

Stefan Dimoski, *8th grade, Robert R. Lazar Middle School (Montville, NJ)*

It's important to be stigma-free in all aspects of life. By not talking about important issues in everyone's lives and perpetuating these social boundaries, people don't know the correct ways to go through life. Without stigma surrounding drugs, more people would feel comfortable reaching out for help if they were to find themselves getting addicted. Without stigma surrounding sex, more people would abstain or practice safe sex. Without stigma surrounding mental health, more people would reach out for help and hopefully suicide rates would decline. That's why it's so important to fight against stigma.

Nina Fardo, *8th grade, Robert R. Lazar Middle School (Montville, NJ)*

Being stigma free is important to me because in a stigma free environment, I can be assured that my friends and siblings won't be punished for things that they can't control. My brothers and I will no longer have to be embarrassed by our hyperactivity and our volume, and my friends will have one less thing to worry about. I *know* that none of the people getting hurt deserve to get all of the hate that they do, and without being marked down by horrible names, they will finally get what they deserve.

Melody Hart, *8th grade, Homeschooled (Gillette, NJ)*

In our national anthem, we sing of a country we call 'the land of the free....' However, some people with mental illness are not free at all because the stigma they carry has created an internal prison. We hear about school shootings and crimes committed by someone with a mental disorder. Was it a way to escape from their inner prison? Was it a raging cry to be relieved not just from the disease itself but also from the oppressive bars of stigma? Lifting the stigma attached to mental illness can free a community to begin to truly heal.

Natalie Ribeiro, *9th, Hanover Park Regional High School (East Hanover, NJ)*

It is easy to build a wall, yet have it knocked down by a feather. Words are the feathers and self-assurance is the wall. Words of "freak, looney, and psycho," seem meaningless to some, yet to others, those words define their past, present, and future. Words may not seem to have an impact on the exterior, at the same time, the interior is dissolving and withering. Not the interior organs, rather the thoughts, the most impulsive, physic organ that determines what happens next. Whether that be if one continues to fight or stop and rest.

Skylar Loper, *10th grade, Lamberts Mill Academy (Westfield, NJ)*

It's important to be stigma free because when you have a stigma, you are often looked down upon or degraded in your social profile. Having no stigma means you're "normal" in society. Being stigma free also means one less problem to work on in your life. Often people with stigmas are less understood in society and less accepted as a person for who they are and not with what they have. That's why it's important to be stigma free.

Noor Zeb, *10th grade, Boonton High School (Boonton, NJ)*

It is very important to be stigma free because mental health is a very serious issue. Discriminating someone because of their mental state has a negative impact on that person. Not judging people in general is an important lesson. People should learn to love each other no matter what difference they might have. It will make the world a better place.

Esme Lockwood, *11th, Montville Township High School (Montville, NJ)*

Inevitably, most people in life have a clouded and judgmental perspective on stigmatized issues. In my experience, I have learned to treat people who are going through personal addiction with understanding rather than anger. Anger limits their self-improvement and encourages them to only continue their addiction. To have a stigma is to be ignorant, and humanity can never improve if we treat every stigmatized issue with negative criticism. Ultimately, once we free ourselves from judgement, we will liberate others to seek help and positively reconstruct our understanding for future generations.

Samia Shivon, *11th grade, Boonton High School (Boonton, NJ)*

It is important to be stigma free because it hurts the well-being and health of others. Stigma views someone who possesses a mental illness or substance use disorder in a negative way. Discriminating people for these issues makes them feel distressed because of the shame and judgement being put on them. This results in people not obtaining equal opportunities as others and being forced into silence. Being stigma free gives people who have issues a safe and comfortable environment to seek help. The support they can get from others will help them deal with the problems they face.