

Forum: World Health Assembly

Issue: Addressing the de-stigmatization of mental health and access to related healthcare

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Introduction

The de-stigmatization of mental health and the urgent increase of access to relevant healthcare treatments represent a fundamental problem of significant relevance in the modern discourse around public health and social well-being. Mental health, an essential aspect of human well-being, continues encountering long-standing cultural taboos and systemic roadblocks that prevent people from receiving the required care. This paper will discuss a formal study of the urgency surrounding mental health de-stigmatization and the concomitant request for increased access to mental healthcare treatments.

Mental health illnesses continue to be stigmatized, affecting the fundamental foundation of society's attitudes. This stigma is not only superficial but an insidious force that pervades many facets of life. It prevents open discussion, discourages people from getting help, and encourages prejudice against those dealing with mental health issues. Individual suffering on a massive scale is precipitated by the unwillingness to confront the stigmatization of mental health and improve access to healthcare. Unmet mental health requirements lead to a decline in life quality, strained interpersonal connections, and, in the most catastrophic cases, self-destructive conduct or suicide. Beyond individual suffering, the societal repercussions are significant. The economic toll is significant, with untreated mental health issues resulting in decreased employment productivity and increased healthcare expenses. Furthermore, a community with unmet mental health

needs suffers from a cascade of social concerns, such as increased crime rates and overburdened public resources.

Misconceptions about mental health concerns exacerbate the problem. A fundamental misconception frequently creates an environment of disinformation, causing individuals to hesitate to disclose their mental health difficulties for fear of being unfairly labeled as weak or unstable. This hostile stigma impedes personal growth and prevents incorporation into supporting networks that can provide the necessary care. A variety of issues hampers access to mental healthcare treatments. Geographical hurdles, financial restraints, and societal injustices all contribute to gaps in access, making numerous people suffering from mental illnesses unable to receive adequate care.

A widespread shortage of mental health experts intensifies the problem. There is a significant shortage of psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers in many areas, making it difficult for persons with mental health needs to access adequate care. The lack of well educated and informed professionals results in the inability to recognize serious issues or a misdiagnosis which can therefore lead to limited access to the required facilities for healthcare and an overall mishandling of the issue. This scarcity disproportionately impacts underprivileged groups, limiting their access to aid even more.

Definition of Key Terms

Mental Health

Mental health is a state of well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their community. Apart from mental disorders, mental health refers to the continuum of distress, emotional capabilities, social interactions and more that differs from person to person.

Mental Health Stigma

Stigma refers to the act of viewing something in a negative light, often present within specific communities or groups. It is perpetuated through stereotypes that portray something negatively and through mass media. Mental Health Stigma specifically revolves around the lack of understanding of mental illnesses and issues. This causes a lack of awareness and therefore prejudice that is both public and self-directed.

De-stigmatization:

De-stigmatization is the process of improving the image, status, worth and understanding of any topic.

Mental Health Literacy

Mental health literacy is knowledge and awareness of issues concerning mental health. This can include, recognizing possible signs of disorders or issues, knowing who to contact or where to seek help, providing support to others going through these issues. By doing so, problems can be recognized in the early stages and the appropriate treatment can be provided immediately, thus reducing any long term risks.

Mental Health Equity

Equity refers to being fair. Mental health equity is being fair in terms of the accessibility to the required facilities regarding mental health. It is ensuring that people of different ethnicities, cultural backgrounds, gender, socio-economic status and other factors are provided with the necessary resources in order to have the same outcome as everyone else and reach their full potential.

Mental Health Care Disparities

Mental Health Care Disparities are the differences in access to health care systems for mental health conditions or requirements due to factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, income, age and more. This can result in the worsening of mental health conditions and access to a lower-quality of healthcare.

Mental Health Advocacy

Mental health advocacy is the process of speaking out against mental health and promoting positive change. It reduces discrimination against those with mental conditions and consists of various actions such as educating the public about mental health conditions and treatment and establishing/supporting organizations that work towards improving mental health care.

Healthcare Fragmentation

Healthcare fragmentation is essentially the lack of collaboration in healthcare systems between healthcare providers. This is often caused by specialization and division of healthcare into specific fields and parts of the body. While this is beneficial for patients requiring a specialist, it causes complications for people dealing with multiple complex conditions. This results in unclear diagnosis, prescription of different medications that may not react well together, and a tendency to avoid seeking help due to the complications in processes.

