

## HOW WOULD YOU RESPOND TO THESE SCENARIOS?

We all encounter stigma in our workplaces, interactions with friends, and even at home. What should you do when you see stigmatizing behaviors or hear stigmatizing words? Ending stigma requires intentional actions, including educating others when they act in stigmatizing ways. Of course, this should be done with kindness and understanding: stigma is so ingrained in all of us that sometimes stigma emerges without us even being aware of it.

Think about these two scenarios. How would you respond? After you have thought about or recorded your responses, turn to page two where you will find some potential responses.



### SCENARIO 1:

You are at a family dinner. Your brother, who just returned from a psychiatric hospital, is there. During dinner, Uncle John talks about his new job. He says “sometimes I feel like I am working in a loony bin.”

What would you say to Uncle John? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



### SCENARIO 2:

You are an employee in an Emergency Room. It is a busy night and you just don't have enough beds to meet the demands. One of the ER staff members comes into the break room and says: “Lou is back again. Drunk as always. We just have to stop giving a bed to him...what a waste. He will just be back again in two days”

What would you say to your co-worker? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



Below are some suggested responses to these two scenarios. These responses reflect best practices and include suggestions from behavioral health professionals across the region. Of course, each situation is different and the response should reflect the needs of the individuals involved. Most importantly, responding to stigma should not create shame or demonstrate judgment. View these as teachable moments. Individuals are more likely to learn and adjust their behavior when they are treated with respect.

**POTENTIAL RESPONSES TO SCENARIO 1:**

**REFRAME THE COMMENT:** At the table, reframe the comment by saying something like: "It sounds like you work in an overwhelming work environment. Sorry to hear that. What's happening there" Or say something like: "it sounds like what you meant to say is that your job is stressful and that some coworkers are hard to work with" Give the Uncle grace while holding an expectation of inclusivity and sensitivity. Try to understand his emotions and hold space for his stress and concerns, while recognizing better ways to share emotional statements without stigmatizing others.

**DIFFUSE THE STIGMA:** Respond (with perhaps some lightness in your voice) with something like: "Oh Uncle John we don't say things like that say anymore. Using words like "loony bin" in this way could be hurtful." Follow this up with a side conversation after dinner.

**CHECK IN WITH STIGMATIZED INDIVIDUAL:** After dinner check in with the brother to see how he is doing. Let him know you are sorry that this comment was made at dinner.

**ADDRESS THE STIGMATIZED COMMENT IN PRIVATE:** Talk to Uncle John after dinner. Acknowledge that you know he did not mean to say anything hurtful but words have power. Suggest some alternative language: "I understand that's something you've grown up saying, here's a less harmful way to say that."

**POTENTIAL RESPONSES TO SCENARIO 2:**

**NORMALIZE THE STAFF'S FEELINGS WHILE HUMANIZING THE PATIENT:** Say something like "You're right, it is really busy tonight. I know I am pretty stressed too. But I am grateful that Lou is back so we can take care of him instead of having him in a dangerous situation someplace else. Aren't you?"

**START A CONVERSATION:** Start a conversation at a staff meeting about stigma in the organization. Talk about its impact and explore with others how it might emerge with this context. Use this Stigma Guide to help you plan this conversation.

**ADDRESS THE STIGMATIZED COMMENT IN PRIVATE:** Find a less stressful time to touch base with the co-worker. Affirm how much you know they care for the patients that come into the emergency room. Let them know that their comment caught you by surprise and that you didn't feel it reflected the caring climate they are part of creating in the ED. Clarify that it stigmatized the patient. Let them know you hope they feel comfortable talking to you if you say something stigmatizing too. Everyone has work to do to create more supportive and less stigmatizing places.