Shame and stigma have many negative consequences regarding mental illnesses and suicide. Stigma drives shame, and shame is one of the main barriers to someone with a mental illness getting the help they need. Not only can shame be felt by those living with mental illnesses, it can also be felt by that individual’s loved ones.

Shame is a sense of failure, a feeling of unworthiness, inadequacy, guilt and embarrassment. Shame often becomes part of a person’s identity. As mentioned above, it can prevent someone living with an illness from requesting medical treatment. Shame can cause both the individual living with the illness AND their loved ones to feel like they’re facing this disease alone.

Long-time readers will know that I lost my oldest son Michael to suicide. For many years, the only people aware of our son’s serious illness of the brain were immediate family. As a parent, I felt I failed our oldest son, because he lived with mental illnesses. Our son felt he was a failure because he couldn’t overcome his illnesses. Both of us felt tremendous shame for something we did not do. With all other illnesses, we are comforted by the ability to share our thoughts and concerns with others, and we are energized by their support.

As a suicide loss survivor, there is also a great deal of shame. The typical obituary of someone who dies by suicide merely indicates that they “died unexpectedly.” Slowly, some obituaries are beginning to state that the person lost their battle with mental illness in the same manner that someone lost their battle with cancer. Only after the help of a support group was I able to tell someone that my oldest son died by suicide. Shame prevented me from showing proper respect to our oldest son.

As I’ve mentioned in previous articles, it’s hard to tell if someone is living with a mental illness. There aren’t many physical clues. However, once it’s known that a person is living with a mental illness, stigma has many negative consequences. Only until recently, health insurance coverage was reduced or absent for people living with mental illnesses as compared to physical illnesses.

Stigma often impacts the ability of a person living with a mental illness to secure or maintain employment, educational and housing opportunities. The stigma creates unjustified fear in the general public and the result is the person living with the illness is negatively labeled for having a disease they certainly didn’t ask for.

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Think about this for a moment. Would you react differently if you discovered that a fellow employee lived with anxiety disorder, and another fellow employee is living with treatable cancer? They both require some accommodation to perform at a high level in the workplace.

However, because of the stigma surrounding mental illnesses, you are likely not even aware of the employee living with anxiety disorder. There should not be any difference in how each of these employees are treated at work or outside of work. They both live with an illness that was not their fault. They both need our compassion and support.

Does your company have a culture that allows an employee to feel safe to say that they are living with a mental illness? Are accommodations made in the same manner as those done for physical illnesses? How would fellow employees perceive allowing an employee to work from home because of an anxiety disorder versus their cancer treatment? The culture you create and maintain is critical in reducing stigma in the workplace.

About the Author - Bob Swanson
Bob Swanson is the past president of Swanson & Youngdale and the first Chairman of FCA International. He tragically lost his son Michael to suicide on March 13, 2009 at the age of 33. Bob now focuses his efforts on creating awareness of the impact of mental health and suicide in the construction industry.