

MENTAL ILLNESS - A STIGMA

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Mental illness does not discriminate but sometimes people do. Stigma and discrimination against those living with mental illness is widespread. It is a feeling of disgrace that sets a person apart from the society. When a person is labelled as a mentally ill person then he/she is perceived as a stereotyped group. This negative attitude causes prejudice and inhibits people with mental illness from seeking treatment and leads to discrimination. This creates serious personal and societal consequences.

Stigma brings experiences and feelings of shame, blame, hopelessness, distress, a feeling of low self-esteem, loss of confidence and a feeling of seclusion in the society. It hinders effective and efficient recovery from mental illness. We must create a mentally, healthy society so that the people with mental illness seek treatment, achieve recovery, engage in meaningful activities, give them social status and reduce discrimination in the society. It is the largest obstacle to recovery.

What stigma actually is? In the society, people assess a mentally ill person in a negative way with a negative attitude which is referred to as Stigma. The condition of mentally ill persons is kept secret and often goes untreated for fear of embarrassment. Stigma is attached from the time of treatment like counselling, medication and other therapies to treat the illness. It should not be ascribed as an illness but as a state of being, which affects everyone, differently, in different forms and begins at any age, people do not realize it, "it can be treated". Mentally ill persons are potentially violent and unstable. This leads to discrimination which may be obvious.

What is the cause of stigma?

Society's lack of information and education on mental illness allows the stigma to grow. Talking about mental illness and being available to listen patiently helps to remove the

awkward silence. The mission in the society is to create a local campaign “reduce the stigma of mental illness” stop the silence, share their feeling and dispel the myths surrounding mental illness. We must change the misconceptions of mental illness by conversing, educating and encouraging people to seek support as and when required.

Presently treatments are being made available; the society can be more supportive and understanding. We must offer good, basic information about what mental illness is, and what are the reasons for its cause thus creating awareness of the mental illness in the society at large. One must offer a comfortable and congenial atmosphere while talking to mentally ill persons by showing concern and by being a good listener.

People with serious mental illness are challenged doubly. On one hand, they struggle with symptoms and on the other hand, with the disabilities that result from the misconception about mental illness in the society. Thus the impact of stigma is twofold i.e. public stigma, and self-stigma.

Public stigma: It is the reaction of the people living in the society, towards the mentally ill persons. The components of public stigma:

Firstly - the stereotypes, it is the negative belief about a group that they are dangerous, incompetent and are of a weak character;

Secondly – It is the prejudice, people who have negative emotions like anger, fear, and have an unpredictable character;

Third – It is the discrimination like avoidance; withhold employment and housing opportunities etc.

Self-stigma: In this case, people with mental illness turn against themselves. The factors of discrimination like dangerous, unpredictable, responsible for their illness, excluding from employment, social and educational opportunities affect them psychologically and lead to self-stigma. They believe the negative statements and in turn think of themselves as unable to recover, undeserving of care, dangerous and responsible for their illness. This leads to feeling of disgrace, low esteem, and inability to accomplish their goal in life. They feel that why make an effort when they cannot recover and lead a normal life.

To avoid being discriminated and be labelled as mentally ill they hide their problems and refuse to seek care. The more hidden mental illness remains, the more people continue to believe that it is disgraceful and needs to be concealed. This still worsen their difficulties and makes them harder to recover.

As a result of these, people with mental illness are deprived of a quality life, good job, safe housing, health care affiliation etc. Research has gone far to understand the impact of the disease, it has now recently highlighted stigma in mental illness. These are treatable health conditions but still people are afraid to talk about. We should go into the community and meet these individuals and help them in independent living and cope up with the social situations.

What are the steps to cope up with stigma?

- 1) **Get treatment**– Do not have the fear of being labelled with mental illness and hesitate from seeking help. It provides relief by identifying what’s wrong and helps to reduce and cope up with the symptoms that interfere with routine work and personal life.
- 2) **Do not let it create self-doubt and embarrassment**– Stigma just doesn’t comes from others, it may be mistakenly believed that the condition is a sign of personal weakness and they will be able to control it without help. Seeking psychiatric counselling, educating about the condition and connecting with other personals suffering with mental illness can help gain self-esteem and overcome destructive self-judgment. Do not isolate, do not be reluctant to tell anyone about mental illness – family, friends or members of the community who can offer support and help if they are made aware about it. Reach out to people who can be trusted for compassion, when support and understanding are needed.
- 3) **Do not equate with the illness** – The person suffering from, is “not an illness” instead of giving a status of mentally ill person specify the person as having mental illness. Never say ‘mentally ill person’ instead say ‘has/have mental illness’.

