

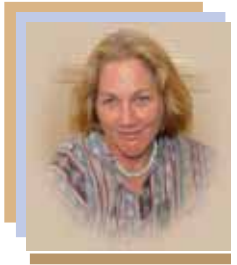
What is stigma?

"Stigma is commonly defined as the use of stereotypes and labels when defining someone. Stigma is Greek for "sign" and it has come to refer to a characteristic or set of characteristics that bring shame to an individual or group who bear this "sign" or stereotyped label. The stigma surrounding these misunderstandings can limit opportunities, it can stand in the way of a new job, it can increase feelings of loneliness, and it can cause many other unfortunate outcomes.

Labels are for boxes—not people.

According to the Surgeon General, the stigma associated with mental illness "is manifested by bias, distrust, stereotyping, fear, embarrassment, anger, and

avoidance". -- excerpted from the Boulder Anti-Stigma Project



By Therese Peloquin,
Consumer and Family Advocate

Breaking the Stigma of Mental Illness—Art Show will showcase local talent

Labels are for boxes—not people.

During May, Mental Health Month will be celebrated by local artists who also happen to have been affected by mental illness. Milagro's Coffeehouse and Southern Peaks Library in Alamosa will be displaying artwork submitted by people who are working to break the stigma associated with mental illness.

Historically, persons who have common illnesses such as depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and anxiety disorder have been marginalized and shunned by society. This kind of stereotyping or labeling by society can be more disabling to the one with the illness than the disease itself. People who have a mental illness struggle to be seen as more than just their disease. A "schizophrenic", or more appropriately, a person with schizophrenia, may also be a brother, a friend, a wife, an artist, a book-lover, or an athlete. Yet stereotypes can limit a person's opportunities in their own community.

Fear, distrust, and bias shown towards people with mental illness can seep into their own family, and finally, into their own self-image—and here, the stigma is perpetuated. A life that could have shown promise and talent is lost to the belief that they are no more than a disease in a book.

In the San Luis Valley, a group of concerned citizens called the SLV AMIGOS (Association for the Mentally Ill: Giving Others Support) has come together to address the issue of stigma against mental illness by offering education, advocacy, and support. The AMIGOS are mostly family members and consumers of mental health services, and are sponsored by the San Luis Valley Comprehensive Community Mental Health Center. Some of the members are trained facilitators of the classes offered nationwide by NAMI (National Association for the Mentally Ill). These classes are designed to offer family members the education and support they need to assist their loved one in living a full and meaningful life.

The AMIGOS kicked off their plan to educate and enlighten the communities in the San Luis Valley with an Open House and Art Show in December, 2004. Featured was a beautiful and moving standing mural called, "Out of Darkness into the Light" created by Leo Tanguma in partnership with mental health consumers from the Denver area. The mural depicted both the anguish of mental illness and the hope found

in a world that believes in and supports recovery. In the winter of 2005 a "Family-to-Family" class was offered in Alamosa; it was attended by around 15 family members hailing from communities as far flung as Manassa and Del Norte. Along with receiving an education on mental illness, advocacy, and self-care; these families found a strong support system in meeting with others who understand what they are going through on a daily basis: caring for a family member with a mental illness. An ongoing Family Support group is being formed—watch for details in the local media.

The AMIGOS invite everyone in our Valley community to be informed and delighted by the art on display during the month of May. Break the stigma of mental illness—keep labels where they belong—on boxes, not people.

SLV AMIGOS' consumer art show runs Mon, May 16th, through the 22nd, at Milagro's Coffeehouse and at Southern Peaks Library in Alamosa.