

Public education for mental health: Revisiting its intervention potential

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Abstract:

It is well known that public knowledge about mental illnesses is not at an expected level, and misinformation and stigma continue to be commonplace. These factors have a negative impact on appropriate and timely help seeking, adherence to treatment, and consequently on the clinical outcomes. There are robust public education materials and resources available through various platforms, such as the print and electronic media and the Internet. In fact, there is information overload, and a considerable proportion of the information is inaccurate, unscientific, and unreliable. Considering this, there is a need for appropriate guidance to be provided by the mental health professionals to the patients, caregivers, and general public. Public education for mental health is not only helpful but is also an effective intervention that is not adequately used. It should be actively encouraged and practiced routinely. This may improve the mental health literacy of the general public; the help seeking, engagement, and adherence of the patients with the treatment process would possibly be better, and these may help the intervention and outcome of mental illnesses.

Keywords:

Mental health, mental illness, public education, psychiatry, stigma

Introduction

Despite progress in the understanding of mental illness and its treatment, there are massive issues related to their perception in the community. Most patients with mental illness attend for intervention late and some never do. The common reasons are inadequate awareness about symptoms and that effective treatment is available. There is disproportionately high misinformation in the communities and online platforms creating a lot of issues including many self-diagnosed worried wells. In addition, social stigma continues to hinder appropriate and timely treatment of many patients in the community.

verbal and physical abuse, exploitation, harmful practice, and even death. It is not uncommon to find that persons with mental illness are labeled as being possessed by evil spirits and are exposed to injurious healing practices.^[3] Stigma and lack of awareness of effective treatment are also considered factors in many suicide attempts and deaths.

There is a role of public education in dealing with these issues in psychiatry. Although clinicians have been aware of this for a long time,^[4] there has not been much progress. Although information and interventions are available to the general public in various domains, their use and effectiveness need to be reviewed.

The stigma around mental illnesses continues in all cultures irrespective of educational level.^[1,2] It leads to delays or no treatment for mental illness, poorer prognosis, and in some cases, negative outcomes such as

It is imperative to discuss how public education can be utilized for improving mental health care. In this connection, relevant literature from electronic databases including PubMed was reviewed to highlight core issues related to public education about mental illness, to explore possibilities of it

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increasing mental health awareness. It was also intended to study the effectiveness of public education as an intervention method in the overall management and outcome of mental illness in the community.

Available public education resources, their accessibility, and usefulness are discussed in various areas and platforms. The challenges of available information, managing misinformation and information overload, and how public education can be used to support patients and caregivers are described.

Public Information Sources for Mental Health

The internet

For many decades, the Internet has taken over as the source of information for anything, including that of mental health. Most people access the Internet for health information, and there are a huge number of sites related to health.^[5] Similarly, people also access the Internet for information about mental illness.^[6] There are many professional sites for general and specific topics on mental health, for example, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines (nice.org.uk), Royal College of Psychiatrists (rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health), MedlinePlus (medlineplus.gov/mentaldisorders), American Psychiatric Association (psychiatry.org/patients-families), along with Indian Psychiatric Society, etc. In addition to these, there are specific illness-based sites (e.g., autism.org.uk) and sites supporting patients and caregivers. There are many online self-help groups and therapy sites such as moodcafe.co.uk, etc.

Besides professional sites, there are individual/personal sites by psychiatrists, mental health professionals, and expert patients, along with many Blogs or YouTube pages with supporting materials. Psychiatrists and other mental health professionals can have their own Internet sites and encourage their patients to participate in psychoeducation through these resources.

Media

Whether print or electronic media, they have a good scope of reaching the masses. Besides newspapers, radio, TV, and social media have immense reach to the general public and have a significant role in public education about health, particularly mental health. Newspaper articles/columns are often very helpful for the general public. However, most of the time, the information flow has been one sided, although interactional programs are possible, for example, question-answer programs on TV, phone-in, magazine, and columns answering readers' queries. All these media communications are especially helpful when they are in the local language.

Social media have become extremely powerful means of communication and most young people utilize these more. To be effective, mental health information should be available there. In fact, many professional bodies and academic medical publishers are in the social media, sharing relevant information.

Information leaflets

Leaflets can be very useful for sharing specific information. These can be available in clinics, libraries, and personal or professional sites, which can be about specific disorders, medications, etc. These can be available in many religious or faith healing centers which many mentally ill patients or their caregivers visit before attending psychiatric clinics.^[3] It has been observed that it is sometimes difficult to find one in the local language used by the patients. However, while the availability and the use of printed leaflets are rather poor, electronic copies can be easily utilized through E-mail or other online communication methods.

Books

Books are powerful educational tools, communicating about mental illness, and how to manage them as individuals and as a caregiver. There are many works of fiction with accurate descriptions of characters with mental illness and their journeys. Similarly, "self-help" in general for positive mental health or specific psychiatric illnesses helps a lot. Some patients and caregivers write about their lived experiences which provide immense insight to the general public. There are various ways books can be used actively for mental health education of the public.

