



BELIEFS AND MYTHS OF MENTAL DISORDERS: A REVIEW ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

Misconceptions about mental illness are very prevalent, and the lack of understanding about the disease can have serious consequences for millions of people. The humiliation of having mental illness leads many people to feel ashamed and prevents them from seeking medical help. Mental illness has good prognosis if diagnosed early, but most of the people think that once the person is affected with mental illness, it can't be cured. This thinking is a highly prevailing stigma in the society, even when persons are treated and become normal, they are not accepted by society as a healthy human beings. Some of **myths** are e.g. mental health conditions are very rare; people experiencing mental distress are different from normal people and less able to participate in everyday life; people with mental health conditions never recover; people with mental health conditions are violent and unpredictable; people with psychotic conditions, like schizophrenia, constantly experience severe symptoms like hallucinations and delusions.

This study was done to review the literature on myths and various beliefs associated with mental disorders.

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INTRODUCTION

Concepts about mental illness can be subjective (1), and it can be difficult to define. One of the definitions listed for mental illness in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2) is "mentally disordered, mad, or crazy" (p. 506). During the Middle Ages, people with mental illness were considered to be living examples of the weakness of humankind. The common belief was that mental illness was a result of being unable to remain morally strong. People with mental illnesses were jailed as criminals and, on some occasions, put to death (Corrigan, 3). In 1974, Thomas Szasz (4) wrote about the "myth" of mental illness. He stated that physicians used anatomical and pathological methods to help identify physical illness. There was proof that these illnesses existed because of how they altered the physical body. Stigma comes from the Greek word *stigmata*, which refers to "a mark of shame or discredit; a stain, or an identifying mark or characteristic" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 1990, p. 506). Stigma, when it is used in reference to mental illness, is a multifaceted construct that involves feelings, attitudes, and behaviors (5). There are several current theories about the construct of stigma and how it might be deconstructed and defined. Misconceptions about mental illness are very prevalent, and the lack of understanding about the disease can have serious consequences for millions of people. The humiliation of having mental illness leads many people to feel ashamed and prevents them from seeking medical help (7). Mental illness has good prognosis if diagnosed early, but most of the people think that once the

person is affected with mental illness, it can't be cured. This thinking is a highly prevailing stigma in the society, even when persons are treated and become normal, they are not accepted by society as a healthy human beings (8).

This study was done to review the literature on myths and various beliefs associated with mental disorders.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A study in Delhi (6) reported that 23.6% of respondents believed that having less sexual desire makes a man prone to mental illness. One-third of the subjects believed that higher education and high IQ could be the cause of mental disorders. 34.7% of rural subjects believed that loss of semen/vaginal secretion is a cause of mental disorder. 52% of rural population believed that polluted air causes mental illness. 39.4% of rural respondents believed that mental illness is the punishment given to patients by God for their past sins. 39.4% of rural people and 34.4% of urban people under study believed in bad effects of ghosts/devil/witches. Large number of subjects have belief that prayer or pooja can reduce the bad effects and ghosts can be removed. Mostly subjects believed that psychiatrists are eccentric and do nothing.

Another study (9) shows that people are more aware of mental illness and they don't see mental illness as God's punishment. People know that mental illness can affect any body at any age, in any situation, and in both genders. The caregivers in the sample stated that mental illness is not communicable, and it's not anything to hide and be ashamed off. They also believe

that a mentally ill person can become normal again. The majority accepted that science has treatment for mental illness. Half of the caregivers stated that all mentally ill are not dangerous. Although some respondents disagreed that mentally ill must stay in mental hospital, not in community or home. People are aware that mental illness is not communicated through talking and mentally ill can also have the capacity to pursue job, and have families. Participants knew that to treat mental illness there is a psychiatrist who deals with mental illness. To conclude, the results show a positive perspective and awareness regarding mental illness among the caregivers.

According to a review article (10), in India mental illness is thought to be result of a curse to humanity. Ghosts, evil spirits and the like are believed to be possessing this individuals. So varieties of barbaric treatments were given to these people to get rid of these evil influences but the stigma attached to mental illness is more than the illness itself. "Once mad..... Forever mad" seemed to be the perception. Stigma attached to mental illness is still very much here. That is the reason why the patients and the relatives are not openly seeking treatment. Here are some myths mentioned in a book (11): Mental health conditions are very rare; people experiencing mental distress are different from normal people and less able to participate in everyday life; people with mental health conditions never recover; people with mental health conditions are violent and unpredictable; people with psychotic conditions, like schizophrenia, constantly experience severe symptoms like hallucinations and delusions.

Most people in Nigerian believe (12) that, mental illness is the result of afflictions caused by supernatural forces. Due to this perceived causes for the illness, the traditional medical practitioners and religious healers are the sole individuals to help the patients getting relief from the illness.

