MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA

Let's Work Together to End Mental Health Stigma in the Humanitarian Sector

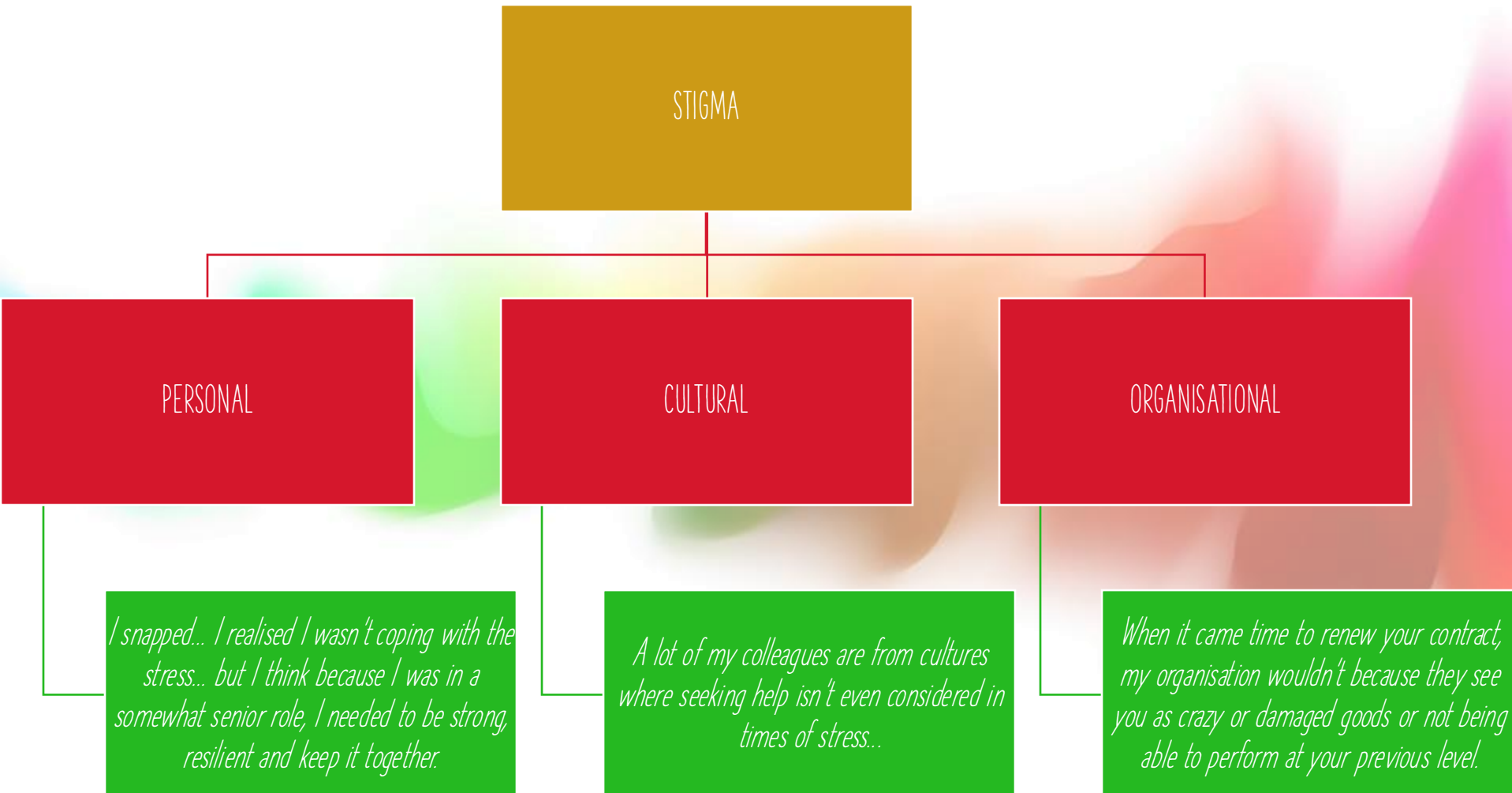# WHAT IS STIGMA IN MENTAL HEALTH

- Mental health stigma in a humanitarian context refers to the negative attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours towards individuals experiencing mental distress or disorders, specifically in situations of crisis, conflict, or displacement. It can manifest as discrimination, prejudice, social isolation, and self-stigma, leading to significant barriers in accessing mental health care and support.