Healthcare Integration

Healthcare integration is the process of connecting different healthcare providers and organizations to improve the quality and efficiency of care. This can be established through integrated delivery systems where a variety of healthcare services and care are delivered by the same organization, Healthcare information exchanges which are electronic communication systems to improve connections between healthcare providers and external organizations, and accountable care organizations which are groups of healthcare providers that work together to provide coordinated care.

Key Issues

Societal Stigma

The societal stigma associated with mental health is a deeply rooted and complicated issue that significantly challenges tackling mental health stigma and enhancing access to mental healthcare. This stigma frequently presents negative stereotypes that characterize people with mental illnesses as unpredictable or dangerous, generating fear and prejudice. Those who do not comprehend these circumstances may engage in avoidance behavior, which isolates those dealing with mental health issues. Furthermore, shame and self-stigmatization caused by cultural misunderstandings can damage self-esteem and discourage people from getting treatment. Discrimination and prejudice against people with mental illnesses can result in uneven work, housing, and healthcare treatment.

As mentioned, stigma might deter people from getting necessary mental health care. Fear of being judged, labeled, or ostracized frequently leads to delayed or ignored treatment, resulting in more severe symptoms, increased suffering, and, in worst cases, self-harm or suicide. This avoidance behavior contributes to underreporting mental health symptoms in surveys and evaluations, resulting in a misleading view of the prevalence and impact of mental health conditions. The impact of stigma also extends to relatives of people with mental illnesses, who may feel alone and ignored by society, increasing the difficulties their loved ones suffer.

Negative depictions in movies, TV programs, and news stories reinforce assumptions and prejudices, helping to perpetuate mental health stigma. Stigma may be perpetuated by the language used to describe mental health conditions, with stigmatizing phrases and pejorative labels further marginalizing people affected. Furthermore, stigma is not uniform and can be impacted by intersectionality, which occurs when individuals confront discrimination based on race, gender, sexuality, or other variables, confounding their experiences even further. This cultural stigma can influence governmental policy, resulting in underfunding and poor legal safeguards for those with mental illnesses.

Healthcare System Fragmentation

The widespread issue of healthcare system fragmentation substantially influences mental health's de-stigmatization and access to related healthcare treatments. Healthcare fragmentation occurs when mental health treatments exist apart from the more extensive healthcare system. This divide creates several difficulties and obstructions. One of the most pressing challenges is a lack of integration since people with mental illnesses frequently get care not integrated with their physical health requirements. This fragmentation makes access to mental health care more complex, complicated, and discouraging for those in need. Care gaps are common, leaving mental health neglected. The separation of mental and physical health services may unintentionally encourage mental health stigma by implying that it is less essential than physical health, promoting the notion that mental health concerns are separate from and less important than physical health difficulties. As a result, mental health diagnosis and treatment may be delayed, increasing suffering and the need for more intensive interventions.

Fragmentation disproportionately impacts vulnerable groups, such as those with co-occurring mental health and drug use problems or those facing homelessness, who require integrated treatment. This fragmentation can also cause financial and administrative issues since distinct billing systems and payment processes for mental health treatments create complexity for healthcare professionals and patients. Furthermore, fragmented care frequently misses chances for prevention and early intervention. Integrated care may be more successful in recognizing and managing mental health disorders before they worsen. Greater integration of mental health services into the more extensive healthcare system is vital to reducing fragmentation in the healthcare system. This involves attempts to coordinate care, improve communication among healthcare providers, and teach healthcare personnel to detect and effectively handle mental health disorders. Policy reforms may also be required to guarantee fair access to mental healthcare services and promote a more holistic approach to healthcare that considers both mental and physical well-being. Reducing healthcare system

fragmentation is a critical step toward removing obstacles to mental health care and improving overall health outcomes.

Shortage of Mental Health Professionals

The scarcity of mental health practitioners is a complex issue with far-reaching ramifications for the de-stigmatization of mental illness and improved access to associated treatment. One of the most pressing issues is that an equal growth in the number of specialists in the area is not meeting the increased demand for mental health services. Population increase and heightened awareness of the importance of mental health are driving this need. As a result, persons seeking mental health support may encounter lengthy appointment wait times, jeopardizing the timely delivery of care, which is often critical in preventing the escalation of mental health issues. There are also regional discrepancies in the shortfall, with urban areas receiving more outstanding care than rural ones, leaving underserved communities with minimal or no access to services.