Create a support group like local and national groups such as the National Alliance Group on Mental Illness (NAMI) offer local and internet resources that help reduce stigma by educating people with mental illness, families and the general public. Encourage State and District Agencies and Programs that focus on vocational rehabilitation or the department of veterans' affairs that offers support for people with mental health conditions.

- 4) **Get help at school** –If the child has mental illness and affects learning, find out plans and programs that might help the child. Discrimination based on mental health conditions is against law and educators at primary, secondary and college levels are required to accommodate students as best as they can. Talk about the best approach and resource program to reduce discrimination as this inhibits learning. All these will positively enhance the performance and secure grades.
- 5) **Speak out against stigma** – Express opinion at events, in letters to editors and on the internet. It will help to instil courage to face the challenge. Hearing to accept the condition and recognizing what is needed to do makes a big difference.

Strategies for changing public stigma have been grouped into three categories:-education, protest and contact.

Protest is a relative strategy it diminishes negative attitude about mental illness. Protests and campaigns are effective in getting stigmatizing images withdrawn. Simultaneously, it has failed to promote positive attitude, a supportive fact.

In U.K. “Time to Change” campaign is one of the biggest campaign that addresses mental health stigma and is supported by charities and mental health service providers. They provide blogs, videos, T.V. advertisements and promotional events to raise awareness of mental health stigma and the detrimental effects it has on mental health sufferers. However, creating awareness simply by providing information about these problems may not be a solution. Some methods are to be identified in the socio psychology literature for improving inter group

relations and reducing prejudice, to promote events by encouraging mass participation, and social contact between individuals with and without mental health problems.

Analysis of these kinds of inter group events suggests that they improve attitude towards people with mental health problems, increases the future willingness to disclose the mental health problems and promote behavior associated with anti- stigma engagements.

Studies have shown that knowledge, culture and social networks influence, the relationship between stigma and access to care. Now it is being focused on educating people to combat harmful stereotypes related to illness and treatment. Education provides information so that the public can make more informed decisions about mental illness. Educative programs are effective for a wide variety of participants including college undergraduate, graduate students, adolescents, community residents and persons with mental illness. This approach towards stigma is very effective and moderates negative attitude. It is further moderated when members of public meet persons with mental illness who are able to hold down jobs or living in a good neighborhood in the community. Encourage people to meet mentally ill persons. Contacts in particular seem to be effective for changing individual attitudes. It is one of the global challenges facing mental health organizations.

Sometimes instead of being diminished by self-stigma most persons become righteously violent because of prejudice they have experienced .This kind of reaction empowers people to become active participants in their treatment plan and often pushing for improvements in quality of service.

Families are also affected by stigma, leading to lack of support. Mental health care should be more accessible, affordable and acceptable through cutting edge technology. Mental illness not only affects the overall health of our population but also our economy. Many mistakenly believe that this illness can be overcome with simple will power; this is sadly not the case. It is a serious condition and must be treated. It should receive the right kind of help- help that works. There should be no hesitance, embarrassment in discussing and seeking help. Recognize the number of mentally ill affected people and support innovators who drive the change.

Gennifer Mathis – Department Legal Director of the Bazelon Centre for Mental Health Law stated that “Mental health parity means that issues such as depression or schizophrenia would be treated for as long as necessary, much as the broken arm is treated until healed rather than having limits on allowed visits per year or insurance policies that do not include mental health at all”. It’s time to move away from ignorance, denial and fear that surrounds brain disease. Mental illness is as much a challenge as a source of strength and motivation to achieve our personal victories. It’s a gift that gives us our strongest blessing, our divine gift.

Role of the Society - As a society, we need to recognize that mental illness is a disease; the person needs our support to handle it. Remove the stigma, show more kindness, compassion, empathy and understanding. Feeling sad, distressed, stressed or depressed are seen as bad emotions - things we should not feel but the reality is, these things are the part of the process of finding balance. It is normal and admissible to have bad moments and distressed memories and is absolutely normal to reach out for support from friends, family and professionals. Make them feel we are here for you. Some of the tools that can be used to stay anxiety free are pranayama deep breathing technique, transcendental meditation, yoga etc.