Many people tend to hide their maladaptive behaviors, emotional illnesses or psychological distress that requires modern mental health treatments. For instance, in the United Kingdom, around, 60- 70% of persons who experience clinically significant mental health problems have not been received any interventions (13). In Canada, only 30% of people with mental health problems ever seek help and many delay seeking help until their condition becomes very severe (14). Different literatures also indicate gender differences in help-seeking behavior among people with mental illness. Generally, females are more likely to seek help for their illness than males do (15). In contradiction, another study by Boyd in rural Australia indicated that around 55.7% of participants reported that they would seek help if they suffered from mental health problems and gender differences were observed, such that males had higher preference indication for seeking help from psychologists than females do (16). Attribution of mental illness to supernatural power is very common in different parts of the world. In Papua New Guinea in the South Pacific, devil spirits and supernatural forces are believed to be caused mental illness when an individual or a group has breaks social taboos and norms or disobeying culturally expected obligations of the society (17). The majority of people who have mental illness in Malaysia attributed the illnesses to supernatural agents such as witchcraft and possession by evil spirits (18). The same traditional beliefs are manifested in the Ethiopian people (19). The supernatural powers are assumed to affect the state of

individuals' mind are widespread in all ethnic or religious groups in Ethiopia.

More than 21 (84%) of participants in a study (20) attributed the mental illness to the supernatural agents like, curs when somebody violates the religious principles specially the one who violates the God's commandments and other social taboos, supposed to affect by the mental illnesses. They also consider mental illness may be caused by devil practices of individuals who are missionaries of devil spirits. They assume also as some persons have special abilities to harm others using their malicious power gained from devil spirits. Most of the participants in the holy water also believed that, mental illness may be caused by when individuals move and work out of the proper time allowed to someone by that particular culture. In those particular societal beliefs, the mid day from around 7-8 pm and mid night from 6-9 am is the time when devils mostly move from place to place. At these particular periods, devils may harm the mental health of individuals who are found in the inappropriate time and place. "God gives men the day to work in and have pleasure; the night belongs to the devils!!" This is the idea taken from one participant during the interview session. In addition to the above attributed causes of mental illnesses, some participants of the study also perceived mental illness as the result of when somebody walks around garbage dumps, ashes, walking along river banks and forests as well as walking around tombs. These particular places are considered as the potential areas to found devils that may affect the mental health of individuals. There are certain social classes that are assumed to have special ability to harm the mental health of others. These marginalized social classes suspected of possessing the evil eyes or locally called "Buda". Mainly these social classes are the members of the artisan classes like, the blacksmiths, goldsmiths, pottery makers and weavers. Such kinds of social classes in that particular place consider as they have special abilities to harm the mental health of others. This kind of special ability is presumed to be transferred from parent to children or hereditary. Furthermore, in that particular place there are some individuals who seem religious men but really they are not religious. They specialize by the orthodox religious institutions to harm others. These individuals may harm others using their religious abilities on those who envy provoking persons. The envy of the religious persons "Debtera" may be provoked by the wealth of the affected persons, the religious person may be also jealousy at the good marriage relationship of the affected person he/she has with his/her wife or husband. The other reason is, the envy of the religious men may be provoked due to the attractive physical appearance of the affected person. The persons who have malicious or magical power are different from the previously explained the so called "Debtera" or religious but not really religious men. The "Debter" is gained his special ability through religious education and training whereas, the "Tenquai" or magicians' ability is gained from the unknown.

In a study (21), when participants were asked what name was given to someone who had severe mental disturbance, they unanimously agreed on one name, marata [the BoranaOromo word for mad which is slightly derogatory]. Several reasons were given for a person to become marata Traditional beliefs dominated the expressed conceptualizations of mental illness. But, interestingly, there were several biological and psychosocial factors mentioned as causing marata. The majority of participants spoke of the importance of supernatural influences in causing severe mental disturbance.

Bewitchment, witchcraft and possession by evil spirits were all reported to be causes of mental disturbance. The concept of bewitchment was particularly related to the evil deeds of others, in order to retaliate to an offence or misdeed. According to the participants, when someone is bewitched, it not only makes the person develop severe mental disturbance, it also causes property loss. And the mental illness could also be transmitted to other people related with the person who is affected. Severe mental disturbance was believed to be caused by god as reported by one of the participants. Madness is first caused by Waqa[God]. Many participants reported that exposure to wind before a woman becomes clean from the blood after child birth to be a reason for attack by evil spirits. Many participants reported that exposure to wind before a woman becomes clean from the blood after child birth to be a reason for attack by evil spirits. Many participants across the group meetings mentioned malaria (a tropical infectious disease) as an important cause of mental disturbance, but they distinguished mental disturbance caused by malaria, which they considered to be a curable condition, from other forms of worry and madness, generally considered a severe and non-curable condition. Another important distinction emerging from the discussions was between so-called true madness and worry. According to their description, worry was considered to be more related to psychosocial stressors as a result of loss, such as death of loved ones, loss of property and such events.

CONCLUSION

The healthcare professionals should take proper interventions to overcome the mental disorders in population. There should be psychiatric clinics in the centres. Family members should take care of mentally sick people at home. The associated morbidities of mentally sick people should be reduced and managed.

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