Furthermore, the scarcity compounds the shortage by exacerbating high turnover and burnout among mental health providers. Some mental health specialties, such as child and adolescent mental health or drug misuse therapy, are disproportionately impacted. Vulnerable groups may encounter significant problems in obtaining culturally competent and specialized treatment. Educational and training constraints, as well as a lack of worker diversity, exacerbate the problem. Expanding the mental health workforce involves investments in training, infrastructure, and diversity-promoting policies.

A complete approach is required to address this shortfall, including more support for mental health education and training programs, financial incentives for professionals working in disadvantaged regions, and improved working conditions to minimize burnout and turnover rates. Furthermore, the rise of telemedicine and novel care delivery models can assist in extending the reach of current practitioners and solving access gaps. By addressing the lack of mental health specialists, society may better guarantee that

individuals in need have timely access to the mental health treatment necessary for their well-being and lessen the total social cost imposed by untreated mental health concerns.

Research and Data collection

In the context of mental health research and data collecting, the terrain is complicated, with numerous major problems. To begin with, significant data gaps and inconsistencies impede efforts to fully assess the prevalence, impact, and consequences of mental health problems. The stigma associated with mental health difficulties adds to underreporting, making it harder to determine the full scope of the problem and underestimating the demand for mental health treatments. Furthermore, the absence of standardized data collecting techniques, disparities in terminology, and privacy issues with mental health data all contribute to a fragmented and incomplete data environment. Even when data is accessible, challenges such as data quality, accessibility, and sharing can make informed decision-making difficult. The study of specific populations and disorders and the necessity for research on the efficacy of mental health therapies highlight the significance of a more comprehensive approach.

In 2017, less than half of the WHO's member states had a domestic budget for mental health research. This also causes disparities in Even then, this budget was not disaggregated between hospital based and community based services. In 2013 it was noted that the average national spending on mental health care and research was only 0.5%.

Ethical issues must also be prioritized in mental health data gathering and research. Study into mental health disorders is further complicated by inadequate financing in comparison to other fields of healthcare, which limits the scope and depth of study. Mental health research requires extensive observational research and studies of specific cases and people, which include a lot of ethical issues that need to be considered. Privacy and anonymity needs to be maintained, consent needs to be given and people need to be protected from psychological harm. If a study is not conducted ethically it can reinforce negative stereotypes about people with mental illnesses. An unethical study can

discourage people from seeking help, especially if a sense of trust cannot be established with the experts due to fear of privacy not being maintained. Lastly, any research that is not conducted ethically can lead to the production of harmful treatments due to the safety and efficacy of treatments not being tested

Standardized data collection, improved research funding, and reducing mental health stigma are crucial for evidence-based policy formulation, enhancing de-stigmatization, increasing access, and creating a compassionate mental healthcare system.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

American Psychiatric Association

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) is a medical speciality society that is globally recognized and represents nearly 36,000 psychiatrists. The organization supports the diagnosis and treatment of patients with mental illnesses and supports prevention and research. Their mission is to utilize psychology to make a positive impact on critical societal issues and elevate the public's understanding of the use of psychology. The APA has integrated and is encouraging equity, diversity and inclusion in all aspects of work. Additionally, they have initiatives in place working towards establishing policies to eliminate disparities in health outcomes and addressing the underlying social determinants that affect the health and well-being of populations that have experienced economic and social marginalization. Their services also aim to make mental health care more affordable by prioritizing access to health services, including mental and behavioral services, health equity for underserved and vulnerable populations, health promotion and prevention and reimbursement and scope of practice.

National Alliance on Mental Illness

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) is a US-based organization that works toward raising awareness and providing support and education about mental conditions. Their services include educational programs for parents of youth who are experiencing mental symptoms, friends and family of patients, adults with mental health conditions,

and the family of military service members and veterans. In addition to this they have multiple programs specifically for members of the Latino community and the African American community. They advocate on a wide range of policy issues at a federal level and also have support systems such as helplines and webinars in place to help the general public.

The Commonwealth of Australia

The Australian government has established a National Mental Health Commission that aims to raise awareness on mental health conditions and provide support for those that are struggling with symptoms due to the lack of resources. The organization has collaborated with multiple local organizations and experts and leaders from across the country to develop and launch campaigns to provide Australia with the required support. They have established national guidelines to introduce wellbeing checks in early childhood. Their National Stigma and Discrimination Reduction Strategies involve reducing self-stigma amongst those who experience mental health issues, reducing public stigma by changing attitudes and behaviors towards people with personal lived experiences and those that support them and taking steps towards eliminating structural stigma and discrimination in the following settings: Mental Health Systems, Healthcare systems, Financial Services, Insurance and Law, Education and Training, and Employment.

