

Mental Health Stigma

Problem, Solution, Barriers Paper

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Problem

If someone is diagnosed with a serious physical illness, such as cancer, would they contemplate for months whether they should see a doctor? Would they be afraid of what their friends and family would think if they decided to seek medical help? Of course not! But what if they started to feel sad all the time or even started to have suicidal thoughts? Would they tell anyone or seek treatment? Unfortunately, thousands of people every year in the United States forgo the treatment they need. 1 in 5 adults in the United States have a mental health condition, yet only 56 percent receive care (“The State of Mental Health,” 2017), and stigma, according to a recent study in the journal *Psychological Medicine*, is one of the top reasons people do not seek medical care (Clement et al., 2014). Mental health is an epidemic in this country and has far-reaching consequences if it is not treated. Stigma is a major and widespread factor that prevents people from getting help and needs to be better addressed to help solve this crisis.

Attitudes around mental health are alarming. A study done by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration of young adults between the ages of 18 and 24, revealed that around 26.9 percent believe that a person with mental illness can eventually recover. They also found that 24 percent believe that a person with a mental illness is dangerous and 38.9 percent believe he or she is unpredictable (“Attitudes and Discrimination,” n.d.). Mental illness is very misunderstood in the United States, and it is unfortunate that some people have certain beliefs and that they react the way they do because many people can recover and do live normal lives with treatment. In fact, there are many highly-educated and accomplished people in academia, law, medicine and other fields who have struggled with serious mental illnesses such

as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depression and borderline personality disorder, but are high-functioning and highly regarded by their peers. Some have written award-winning books and started large advocacy groups (Jones, 2015). People are capable of tremendous things, despite their struggles, and it is important for our country to erase stigma to help people achieve all that they can. There is so much unlocked potential that could benefit the United States in so many positive ways if people could overcome the hurdle of seeking mental health services.

In their study, Clement et al. (2014) found that the main types of stigma people face included the stigma associated with using mental health services and shame or embarrassment. Other barriers included fear of disclosing their mental condition, concerns about confidentiality, wanting to handle their problems on their own, and not believing they need help. Many have or are afraid to lose their jobs because of mental health conditions, even powerful figures. In 1972, vice president candidate Senator Thomas F. Eagleton was forced off the ticket when the Democratic Party learned that he had been hospitalized for depression and undergone electroshock treatment 10 years previously. Tragically, Clinton's Deputy White House Counsel Vince Foster even died by suicide in 1993 when he did not seek psychiatric treatment for his depression because he was afraid he would lose his White House security clearance if he did (Jones, 2015).

Unfortunate as it is, stigma and attitudes about mental illness are not so surprising as the media often paints a negative picture. In a literature review of scientific articles published from 1957 to 2010 of negative expressions of mental illness in the mass media, they found that there were far more negative descriptions than positive descriptions of mental illness (Colavito, Ferrari, Pingani, Rigatelli, & Vinci, 2012). When the media portrays mental illness in a negative

way, people, especially those who have very little exposure with mental illness, will have a very skewed view. It's essential that we try to change this in the U.S.

This problem is widespread across many groups of people. However, Clement et al. (2014) found that the people most affected by the stigma were young people, men, minorities, people in the military and even those working in the health field. Young people especially are a population important to address. According to data from the 2014 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, only one-third of young adults aged 18 to 25 with any mental illness received any treatment and are less likely to receive mental health services than any other age group ("One-third of Young Adults," 2016). This issue is evident on college campuses. In a study published in *Social Science and Medicine*, which examined data from 2009-15 and included 62,756 students from 75 institutions, they found that on college campuses where there is a higher stigma toward mental health treatment, there is less treatment-seeking behavior among students. They found that school-level stigma is negatively associated with self-reports of suicidal ideation and self-injury. It is also negatively associated with medication use, counseling and therapy visits, and to a lesser degree, informal support (Wolf, 2018). This stigma is damaging because they are the ones most susceptible to mental illness. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, 75 percent of mental health conditions begin by age 24 ("Mental Health by the Numbers," n.d.). During such critical time in their lives, students need all the help they can get, however stigma is preventing many from doing so. Young people are the future of this country, and we must do everything we possibly can to help them succeed to solve some of the biggest issues of today.