Bibliotherapy is useful and has a lot of potential as a method of intervention.^[7] The patients and caregivers, those who are interested, can be directed to appropriate books to read. However, despite being very useful, books are less commonly used than other media.

"Books on Prescription" is an interesting method of suggesting reading appropriate, preselected books, on various topics relevant to mental illnesses, taking care of self and patients, and for positive mental health.^[8] In this approach, general practitioners and mental health professionals suggest patients and caregivers read specific books. This is a useful technique but infrequently used. Similarly, "book reading clubs" can discuss various related books on mental health and interventions.

Movies

Many movies have depicted mental illnesses and symptoms in the characters,^[9] which makes it easy for the general public to understand the intricacies of presentation, treatment approaches, and outcomes. There is a long list of Indian movies with characters

having a mental illness, some examples are, *Black, Taare Jameen Par*, 15 Park Avenue, My Name is Khan, *Barfi*, *Dear Zindagi*, *Tamasha*, *Sanju*, *Golmaal3*, *Hichki*, and *Kartik Calling Kartik*. These pictures have narrated various mental disorders with finesse, for example, paranoid schizophrenia, dementia, dyslexia, bipolar disorder, depression, alcohol dependence, substance use disorders, autistic spectrum disorder, personality disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder, self-harm and suicide, and tick disorder. However, it is important to inform the public about the mental disorders of the characters in the film, the treatment approaches, etc., through various media, even if it is not possible in the film itself.

There is a downside to this as well. Films and TV operas often present mental illness and its treatment in a dramatized, unnatural way which has propagated misinformation, and poor knowledge in the general public.^[10] Many professional bodies have raised concerns and gradually there appears to be some improvement in the portrayal of mental illness in the mainstream cinema and TV serials.^[11] Writers, producers, and actors in the entertainment industry have a responsibility not to propagate misinformation. In this process, collaboration with professionals from the beginning, e.g., since writing and having sensitivity toward the mental health aspects are essential.

Roles of Public Education

It cannot be overemphasized that social factors associated with mental illnesses need to be addressed at the community level. One of the obvious ways would be to have an effective public education system sharing accurate and appropriate information, in a way common people can understand and utilize the information. The role of public education is to raise awareness and improve the knowledge base among the general public. In psychiatry, it adds further value as the information may have preventative and therapeutic value. Active interaction during the process has the scope for comprehensive understanding and increased possibility of change in attitude toward mental illness, mentally ill patients, and help-seeking behavior.

The preventative role of public education can be through sharing techniques of stress management, crisis resolution, and mental health first aid. This is so evident during disasters affecting the masses and the psychological support needs to be provided in the community to a huge number of people. Recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were a lot of people in the community affected by stress linked to the pandemic,^[12] and many people got support through educational approaches;^[13] besides, the fact that effective public health education programs reduced the health impact.^[14]

Public education can help in mental health intervention in various ways, for example, providing accurate information, directing to appropriate care, online treatments, and psychotherapies. This helps manage common mental illnesses. Another example is the area of sexual problems where education can be so effective,^[15,16] not only in dealing with the main concern but also anxiety, depression, and the myths and misconceptions associated with it.^[17]

Methods of Public Education

Mental health professionals need to reach out to the masses, in active interaction, discussion, and answering queries. It has been reported that the general public has higher trust in professionals in a crisis situation and follows their advice for effective crisis management.^[18] There is a great role of psychiatry beyond the confines of the clinics, out in the communities. Public lectures, discussion forums, phone-in programs on radio and TV, and even road shows are just some of the examples.

Participating in mental health first aid in mass trauma situations is another avenue for mental health professionals to interact directly with the general public.^[19] The presence of clinicians in various forums in the community is an effective method and needs to be explored and utilized. These could be community meetings, blending in with other functions, health conferences for the general public, and meetings in other institutions.^[20,21]

Sexual education in the general population is an important area,^[22] considering the profound presence of myths, misconceptions, and stigma.^[17] This can be arranged through print and electronic media, making it more interactive.

