One of the greatest challenges faced by mental health workers, in recent years, has been breaking down the stigma attached to mental illness. A stigma which didn't only affect the general public, but also patients and other healthcare professionals.

A patient's reluctance to admit to suffering from a mental illness, a mere 50 years ago, is hardly surprising when you consider the treatments that were available at that time such as electroconvulsive therapy in which the patient was strapped down and electrocuted - very much akin to a less deadly version of the electric chair. Going back slightly further to the 1940's and 50's, and the treatments got even more barbaric, the frontal lobotomy involved destroying the part of the brain which was thought to be responsible for the illness in question. These were commonly performed on patients suffering from schizophrenia, and while the delusions were often cured, the patient was left without full brain function. The lucky ones were just sent to an asylum to live, like a prisoner, out of sight and out of mind.

Fortunately, within the last 50 years, mental health has undergone major changes and now offers a variety of therapies for those suffering from a condition. Most large hospitals will have an in-staff psychiatrist to treat patients or to refer them to a psychologist who by therapy will help the patient realize the cause of their problem. However, one does not need to go to hospital to consult a mental health professional. If someone suffers from a minor mental health problem, such as panic attacks or a particular phobia, they are just as likely to find the help they need on the high-street.

Both the psychiatrist and psychologist are well versed in psychotherapy, but only the psychiatrist can prescribe medicine such as mood stabilizers or psychoactive drugs if needed. In recent years, creative therapies like music, color or dance therapy have also proved successful for certain conditions. Art therapy, for example, has proved effective in the treatment of patients with dementia.

On the face of the matter, it appears that the nations mental health should be better than ever but as times change so do the conditions which appear. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was unheard of 30 years ago, but now poses a major problem for soldiers returning from war or witnesses to major accidents. This does not necessarily mean that this is a new disorder, but rather that a name can be given to a condition which has been around for hundreds of years.

Another example of an old complaint recently being given a name is obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) in which sufferers have a compulsion to carry out certain actions, which for some may seem strange like repeatedly turning on and off a light switch a given number of times before leaving the house. Some disorders are not so old though, eating disorders such as anorexia are relatively new.

Mental health issues are often a result of the environment in which we live. Taking anxiety into consideration, it has been noted that the number of sufferers has increased
dramatically as our lifestyle gives us more to worry about.

The challenge faced by mental health workers in the coming years, is to continue the good work already started and expand on it, particularly with regard to autism which currently affects around 1 in 88 children, yet remains incurable.

**Discussion Questions**

Why do you think there was so much stigma attached to mental illness?

Do you think creative therapies can replace traditional pharmacological treatments? Why?

Can you think of any conditions which are both physical and mental?