



**EASA** Center for Excellence

## Young Adult Identity, Psychosis, and Stigma

### Understanding Stigma

- Stigma is a term used to describe social interactions that lead to the exclusion of a person from their typical social groups.
- People that are identified as different from their typical social group for a wide range of reasons might experience stigma.
- Over time people can internalize stigma.
- When someone internalizes stigma it negatively impacts his or her sense of identity.
- Individuals that encounter stigma can lose important social relationships and be excluded from housing, employment, and recreational opportunities.
- A person's thoughts and feelings about stigma related to having a mental health challenge can lead to that person and/or that person's family not seeking the mental health services they might need.

### Stigma happens in social relationships

- Stigmatizing messages can be communicated in social interactions like conversations and in unspoken messages like body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice.
- It is common for a person or group of people to unintentionally send individuals with differences stigmatizing messages.
- Mental health care providers, from counselors to psychiatrists, likely send unintended stigmatizing messages to their clients.

### Problems stigma might create for young people with psychosis

- Young people's central developmental task during adolescence and young adulthood is to develop their sense of identity.
- In order for young people to develop a sense of identity they need to be involved in life activities that help them better understand who they are as a person in the world.
- Stigma threatens these young people's ability to develop a holistic sense of identity.
- Young people with psychosis and schizophrenia are vulnerable to turning experiences of stigma into harmful messages about their identity.
- Administrative protocols and professional development opportunities that address young adult identity development will help young people develop a non-stigmatized sense of identity.

## What kinds of skills can we develop to support young people's development of a non-stigmatized sense of identity?

### For adults that work with young people:

- ✓ Take your time in getting to know someone.
- ✓ Ask questions about the young person's life, like their hopes and dreams for the future, friends, intimate relationships, spiritual and religious beliefs, worldviews and their values.
- ✓ You are more than your job! Let your clients get to know you as a person.
- ✓ Use psycho-educational interventions that teach young people about stigma and why it exists.
- ✓ Hold yourselves accountable to developing these practices, our young people are worth it and they will internalize your efforts.

### For mental health clinicians:

- ✓ Help your clients identify genuine ways of introducing themselves in social settings and with other healthcare providers. And then practice them together in the session and out in the world!
- ✓ While stigma is real and is often harmful to a young person's identity, it can also be an opportunity to strengthen a young person's sense of identity.
- ✓ Support young people's exploration of the thoughts and feelings they have about how psychosis and schizophrenia may or may not impact the sense of who they are as a person.
- ✓ Educate young people's support networks in communication skills that help them communicate to their young person that their identity is not their mental health illness ("he/she is schizophrenic", "he/she is psychotic", "he/she is bipolar")

### For administrators, supervisors, and program managers:

- ✓ Provide training and ongoing consultation for clinical supervisors emphasizes adolescent, young adult identity development, and cultural humility.
- ✓ Acknowledge supervisors and their supervisees' ability to develop and apply treatment approaches and interventions that honor the unique experiences that come with being an adolescent and young adult.
- ✓ Teach professionals in your agency- from directors to office support staff- about young adult identity development, stigma, and cultural inclusivity.
- ✓ Reward efforts to help young people develop a valued sense of identity. This can include the design of offices and waiting rooms, office hours, intake documents, intake protocols, clinical supervision, and clinical interventions.