- In humanitarian settings, various factors like cultural beliefs, limited resources, and the 'aid cowboy culture'-the pressure to be tough and handle challenges alone-can contribute to additional difficulties for individuals dealing with trauma, loss, and ongoing insecurity. However, the fear of being judged or discriminated against may stop people from seeking help, worsening their suffering.

SOURCES OF MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA

STIGMA

PERSONAL

CULTURAL

ORGANISATIONAL

I snapped... I realised I wasn't coping with the stress... but I think because I was in a somewhat senior role, I needed to be strong, resilient and keep it together.

A lot of my colleagues are from cultures where seeking help isn't even considered in times of stress...

When it came time to renew your contract, my organisation wouldn't because they see you as crazy or damaged goods or not being able to perform at your previous level.

SOURCES: PERSONAL

Personal stigma refers to the internalised negative beliefs and attitudes that individuals hold about themselves due to their mental health conditions. In the context of humanitarian aid work, this can manifest as feelings of weakness, shame, or inadequacy for experiencing psychological distress or seeking help.

These internalised beliefs can be influenced by the "aid cowboy culture," which values self-reliance and stoicism, leading individuals to view help-seeking as a sign of weakness or incompetence.

The internalisation of these cultural norms can exacerbate self-stigma and prevent individuals from seeking the support they need.

SOURCE: CULTURAL

- Cultural stigma refers to the shared beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours within a society or community that may marginalise or discriminate against individuals with mental health conditions.

- In humanitarian settings, cultural stigma may be influenced by established beliefs, social practices, or societal norms that view mental distress as a sign of weakness, personal failure, or even spiritual affliction.

- These cultural beliefs can create an environment where individuals are hesitant to disclose their mental health struggles or seek help due to fear of judgment, social isolation, or discrimination.

SOURCE: <u>ORGANISATION</u>

Organisational stigma refers to the policies, practices, and norms within humanitarian organisations that either implicitly or explicitly perpetuate negative attitudes and behaviours towards mental health.

This can include a lack of awareness or understanding of mental health issues, inadequate support systems, or a culture that prioritises resilience and self-reliance over seeking help.

Organisational stigma can create a workplace environment where individuals feel unsupported, fear repercussions for disclosing their mental health challenges, and are discouraged from seeking help due to concerns about career advancement or job security.

ADDRESSING: PERSONAL STIGMA

- <u>Promote self-care and help-seeking</u>: Provide resources and training on stress management, coping mechanisms, and available support services to encourage aid workers to prioritise their mental well-being and normalise help-seeking behaviours.

- <u>Challenge the "aid cowboy" culture</u>: Foster a workplace culture that values vulnerability and emotional expression, encourages open conversations about mental health challenges, and normalises seeking help as a sign of strength and self-awareness.

- <u>Provide mental health education</u>: Offer workshops and training sessions to educate aid workers about mental health conditions, their symptoms, and available treatment options, reducing self-stigma and promoting help-seeking behaviours.

ADDRESSING: CULTURAL STIGMA

- <u>Cultural sensitivity training</u>: Provide comprehensive cultural sensitivity training addressing the diverse cultural backgrounds of local/national staff and international aid workers. This training should focus on understanding and respecting different cultural beliefs and attitudes towards mental health, communication styles, and help-seeking behaviours.

- <u>Promote cross-cultural dialogue and understanding:</u> Encourage open and respectful communication among aid workers from different cultural backgrounds to foster understanding, challenge stereotypes, and create a more inclusive and supportive environment.

- <u>Develop culturally adaptable mental health programs</u>: Design mental health initiatives that can be tailored to the specific cultural context of each humanitarian setting, ensuring that interventions are relevant, acceptable, and effective for diverse groups of aid workers.

- <u>Facilitate peer support networks:</u> Establish peer support groups that bring together aid workers from different cultural backgrounds to share experiences, provide support, and learn from each other's perspectives on mental health.

