SWADLING, CLAIRE

Imagine you are in a room full of mirrors. Everywhere you look, from ceiling to floor, you are met with your own image. Every glance, every twitch, and every movement is amplified. You are no longer a single human being; you are now a multiverse of numerous realities created by infinite reflection. The experience of stigmatized people during the current coronavirus pandemic is similar to this; previous problems are amplified during quarantine, presenting exponentially larger challenges for these groups of people. The result has been misdirected refusal of employment, social rejection, and even violence (Hosa.org). In order to combat the stigmatization that this virus has had on marginalized groups, it is important for our communities to work together, for us to engage in thoughtful dialogues, and for us to self reflect.

To combat negativity, our communities need to help each other out. Thankfully, many people have already organized food drives and other initiatives to aid their local citizens. Others have provided care packages and other essentials to these groups. These efforts do not only serve to supply those in need with resources; the act of organizing a community service project brings families closer together. For example, to organize a food drive, one would first have to identify the groups in need. This educates the organizers, an important preliminary step in eliminating stigma. Next, local organizations would need to be contacted to help with the process; perhaps the local grocer would be willing to donate goods for the drive. This forces people to create new connections and become more in touch with their communities. Those who understand the people they live around are less likely to associate negative feelings with those they know. Finally, the actual drive will bring all walks of life to one place: organizers, volunteers, and the recipients. As a result, the town becomes closer knit, eliminating stigma in the process. I can relate to this on a personal level; my nonprofit, Health. Right. Now., has raised over $500 for a local homeless shelter. The process of organizing this has helped my friends and I come in closer contact with our communities and foster understanding. Clearly, community events can help build resilient communities.

The creation of meaningful dialogues is integral to eliminating stigma. One possible upside of COVID-19 is that it puts us in closer contact with technology. If used properly, it can help us to unite. Due to the nature of the Internet, one can talk to people living hundreds of miles away, all from the comfort of one's couch. This can be put to good use in a variety of ways. For example, people could host educational workshops detailing the source of marginalization. Alternatively, we could share potent information about how to best combat negativity during the pandemic. We can even share our community outreach initiatives, letting people across the whole globe reap the rewards of understanding learned from organizing them. I have been lucky enough to witness a tremendous amount of productive online conversations concerning racism and healthcare access. My friends and I have shared information about tragic recent events, thus accomplishing the first step towards destigmatization: education. We have also sought to brainstorm solutions to these issues. For example, one of my friends introduced me to "The ARE Project". It is a youth-led initiative to kindle interest and understanding of African American civil rights. Through their workshops, they are able to empower people with both the awareness to acknowledge these issues and equip viewers with tools to fight racism in the future. This work is especially crucial during the

coronavirus crisis because African Americans have been disproportionately affected by the virus, and lack the healthcare necessary to recover from it (www.npr.org, www.hopkinsmedicine.org). As you can see, technology can be used to reduce negativity and increase acceptance.

Finally, self-reflection is vital to ending stigmatization. While COVID-19 has taken many things away from us, we are still left with our most important asset: our minds. This is our most powerful weapon in the war against marginalization. Afterall, all things present in society today are a consequence of someoneâ€™s thoughts. If we can combat issues at their root, we have a good chance at tackling institutional racism and other forms of stigmatization exacerbated by COVID-19. I can personally attest to the effectiveness of this. After my father died when I was five, I didnâ€™t have many people to talk to. I had no siblings, and my mother worked long hours to cover medical bills. As a result, I began to rely on myself to learn, meditate, analyze, and reflect. Consequently, I have found that using my critical thinking can lead to changes in mindset and ultimately actions. My contemplation on the tragedy of my father led me to contact Dr. Robert Lustig, Professor of Pediatrics at UCSF and best-selling author. His guidance helped me establish Health. Right. Now., a nonprofit dedicated to solving public health issues. Indubitably, taking time to reconsider our own biases will serve society immensely.

It is clear that through community involvement, virtual conversation, and self-analysis, we can begin to combat coronavirus-related stigmatization. We are in a unique situation that we need to utilize the best we can. Quarantine and social distancing have allowed us to stay partially isolated. We have been sitting in that room full of mirrors, devoid of everything but our many selves. However, instead of becoming overwhelmed by the sheer number of realities, we can choose to take this time to hone in on the one we want. Our understanding of marginalized groups and ability to bring our communities closer will help us banish the billions of other realities and focus on the one we want: a more equal, more accepting, and more peaceful society.