Layperson Summary: Stigmatizing Mental Illness

Mental health has always been a complicated issue for our society. The negative ideas surrounding mental illnesses may be as harmful as the illnesses themselves state researchers Overton and Medina (2008). Schizophrenics with violent behaviors and “depressing” alcoholics are common perceptions of those with mental illness (Overton and Medina 2008). In the middle ages, those with mental illness were considered “of poor character” and locked away (Overton and Medina 2008). Psychiatrist Dr. Thomas Szasz even suggested in the 1970s that mental illnesses were being “invented” not discovered (Overton and Medina 2008). Today, you know many of these perceptions to be untrue but stigmatization of those with mental illness is still a current issue. It is a common belief that those with a higher level of education are more understanding and aware, also when interacting with those with mental illness. Research has proven otherwise, and this idea is what I intend to explore.

Discriminatory perceptions of those with mental illness have a life altering effect on people who are diagnosed with a mental illness (Lyons et al. 2009; Kroska and Harkness 2008). Not only impacting society’s opinion, when someone is labeled, but also the labeled individual’s self-view (Lyons et al. 2009; Kroska and Harkness 2008). Researchers have found that even mental health professionals stigmatize their patients (Hansson, Jormfedlt, Svedberg, and Svensson 2011). This research shows that education plays a small role in how little or much we stigmatize those with mentally ill. To investigate this idea further, I have decided to conduct interviews regarding peoples’ views on those diagnosed with a mental illness. These interviews will take place with participants who have no higher education and have experience with mental illness, as
well as those who have some higher education and experience with mental illness. Then I will interview participants who do not have experience with mental illness, and have some higher education or no higher education. By comparing these populations I hope to discover what causes greater awareness and understanding of mental illness.

My expectation for this research is that higher education does not create awareness and understanding towards those who are mentally ill. I believe that exposure to and contact with those who are diagnosed with a mental illness is what increases your awareness and understanding. If my expectations are correct those who have, and lack, higher education but have no experience with mental illness will be less understanding of those labeled with a mental illness. Those who have had contact with mental illnesses regardless of education should be more understanding of those labeled with a mental illness. By conducting this research, I hope to bring awareness to these facts and shed light on the impact stigmatizing, or labeling, someone with a mental illness has on an individual’s life. I would like to reinforce the need for active changes to mental health policy and practices.