Mental health screening in various communities when appropriate and providing feedback about the results and intervention if required is a practical way of getting the message to reach the people. The screening can be done in educational institutions,^[23] among survivors following disasters,^[19] among vulnerable public affected by stressful events, and while conducting mental health first aid following a crisis and in the general public. Online self-assessment tools can help improve awareness about mental health concerns and direct individuals to appropriate support services. Mental health apps can provide quality, evidence-based education, and links to relevant resources.^[24]

Public education can be done through short courses, online or in-person training sessions with a pre-post evaluation, which can involve mental health literacy, attitude toward mental illness, and stigma. Content may

include mental health promotion, prevention strategies for mental illnesses, and crisis intervention techniques. Health conferences specifically designed for the general public, for example, the Healthy Ageing Conference,^[25] or sessions for the general public in psychiatric conferences are other avenues for public education. Mental health education programs in schools, colleges, and universities have been so effective that research suggests integrating education and mental health.^[26-28]

Effectiveness of Public Education

The role of education as a determinant of mental well-being has been reported, possibly mediated through improved health behavior, physical health, and knowledge.^[29] Primarily, public education provides information, suggests appropriate actions related to health or self or family members, and prepares for action during health crisis situations. Public education is effective in reducing stigma and improving attitudes toward mental illness.^[30]

Few studies have reflected on the effectiveness of public education as a method of intervention. A web-based program in Japan was useful in helping parents know about schizophrenia.^[31] A public education campaign in the UK did not find an increase in knowledge of mental illness, but neighbors' attitudes and patients' social integration improved.^[32]

School-based educational programs have been effective in raising awareness^[33] and improving mental health.^[34] Interventions for mental ill health prevention have shown to be effective for students in higher education both short and long term, whereas mental health promotion had shorter lasting effects.^[35]

Challenges

There are many challenges in the public education systems and materials available now. Most information is not available in local languages, which is a major concern, as the patients and caregivers may comprehend best in their languages. Print resources for the general public on mental health as mentioned above are still scarce, costly, and not up to date. There is often no easy access to printed information, especially in the local language, and many patients and caregivers still do not have access to online information or are not aware of how to search for appropriate professional information online.

It is extremely important to highlight that the information online or elsewhere is written for the general masses, and not individual specific as personal situations may be different and complex, composed of various issues. These do not convey answers to the specific questions

of the person, patient, or caregivers. However, it is often seen that the users in the general public consider the available information to fit them individually. This results in many self-diagnoses, misdiagnoses, and distress. Some even proceed to procure medications and other interventions.

It appears that there is too much web-based information with no quality control^[5] and could be outdated considering the fast progress in the scientific area. As the general public may not be aware of the reliability of the Internet sites, there is a concern about receiving inaccurate and misinformation, as there are many improper sources on the Internet. Some information websites require a fee, which may make it difficult for some of the patients and caregivers to afford.

There is a lot of erroneous information in the media, the Internet, and print, which overshadows the appropriate scientific information. While it is difficult to control the nature and quality of information available on the Internet, mental health professionals can redirect and support the general public and patients about reliable professional sources of information.

There are still inappropriate depictions of persons with mental illness and their treatment in plays, movies, and TV serials; this creates more problems and propagates stigma further. The authorities should be more responsive to these issues, and there should be quality control. The general public and professionals should also be given opportunities to raise concerns and there should be a process to address these.

Inadequate, improper reporting of news related to mental health in media is commonplace, and journalists or news broadcasters do not often follow the guidelines while reporting news about persons with psychiatric problems. As a result, often the general public is exposed to sensational news and headlines, highlighting the issues without providing the possible solutions in the same broadcast. One of the examples is the news about suicides. Media reporting about suicides has been not only of poor quality in India,^[36] but there have been potentially harmful practices observed.^[37] While reporting suicide, the news broadcast should talk about the available help in those circumstances, and any helpful societies, or phone numbers. Similarly, often mental health issues are simply not identified or reported, which needs to be emphasized.

Information overload could be a barrier to effective public education,^[38] which can burden the general public and leave them confused and indecisive. Information overload during COVID-19 was linked with anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder.^[39] The

public must be provided with verified, concise, and practical information in a balanced way.

One of the major challenges in public education initiatives is the existing and well-entrenched stigma about mental illness and psychiatric treatment in the communities. However, stigma can be tackled through robust and effective public education. It has been reported that public education and contact reduced the stigma associated with mental illness.^[1] Focused antistigma measures have been reported to help decrease negative attitudes toward mental illness^[40] and improve mental health literacy.^[41]

Another interesting issue related to public education of mental health is the existence of antipsychiatry. Although it is not as prominent as before,^[42] the antipsychiatry movement continues to be discussed,^[43] which has challenged the understanding and intervention approaches of the mainstream psychiatric practice. While the debate must continue and encourage further research into the nature of the treatment of mental illnesses, it needs to be highlighted that antipsychiatry may influence public opinion and public education approaches need to be prepared for it.

Conclusion

Public education has immense potential as an effective method to improve mental health understanding and care. On a positive note, there are reliable materials available for public education about mental health. Most of them are in the public domain which is user-friendly and practical. However, they are rather passive, need to be actively searched, and are often lost in the cobweb of misinformation. Methods of public education need to be expanded to increase their reach to the masses. Increasing awareness, dealing with stigma getting the best help to patients early, and campaigning against misinformation are some of the roles the mental health professionals need to carry out alongside their usual clinical work. More research is needed to study the effectiveness of public education about mental health care.

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Conflicts of interest

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