

Blog Post Title: How Capella Helps Break the Stigma of Mental Illness

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Description: Learn how Capella University students and faculty are helping to break the stigma surrounding mental illness.

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In 2017, there were an estimated 46.6 million adults in the United States with mental illness. This number represents 18.9% of all U.S. adults.

Often, people with mental health issues can feel like it's their fault. They might think that having mental illness means they're "crazy," or fear that others will see them that way. They may worry they'll be shunned by family and friends or that admitting there's a problem will invite discrimination at work. So they keep the struggle to themselves, hoping it will go away on its own. But without treatment, mental illness can wreak havoc on a career and relationships; it can even turn life-threatening.

"A huge part of the stigma is it's not a visible disorder, and mental health treatment hasn't been understood by the public," says Simone Lambert, PhD, Capella counseling faculty member and President of the American Counseling Association. "There is concern that reaching out for help might be a sign of weakness. Actually, asking for help is a sign of strength. People may believe that if they seek a diagnosis, that diagnosis will define them. In reality, that allows them to receive accurate treatment."

Mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of.

It's common and treatable. Here's how students and faculty in [online counseling degree programs](#) at Capella University are working to break the stigma of mental illness.

"I've Been There, Too."

The more people who speak out about their mental health issues, the less shame others feel in doing the same and seeking help. "I've been there, too," is a powerful thing to hear when you're suffering.

"I had never spoken out about my mental health struggles until I ended up with crippling postpartum depression and anxiety after my son was born," says Jenna, who is currently pursuing a master's degree in school counseling. "I knew it was finally time to speak out."

Jenna got the help she needed and plans to use her personal experience with mental illness to enrich her clinical practice. "I'm proof that having mental health issues can result in a successful life story—one filled with happiness, motherhood, being a wife, and pursuing a master's degree."

"Suck It Up, Buttercup."

In some communities, the stigma is quite strong and overt. "I have constantly battled anxiety and been told to 'get over it' or 'take a chill pill,'" says Annalyse, who recently graduated with a master's degree in marriage and family counseling/therapy. "During one of my husband's deployments, I recall another military spouse telling me to 'Suck it up, Buttercup.' There is no room for struggle in military culture."

Annalyse was also a competitive athlete and felt similar pressure to hide difficulties while playing sports. “With my degree, I hope to help other individuals, couples, and families experience the joy that comes after the weight of mental health is lifted,” she explains. “My goal is to open a private practice focusing on high-performing athletes and their families.”

A Badge of Honor, Not a Blemish

Michael, a veteran currently earning an online counseling degree, says, “During my military career, I was banned from certain career-enhancing encounters because I was seeing a mental health counselor. I plan to use my degree to start a treatment program for veterans, active-duty military, and their families. I want to create a facility that helps remove the stigma of mental health issues and encourages those in need to seek professional help. I’d like to make it a badge of honor rather than an embarrassing blemish.”

Breaking the Stigma in Minority Communities

“As an African American woman, I have been told and shown that seeking help for a mental illness is a personal weakness,” says Bernadette, an [American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy](#) Minority Scholarship Fellow. “African Americans pride themselves on keeping family business ‘inside of the house.’”

“I became a marriage and family therapist because I knew that all of my experiences, good and bad, could help someone else on their journey. I am an advocate for people of color and the LGBTQ+ communities because they need strong allies to conduct research and provide multiculturally competent therapy.”

Capella Counseling faculty Dee Hann-Morrison, PhD, LPC, MAC, can relate. “When I started my MHC studies, I believed that being a practitioner would be a means by which I could contribute to erasing the stigma of mental illness, especially in the African American community,” she says. “Over time, I’ve discovered additional ways to help.” Hann-Morrison draws on her experience as an African American, a counselor, and a faculty member to write articles, self-help books, and fiction that explore mental health issues. She also speaks at conferences and conducts community service.

How Capella Is Helping to Break the Stigma

By offering online degrees, Capella makes receiving a counseling education more accessible. “We’re able to reach folks in all parts of the country and around the world,” says Leslie Guditis, PhD, licensed marriage and family therapist, and Capella faculty member.

By improving the accessibility of counseling degrees, Capella attracts learners from all communities—including those where the mental health stigma is the strongest. “Mental health counseling learners will engage in clinical practice,” Hann-Morrison explains. “But I suspect that many will also spend time doing what most minority counselors do: Educating communities about mental illness and modeling acceptance of mental health services.”

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