- <u>Address power dynamics and cultural hierarchies:</u> Acknowledge and address power imbalances and cultural hierarchies between international and national staff, ensuring that all voices are heard and respected in mental health initiatives.
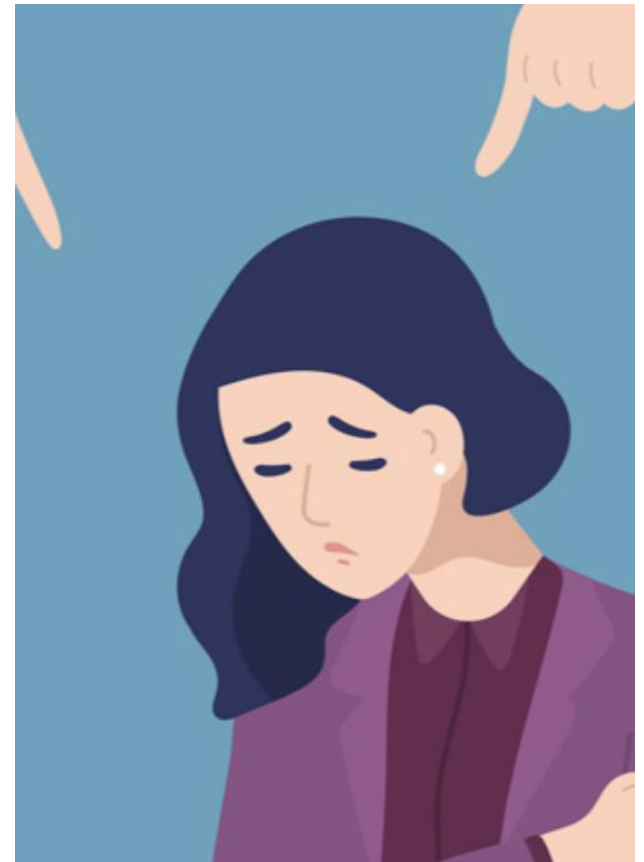
ADDRESSING: ORGANISATIONAL STIGMA

- <u>Develop comprehensive mental health policies</u>: Establish clear policies that prioritise mental health, provide resources for promotion and prevention, and ensure confidentiality and non-discrimination for those seeking help.

- <u>Create a psychologically safe workplace</u>: Foster a supportive work environment where employees can disclose mental health challenges without fear of negative repercussions, promoting open communication and help-seeking behaviours.

- <u>Leadership training</u>: Train managers and supervisors on mental health awareness, early intervention, and supportive communication, equipping them with the skills to identify and address mental health concerns among their staff.

- <u>Invest in mental health resources</u>: Allocate resources for mental health support services, such as counselling, therapy, and peer support programs, ensuring accessibility and affordability for all aid workers.

- <u>Shift from a reactive to a proactive approach</u>: Instead of solely focusing on addressing mental health issues after they arise (medical model), organisations should prioritise promotional and preventive measures such as stress management training, resilience-building workshops, and creating a supportive work environment that promotes well-being.

REMOVING STIGMA FROM MENTAL HEALTH

By proactively addressing mental health stigma and fostering a supportive environment, aid workers and humanitarian organisations can reap significant benefits, including:

- Increased staff retention: Reducing stigma and providing mental health support can improve job satisfaction and well-being, leading to higher staff retention rates and a more stable workforce.

- Reduced turnover: Addressing mental health concerns can decrease staff turnover, saving organisations the costs of recruitment, training, and onboarding new employees.

- Preservation of institutional knowledge: Retaining experienced staff ensures that valuable institutional knowledge and expertise are not lost, contributing to more effective program implementation and continuity.

- Enhanced program effectiveness: A mentally healthy workforce is more likely to be productive, engaged, and resilient, leading to improved program delivery and better outcomes for beneficiaries.

- Cost savings: Investing in mental health support can reduce the financial burden associated with staff turnover, absenteeism, and decreased productivity, ultimately saving organisations money in the long run.

Prioritising mental health is an ethical imperative and a strategic investment for humanitarian organisations. By creating a culture that values and supports mental well-being, organisations can build a more resilient, effective, and sustainable workforce better equipped to fulfil their mission and serve those in need.

IF YOU ARE SEEKING SUPPORT

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