**Learning Activity: Reducing Internalized Stigma of Mental Illness Through Reduction of Microaggressions**

Microaggressions are subtle behaviours or reactions that diminish the recipient in some way and are often so subtle that the perpetrator can easily deny the intention or even blame the recipient (Gonzales, Davidoff, Nadal, & Yanos, 2014). Sometimes the perpetrator may even be unaware of their underlying attitudes that are being expressed in this subtle manner. However, the recipient is very much aware of the difference in how they are treated and can internalize this stigma. Having worked in various mental health agencies for the past 20 years, I have witnessed that these types of microaggressions directed towards mental health clients are quite common, hurtful, and can have serious negative effects on client’s well-being and mental health. The study conducted by Pearl, Forgeard, Rifkin, Beard, and Björgvinsson (2017) suggests that internalized stigma of mental illness is associated with symptom severity, functioning, quality-of-life, and treatment outcomes. This supports the idea that reducing microaggressions toward those with mental illness will assist in reducing internalized stigma and contribute to improved mental health. Through the research conducted by Gonzales et al. (2014) five themes of microaggressions against those with mental illness were discovered: (1*) Invalidation* (minimization, symptomizing, patronizing); (2) *Assumption of inferiority* (incompetent, no control, lower intelligence); (3) *Fear of mental illness*; (4) *Shame of mental illness*; (5) *Second class citizen attitude*.

Gonzales, L., Davidoff, K. C., Nadal, K. L., & Yanos, P. T. (2015). Microaggressions experienced by persons with mental illnesses: An exploratory study. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal, 38*, 234-241. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/prj0000096 [http://0search.ebscohost.com.aupac.lib.athabascau.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pdh&AN=2014-48757-001&site=eds-live](http://0-search.ebscohost.com.aupac.lib.athabascau.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pdh&AN=2014-48757-001&site=eds-live)

Pearl, R. L., Forgeard, M. J. C., Rifkin, L., Beard, C., & Björgvinsson, T. (2017). Internalized stigma of mental illness: Changes and associations with treatment outcomes. *Stigma and Health, 2*, 2-15. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/sah0000036

<http://0-search.ebscohost.com.aupac.lib.athabascau.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psyh&AN=2016-18135-001&site=eds-live>

**Learning Activity**

Below are some examples of microaggression statements regarding mental illness and some possible interpretations of these statements. Match each of these statements with one or more possible interpretations that may be implied, and generate reasons why this statement may not reflect a culturally appropriate message. Feel free to provide additional interpretations.

Consider your reasoning and select TWO of these statements to reword to more appropriately reflect a culturally sensitive statement that reflects a better awareness of mental illness through a social justice lens.

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| **Statements about Mental Illness(MI)** | **Some Possible Interpretations** |
| “Just take your medication and everything will be alright.” | People with MI do not want to get better. |
| “Everyone can be successful and healthy if they try hard enough.” | People with MI are less important, likeable or competent. |
| “Right now, you need someone to take care of you.” | People with MI are unintelligent. |
| “I hear you but, your thinking is not right.” | People with MI are resistant to change. |
| “You should rest, I do not want to stress you out.” | Professionals know more about MI than the person experiencing MI. |
| “There can’t be too much wrong, you look so happy to me.” | People with MI are weak. |
| “You are making your life so difficult.” | Happiness = Wellness. If you are not happy then you are ill. |
| “I am sure you will feel better soon.” | People with MI should be feared. |
| “This is just a passing mood.” | MI is shameful. |
| “I know what you are going through, I have also had bad days.” | MI defines who you are as a person. |
| “I am going to slow down so you can understand my words.” | MI is not as serious as other disabilities. |
| “You are just having a tough time right now.” | People with MI have no self control. |
| “You need to listen to the professionals. They know what is best.” | People with MI cannot make good decisions. |
| “It is not your fault. Your problems are because of your illness.” | MI should not significantly impact your life. |
| “You cannot be expected to have such responsibility with your illness.” |  |
| “You should be thankful that you do not have a real physical disability.” |  |

**Questions for discussion**

1. I feel that when a client addresses experiences of microaggressions it can be an empowering experience. However, this level of honesty could also be opening them up to worse treatment and potentially being labelled again as “difficult” or “overly sensitive.” How could you encourage clients to come forward with experiences of microaggressions and support them in enhancing their feelings of empowerment?
2. Considering the fact many microaggressions are not intentional, how might you effectively provide education to a fellow counsellor about their microaggressions without raising their defensiveness?