Canada

The Mental Health Commission of Canada, a national non-profit organization and registered charity was established by the Canadian government to improve mental health outcomes for all people in Canada. Their training programs and initiatives include suicide prevention, elimination of stigma and discrimination, access to high-quality, culturally appropriate mental health services, workplace psychological health and safety conducts, and health care for those with substance abuse issues. In addition to this, the Canadian government promotes advocacy for the review of policies and practices in order to decrease embedded stigma and to change institutional culture, and advocacy for

continued mental health and well-being learning opportunities for Defense Team members. The government also provides support services for the general public and specifically for Indigenous people, veterans, Canadian Armed Force members and federal employees.

The United Kingdom

The United Kingdom government has multiple initiatives, such as the National Health Service, in place to improve the quality of life in the nation. Firstly, The Office of Health Development and Disparities and Health Education England's 'e-learning for healthcare' have developed an interactive e-learning platform about mental health and wellbeing that is easily accessible to the entire country. This content has been developed to increase the confidence and skills of healthcare professionals. The government has also focused on mental health promotion and preventing mental health issues, prevent suicide and improving the physical health of people with mental conditions, with great importance given to the affects of COVID-19.

The United States of America

The United States of America has a lot of initiatives, both in the public sector and private sector, aiming to improve the mental health of citizens and reduce the stigma around the topic. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administrations (SAMHSA) is a government organization that leads public health and service delivery efforts that promote mental health, prevent substance misuse, and provide treatments and support to foster recovery while ensuring equitable access and better outcomes. Their programs include Behavioural Health Equity which focuses on accessible health care for the American Indian/Alaskan Native community, the Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander community, the Black/African American community and the Hispanis/Latino community. It aims to eliminate any racial or ethnic disparities and language barriers when it comes to access to health care. Another example of a program by SAMHSA is

the Early Childhood Mental Health program that aims to promote and support the health and wellbeing of young children and their families.

Development of Issue/Timeline

Date	Event	Outcome
18th and 19th centuries	Lack of understanding in the mental health field.	People with mental health disorders were typically subjected to severe treatment and incarceration in asylums since mental illness was frequently misunderstood and stigmatized. This period was marked by a lack of empathy and decent treatment.
20th century	Mental health advocacy movements began to take shape.	Movements for promoting mental health started to take shape. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) was founded in the United States in 1949 as a demonstration of a commitment to study and comprehend mental health problems. The deinstitutionalization movement aims to end the practice of keeping mentally ill

		people in facilities for an extended period of time.
1963	The Community Mental Health Act was passed in the United States.	In order to provide community-based mental health treatments as an alternative to institutionalization, the Community Mental Health Act was created in the United States.
1980s and 1990s	Awareness of mental health issues increased.	As there was a greater understanding of mental health concerns, anti-stigma initiatives started to take off. To assist people and families affected by mental illness, mental health organizations like the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) were established.
2000s	Online communities and forums were created and gained popularity.	The internet and digital media were very important in raising awareness and offering resources to individuals who were interested in learning more about mental health.

		People might share their stories and look for help through online forums and groups.
2010	The Bell Let's Talk campaign was launched in Canada.	In order to minimize stigma and increase awareness of mental health, the Bell Let's Talk campaign was introduced in Canada. Since then, this campaign has evolved into an important yearly occasion.
2015	The United Nations included mental health as a global development priority.	Proof that the significance of mental health has been acknowledged internationally is the United Nations' inclusion of it as one of the Sustainable Development Goals.
2020	Increased awareness of mental health issues and the need for better access to mental healthcare during COVID -19 pandemic.	The COVID-19 epidemic raised consciousness about mental health problems and the need for improved access to mental healthcare. The pandemic increased the availability of telehealth and digital mental health services,

		enhancing patient access to care.
Ongoing	More systems have been implied to increase access to mental healthcare.	The rights of people with mental health disorders are continually being protected and access to care is being widened by legislation. Campaigns for eradicating stigma and expanding access to mental healthcare have grown more dependent on peer support programs, internet platforms, and public awareness activities.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

“Bell Lets Talk” campaign in Canada

In Canada, the "Bell Let's Talk" campaign is an example of a very effective public awareness program to destigmatize mental health and enhance access to mental healthcare. This campaign, developed by telecommunications provider Bell Canada, aims to increase awareness and translate that awareness into meaningful action. The campaign also uses tailored messaging to dispel common myths and show the universality of mental health concerns. It emphasizes that asking for assistance shows strength, not weakness. This type of personalized message is critical when dealing with various populations and groups.

