the Royal Family is revered by kiwis as such) have been honest, open and proud about their experiences with mental health issues and have worked with health ministers to challenge mental health stigma. Indeed, studies have shown that New Zealand's Like Minds, Like Mine governmental campaign featuring John Kirwan reduces public stigma.

As for Prince Harry being “honest, open and proud” about his mental health issues, it remains to be seen if his disclosure will be associated with reductions in stigma. Mental health charities have, however, already experienced a surge in the number of people contacting them following the Royal’s revelation. The mental health charity Mind, for example, reported that the number of calls it’s received on its information line had increased by 38 percent.

One in four of us will develop a mental illness at some point in our lives. In other words, if it’s not you, it will likely be someone you know who is fighting a crippling battle on two fronts: dealing with the debilitating symptoms of the mental illness itself, and enduring the toxic effects of stigma.

To combat stigma, we collectively need to normalise mental illness as we do physical illness and stand together in solidarity. You don’t have to be a prince to make a positive difference.

On a personal note, in 2006, I developed an episode of psychological distress triggered by war in my home country. I was subsequently ostracised, rendered impoverished and homeless. With the right support network, I gradually recovered, qualified from medical school and, in 2013 received the Royal College of Psychiatrists Foundation Doctor of the Year Award.

Without a doubt, mental illness has made me a better doctor and a better human being. It has humbled me and made me more empathetic and insightful. With time, I became energised and indignant and felt inspired by other survivors to share my recovery journey, so I conceived the “Wounded Healer” program. I’ve been fortunate enough to deliver the program to over 50,000 people in 12 countries spanning five continents worldwide, and have been received with both stigma and support.

People with mental illness can realize their dreams and make meaningful contributions to our societies. They must never feel ashamed or apologise for their condition. In the words of Dr Adam Hill, “When I embraced my own vulnerability and came out proud with my mental illness, many others also wanted to be heard, enough of us to start a cultural revolution.”

We ask advocates for mental health to come join our cultural revolution and to chime in unison with us: “parity” not “pity” for people with mental illness.

Dr Ahmed Hankir, Core Trainee in Psychiatry, Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust