

Retro Mental Illness Propaganda Will Make You Cringe

Although mental health advancement efforts are still plagued by stigma, we have come a long way.

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One of the biggest impediments to [mental wellness](#) today is stigma — about the type of people who encounter mental health issues (in reality, there is no “type” and [one in four are afflicted](#)); and about the nature of mental illness in general. Ultimately, stigma prevents many from seeking help and, therefore, caregivers' ability to improve overall mental health.

As [former H&HN editor Mary Grayson once put it](#), “an odd mix of silence, flip talk and stereotyping surrounds and isolates people with psychological disorders and the loved ones who care for them. For all the significant scientific breakthroughs in treatment, there is an even higher, very real wall of stigma, probably dating to when man discovered fire.”

The simultaneous dawn of stigma and fire may be true, but I bet the 1960s marked a high point on the histogram of shaming those with mental health issues, right around the time this ad from the National Association for Mental Health was published in *Hospitals* magazine (March 1969).

Really? The girl *never* smiled? If all concerned parties were around on her birthday to make sure of this, then there's a chance she had Moebius syndrome, a congenital disease that causes weakness or paralysis of the facial muscles. And how does one even quantify 500,000 individual mental illnesses, for that matter?

A little research into the National Association for Mental Health reveals that while the British [NAMH](#) pioneered a societal dialogue about mental illness, helped to run institutions for the mentally handicapped and developed training for mental health professionals, the group also had some unsavory brushes with eugenics moralizing, the social hygiene movement, Scientologists and, yes, stigma.

The organization has evolved and, now known as Mind, espouses more sophisticated and appropriate attitudes about mental illness. But earlier misguided pronouncements by NAMH and others remind us that some mental illness stigmas linger today, in part because of how bizarre and far-flung society's outlooks on behavioral health were, and not very long ago at that.

We asked her to smile but she didn't know how



This girl has never smiled. She is one of 500,000 children in America who are mentally ill. Science helps children with crippled bodies. Now it must find ways to help those with crippled minds. This is a job for research. You can help support such research by giving to the National Association for Mental Health through your local chapter.