Bell uses the power of digital communication to foster talks around mental health through its multi-platform involvement, including social media. On "Bell Let's Talk Day," they

contribute a certain amount for each social media contact with the campaign. This novel strategy converts each tweet, text, or share into a monetary donation to mental health projects.

"Bell Let's Talk" is a big fundraiser for mental health initiatives and fostering open talks. The cash raised will go toward mental health research, care, and community-based programs. The campaign's impact is measured and public, with Bell reporting on monies raised and their application to mental health projects.

The "Bell Let's Talk" campaign exemplifies how a well-executed public awareness program may effectively remove stigma, foster open discourse, and raise funds for mental health services. It serves as a model for other initiatives worldwide, demonstrating how a mix of digital involvement, high-profile backing, tailored messages, and verifiable effects can result in actual change in mental health awareness and access to care.

Legislation

Legislation is essential in the continuous effort to de-stigmatize mental disease and increase access to mental healthcare. People with mental disorders are protected from discrimination in all aspects of their lives, from education jobs under anti-discrimination laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the United States. Parity laws and regulations, such as the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act (MHPAEA), require insurance companies to consider mental health and substance use disorder treatments on the same level as physical health care, ensuring fair access to treatment. Individuals seeking mental health therapy benefit from privacy provisions under laws such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), which encourages safety and trust. Mental Health Acts and other pieces of legislation lay the groundwork for those suffering from mental diseases' rights and treatment. Access to mental health treatment is improved through legislative financial allocation, particularly in underprivileged groups. Legislatively mandated educational and training requirements

ensure that workers from various fields may better understand and respond to mental health concerns, eliminating stigma and improving service quality. Legislation also promotes data gathering, establishing crisis response teams, and delivering community-based services, all of which contribute to a more inclusive and supportive mental healthcare system. Finally, legislative actions are essential for developing a legal framework that protects individuals' rights, prohibits bias, and promotes accessible and equitable mental healthcare treatments.

Crisis Helplines

A vital aspect of mental health support networks, crisis hotlines provide urgent aid to people in need, especially during sudden emotional crises or when they are having suicidal thoughts. Recognizing the unexpected nature of mental health emergencies, their availability around the clock guarantees that assistance is always available. These helplines are staffed by highly qualified experts or committed volunteers who offer instant emotional support, coping mechanisms, and crisis intervention approaches to help people through their problems. These helplines act as lifelines for many people by providing a non-judgmental and private setting where people may express their emotions and anxieties without disclosing their identities, making it less intimidating for those reluctant to seek help because of stigma. Crisis hotlines offer more than immediate crisis support; they also act as entry points to continuing mental health care referral options. Many helplines also provide text-based or online chat options, which increases accessibility for people who might prefer written contact or have trouble talking about their problems. Underscoring their substantial commitment to mental health assistance and destigmatization initiatives is their involvement in suicide prevention, data gathering for research, and engagement with regional healthcare providers and mental health groups.

Possible Solutions

Education

Increasing education on the topic can greatly contribute towards the de-stigmatization of mental health. By instilling a positive attitude and a positive representation of mental health from a younger age, kids are more likely to grow up with a more positive outlook on such issues, hence removing the stigma around them. Educational institutes across the world can have specific training sessions, seminars or workshops where the effects of various factors on mental health are discussed with students, including how to deal with these issues and who to approach if showing symptoms of a mental condition. In addition to this, the language used when referring to mental health can also be refined to create a more positive attitude towards the topic. Avoiding the use of certain words that may create a false image of abnormality can be beneficial to aid in the process of de-stigmatization for the future generations.

Mental Health Support Services

Having access to any form of support can be extremely beneficial for those going through the issue, and for their family and friends. Support services provide people with the help and guidance required while also informing their friends and family on what can be done on their part to aid in the process of treatment. These services can be in the form of counseling, therapy, medication or peer support. These can be integrated into day to day life by having these as accessible and approachable options in all workplaces and educational institutes. This normalizes the concept of seeking for help which can aid in the process of de-stigmatization and also increases accessibility to help and care.

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