

FIGHTING STIGMA WITH DELAYED DISCLOSURE

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A few years ago, I attended one of the annual Mental Illness Awareness Day conferences, and a man who spoke to the crowd early in the day told an inspiring story that stuck with me. I don't remember the speaker's name, but I will always remember the story he told, which involves a terrific strategy he used for overcoming the stigma attached to people with psychiatric diagnoses.

The speaker told us about an experience he had on an airplane. At the start of the flight, a woman whom he had never previously met was seated next to him, and the two strangers started a friendly conversation. She spoke a little about her occupation and asked him about his. He told her that he works in the mental health field. The woman replied with words to the effect of "That must be a tough job you have. People with mental illness are so hard to deal with, especially those schizophrenics."

What she didn't know was that the gentleman to whom she was speaking had that very diagnosis! And he didn't tell her; at least not right away.

I think most people in this man's position would have likely responded by telling her off for her ignorance, or quietly moving to another seat to get away from her. This particular individual, however, expressed no animosity whatsoever. He said nothing to the woman about his own diagnosis, and the two continued to pleasantly converse.

As the flight progressed, they spoke about various topics, and both got to know one another as human beings. When the plane landed at the airport, the two

exchanged friendly goodbyes. Then, just before exiting the plane, the man calmly said to his traveling companion: "By the way, I have a diagnosis of schizophrenia."

I think it was a great strategy to give the woman some time to get to know him first, **before** revealing his diagnosis. Otherwise, her pre-conceived beliefs would have probably put up a huge wall between them and stopped a friendly conversation from ever taking place. Any dialogue that would have occurred under those circumstances would likely have resulted in the woman seeing him through a biased lens, and interpreting practically anything out of his mouth as a "symptom".

Importantly, the gentleman never lied or put up any sort of false front. He never said he **didn't** have a mental illness; he simply waited for the best time to disclose. What time could be better than waiting until after a person has gotten to know you **first**?

In my opinion, Delayed Disclosure is probably one of the most effective ways to overcome stigma or prejudice of various kinds. I say "of various kinds" because of course, societal stigma is not limited to people with psychiatric diagnoses. People also

are seen and treated differently because of ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, income bracket, etc. Anyone who is forced to deal with stigma may be able to educate others by using the "Delayed Disclosure" method as described in the airplane story.

This method has two steps, which can be summarized as follows:

Step 1: Spend some time letting an individual get to know you. Be yourself, be friendly, and for the time being, disregard any ignorant comments. Don't lie, but hold off on revealing that part of you that may cause the individual to see you in a different way.

Step 2: Wait until some time has passed (whether it's an hour, a week or even a few months; depending on the circumstances) and the other person has come to know and like you for the person you are. Then, once it's clear you're on good terms with each other, calmly and casually mention that previously unspoken part of what you "are", whether it's "mentally ill", Jewish, gay, Muslim, etc.

Perhaps if a lot of people use Delayed Disclosure, a large chunk of stigma and prejudice in society could be reduced. It's certainly worth a try!■