If left untreated, mental illness can severely impact many areas of peoples' lives, on both an individual and societal level. Untreated mental illness can lead to things such as homelessness, incarceration and episodes of violence. According to the Substance Abuse and

Mental Health Services Administration, 20 to 25 percent of the homeless population in the U.S. suffers from some form of severe mental illness and mental illness was the third largest cause of homelessness for single adults (“Mental Illness and Homelessness,” 2009). Approximately 20 percent of inmates in jails and 15 percent of inmates in state prisons have a serious mental illness, according to the Treatment Advocacy Center, totaling nearly 356,000 people (Young, 2016). The Treatment Advocacy Center reports that approximately 1,000 homicides among the estimated 20,000 total homicides in the U.S. are committed each year by people with untreated schizophrenia and bipolar disorder (Young, 2016). Suicide is also a huge concern when mental health is not treated. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2015 suicide was the tenth leading cause of death overall in the United States, claiming more than 44,000 lives. And from 1999 to 2014, the total suicide rate has increased 24 percent (“Suicide,” 2017). Untreated mental illness also has damaging economic impacts. According to research by Harvard University Medical School, untreated mental illnesses costs the U.S. at least \$105 billion in lost productivity annually (Giang, 2012). Stigma must be erased so people will be more motivated to seek mental health treatment, which will prevent, or at least limit, these negative consequences.

In an age where mental health is a huge crisis in the U.S., stigma significantly worsens the problem. Because of fear, embarrassment or shame, many people neglect getting the help they need to live healthy lives or even to survive. It is incredibly important to address this issue before more serious consequences develop. Stigma is one of the major steps to tackle this crisis. Even if people have access to the care they need and the money for services, they first must feel comfortable asking for help.

Solution

I want my audience to participate in the annual 5K NAMI (“National Association on Mental Illness,” n.d.) walk in Central Ohio. Participants can build teams and raise money for local, regional and state NAMI organizations. As well, they can promote awareness of mental health on social media through sharing about their participation in the NAMI walk. On June 9, there will be a NAMI Walk in Franklin County at Wolfe Park in Columbus. Check in is at 9:30 am and the start time is 10:30 am. To register, visit the NAMIWalks website and search for your region (“NAMIWalks Franklin County,” n.d.). I chose NAMI for my nonprofit because it is the nation’s largest grassroots mental health organization and is highly reputable. According to Charity Navigator, America’s largest independent charity evaluator, NAMI is the highest rated mental health organization in the country. 81 percent of its revenue goes toward its programs, with only slight amounts going toward administration and fundraising (“NAMI,” 2016). As well, NAMI offers expansive programs and has been successful in changing the direction of mental health in the U.S. Through gifts and contributions, NAMI provides thousands of communities across the country with education and support they need. NAMI shapes national public policy for people with mental illness and their families. They also offer professional helplines and lead public awareness events and activities, including Mental Illness Awareness Week and NAMI walks, which helps fight stigma and encourage understanding (“About NAMI,” n.d.). Moreover, by participating in this walk, more awareness will be shared about mental health through social media, and the money raised will help fund all these programs that help fight stigma and provide resources to help people build better lives.

One specific program the race would fund that helps fight stigma is NAMI Ending the Silence, which is an in-school presentation designed to teach middle and high school students

about the signs and symptoms of mental illness, how to recognize the early warning signs and the importance of acknowledging those warning signs. The presentations include a lead presenter who shares an informative presentation and a young adult with a mental health condition who shares their journey of recovery (“NAMI ending the silence,” n.d.). Research done by NAMI concluded that NAMI Ending the Silence provided a “robust” effecting in changing high school and middle school students’ “knowledge and attitudes toward mental health conditions and toward help-seeking” (“Fighting stigma in schools,” n.d.). Starting mental health education in schools can bring in a new generation of people who will be more knowledgeable about and will become advocates for the issues, which will help combat stigma and change the conversation and direction of mental health in the country.

Barriers

One barrier to the audience enacting my solution is that some people may not like to be active and would be uninterested in participating. To help overcome this, I could encourage people to do this as a group. When you are with your friends, time usually passes quickly because you are enjoying spending time together. Also, as a group everyone can be encouraging one another to continue running or walking. Another barrier is that people may not be motivated to raise funds, possibly because they are not excited about the cause or that they feel uncomfortable asking people for money. One way I could overcome this would be to offer an incentive. The person who raised the most money for example could get a gift card. One more barrier is that people may be physically unable to participate in the race. To overcome this, the person unable to run could ask a friend or family member to walk or run in their honor. They could still raise money and spread awareness, however on the day of the race someone would take their place.

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