“Where there is hope there is life”. Mentally ill persons lose hope psychologically, socially and spiritually. People should realize that they are not alone in this suffering, even in deepest despair they should not fear the darkness, it is in the darkest hour they will discover the light within. Implement a community based and people oriented model which emphasizes people to reintegrate successfully into their families, communities and regain self-respect and dignity and bring a lasting change in the lives. Focus that the basic needs and basic rights are recognized by combining health, socio-economic and community oriented solutions with changes in policy practice and resource allocations. The approach must be holistic, innovative and go beyond media interventions .Deliver strategic goals, conduct programmes to achieve the purpose and collaborate with a range of local, national, international partners to accelerate global implementation. Also develop new social franchises, empower and support other organizations to expand its reach in a sustainable and cost effective manner to transform and built better lives.

Identify, mobilize and train mentally ill persons. Develop stake holders to facilitate opportunities for effective individuals to gain and regain the ability to work, to contribute to

family and community. Also manage partnerships and relationships with stake holders who are involved in implementing mental health services and are responsible for policy decisions and their practice.

This means that mentally ill people will have better access to affective community based health services. The services must be equipped with the skills and ability, be empowered with the ability to make choices and transform these choices into positive changes in their lives. There should be a demonstrable commitment by a range of stakeholders for closing the gap and increase in resources deployed and protect to support and scale up plans to facilitate a positive change in the existing system at national and international level. Increase the global profiles, explore and promote alignments between mentally ill and other social and health organizations, recognize that they are closely linked. Create an international network with those operating mental health programs, provide opportunities for partner members to share learning and develop their practice, use local experiences and evidences to challenge policy. Review the strategic framework annually and ensure that it is appropriate for the purpose in the context of an ever changing environment.

A number of national and local campaigns are trying to change attitudes towards mental illness. In the United Kingdom – “The Equality Act, 2010” makes it illegal to discriminate directly or indirectly against people with mental health problems in public service and functions, at place of work, education, association and transport. Research shows that the best way to challenge these stereotypes is through first hand contact with people who have an experience of mental health problems.

Free podcasts are designed to provide with the skills and techniques to help to live a mentally healthier life. A podcast is an android which is regularly updated, downloaded and listened anywhere, anytime. Introduce positive thinking as a way of reducing anxiety and encourage people to be relaxed, be focused, be goal setting, have a good nutritious and healthy diet as it improves overall physical and mental well-being.

Ensure that mental illness is covered by insurance at parity with other illness. Set up mental health clinicians across the country. Encourage Fellowship for mental health journalism.

Award prizes for Documents and projects and co-ordinate efforts to focus on issues of common concern. The greatest challenge is to educate our youth and their families about the early signs of symptoms of mental illness and seek life saving treatments and support. It is important to create communities of compassion and inclusion and thus provide the youth the love and support they need to thrive.

The difficult challenges that encumber our struggling economy are insufficient budget, lack of affordable, accessible and culturally–responsive care. We should overcome these with unity, integrity and resilience. Make a commitment to create a mentally healthy community.

Treatments have developed and tested to successfully reduce the symptoms and disabilities of mental illnesses. Unfortunately people distressed by these illnesses do not seek services or choose to fully engage in them. One of the major factors that impedes counselling and care seeking is mental illness stigma.

In the present days, the courts trust more on the existing facts while estimating the type, nature and severity of mental illness and for deciding matrimonial disputes of divorce. In this regard it is worth quoting Justice Venkatchaliah statement that "All mental abnormalities are not recognized as grounds of the decree .If the mere existence of any decree of mental abnormality could justify the dissolution of marriage few marriages would indeed survive in law"¹

In many cases of doubtful or mild form of mental aberrations divorce was not granted .In case of Reddy and Reddy² mental disorder was a ground for divorce under Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 but was refused. The Gupta & Gupta case it is cited as a landmark judgement because it is in accordance with the scientific development in psychiatry. The judgement goes ahead to say that "schizophrenia is what schizophrenia does." .The sheer branding of a person as schizophrenic is not enough. Each case has to be assessed or in other words, is to be estimated on its own merit.

¹ Ram Narain Gupta vs Smt. Rameshwari Gupta 1988 AIR 2260

² Reddy H v. Reddy R. 2003, HLR 132 AP

Thus in order, to tackle stigma, to improve treatment and engagement, the above strategies have been discussed. One of the simple way to help may include is to get to know people with personal experience of mental illness, offer support to people when they are unwell, treat them with dignity and respect as one would treat any other person, talk openly of your own experience of mental illness, speak up in protest when friends, family, colleagues, or media display false beliefs and negative stereotypes.

