



Social stigma: a whopping barrier to care for psychosocial disability

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ABSTRACT

Psychosocial disability refers to disability experience of people with impairments and participation restrictions related to mental health conditions. Stigma is society's negative evaluation of particular features or behaviour. This article discusses some of the issues related to social stigma and psychosocial disability.

Keywords: psychosocial, disability, stigma, mental illness

PSYCHOSOCIAL DISABILITY

Disability has been used for various conditions. It is the subject matter of various academic disciplines which see it in various perspectives. Conventional views of disability emphasize wheelchair users and a few other "classic" groups such as blind people and deaf people.¹ According to International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) disabilities is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations.² So many health and social conditions are disabling. Psychosocial disability refers to disability experience of people with impairments and participation restrictions related to mental health conditions. These impairments and participation restrictions include the loss of or reduced abilities to function, think clearly, experience full physical health and manage the social and emotional aspects of their lives.³ Psychosocial disability relates more to the social consequences of disability³ and can affect a person's ability to participate fully in life. This may be due to how the impairment from mental ill-health has affected them and how it prevents them to engage in

opportunities such as education, training, cultural activities, and to achieve their goals and aspirations. Not everyone but a significant number of persons with a mental illness will have a level of impairment that can be defined as a psychosocial disability.³

Mental health conditions are responsible for a great deal of mortality and disability, accounting for 8.8% and 16.6% of the total burden of disease due to health conditions in low and middle-income countries, respectively.⁴ WHO reported that mental illnesses are the leading causes of disability adjusted life years (DALYs) worldwide, accounting for 37% of healthy years lost from non-communicable disease NCDs.⁴ Depression alone accounts for one third of this disability.⁵ According to National Human Right Commission, nearly 20-30 million people in India are in need of mental health services in India.⁶ One third of these need help to cope with disability resulting from various mental disorders.⁷ But these figures do not include the thousands of others who may be suffering in silence without access to help. Lack of knowledge on the treatment availability & potential benefits of seeking treatment are important is one of the major barriers to care.

One another major barrier is negative attitudes of the society. Society's unwillingness to care and commiserate with the problems has a very considerable influence on mental health care and development of any programme or service. Despite the fact, people with psychosocial disabilities or mental illness often attract fear, hostility and disapproval rather than compassion, support and understanding. Such reactions not only cause them to feel isolated and unhappy but may also prevent themselves obtaining effective help and treatment. Negative attitudes have a very considerable influence on the clinical course of persons suffering from psychosocial disability/mental illness leading to stigma and discrimination.

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STIGMA BARRIER TO CARE

Stigma is a social process or related experience characterized by exclusion, rejection, blame or devaluation that results from an adverse social judgment about a person or group.⁸ Various other medical conditions are also stigmatized e.g. leprosy, HIV/AIDS, TB, epilepsy, along with mental illnesses. Different stigmatized conditions are also associated with specific features of stigma, which may be rationalized with reference to condition-specific ideas about those conditions, their social implications, and why they are considered socially unacceptable e. g. exaggerated concerns about the risk of infection or moral condemnation may promote the stigma of HIV/AIDS, exaggerated concerns about dangerousness with mental illness. It appears to be closely associated with the experience, meaning, and behaviour associated with the disease among affected persons and unaffected persons in the community who have either no idea or very blurred ideas about it.⁹

Disability is not just a health problem. It is a complex phenomenon, reflecting the interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society in which he or she lives.³ Stigma is society's negative evaluation of particular features or behaviour. Cultural beliefs that define certain conditions negatively may create tainted and discounted identities for affected individuals and their families.¹⁰ Social stigma attached to psychosocial disabilities or mental health has a measurable impact on care, treatment or rehabilitation of the same.

Stigma does not stop at disability/illness it marks those who are disable/ill, their families across generations, the community where they live, institutions that provide treatment, psychotropic drugs, and mental health workers. The stigma attached to psychosocial disability/mental illness is the main obstacle to the success of programmes to improve psychosocial disability/mental health.¹¹

Stigma is so prevailing and pervasive, prevents people to accept their own psychosocial disability/mental health problems and disclosing them to others. It is a barrier, discourages individuals and their families from getting the help they need due to the fear of discrimination.¹²

Stigma limits people from getting good jobs and advancing in the workplace. The study provides evidence that some individuals with a mental illness have the capacity to achieve and maintain successful employment despite the challenges presented by this serious psychosocial disability/mental illness.¹³ Despite this fact most of the employers are reluctant to hire people who have psychosocial disabilities/mental illnesses; in case they are employed they have to face discrimination by employers and colleague.¹⁴

Stigma leads to fear, mistrust, and violence. Even though the vast majority of people who have mental illnesses are no more violent than anyone else most of the time the average television and other media portrayed people with psychosocial disabilities/mental illnesses as violent or other negative pictures.¹⁵

Stigma results in inadequate social security measures. Any insurance plans do not cover psychosocial disability/mental health services to the same degree as other illnesses. Either legislation has poor provisions or failed to implement whatever is there.

Stigma results in prejudice and discrimination that people have experienced have varied from outright abuse and harassment,¹⁶ to the awkwardness that people encounter from having a condition that is hard to talk about. Individuals with psychosocial disability/mental illness receive harsh stigmatization, resulting in decreased life opportunities and a loss of independent functioning over and above the impairments related to mental disorders themselves.

Collaborated efforts is required to dispel stigma of psychosocial disability/mental illness, spanning policy and legislation, alterations in media depictions, changing attitudes and practices among mental health professionals, contact and empathy enhancement among individuals, family and community interventions.

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