



Mental Health Stigma and Help Seeking Behaviour: A course of action on Mental Health Stigma

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Abstract

Mental health is a domain that focuses mainly on emotional, psychological and social wellbeing aspects. According to the American Psychological Association, Stigma is described as “the negative social attitude attached to a characteristic of an individual that may be regarded as a mental, physical, or social deficiency” (2018). In the case of mental health stigmas, these negative attitudes are held about all people who suffer from mental health conditions. There is a sense of “social disapproval” (APA, 2018) that follows mental health stigmas because mental health problems are typically associated with degrading terms such as ‘crazy’, ‘slow’,

‘retarded’ or ‘abnormal’ The second theme explored in this paper is ‘Help Seeking Behaviour’ which is described by the American Psychological Association as “searching for or requesting help from others via formal or informal mechanisms, such as through mental health services” (2018). However, help seeking behaviour doesn’t just involve seeking professional help but can also include confiding in a friend or family member about mental challenges that are being faced. Studies have shown that men often face greater stigma surrounding mental health issues, leading them to be less likely to seek help compared to women. This can be attributed to various factors, including traditional notions of masculinity that discourage vulnerability and emotional expression. Understanding gender differences and the stigma surrounding help-seeking behaviours is crucial in addressing disparities in mental health outcomes and ensuring equitable access to support services.

Differences in Gender Perceptions

In the realm of mental health, gender plays a significant role in how individuals perceive and address their emotional well-being. While both men and women experience mental health challenges, societal norms and expectations often influence how they approach seeking help and coping with stigma. Understanding these gender differences is crucial for developing effective strategies to support individuals in managing their mental health.

Social Stigma and Gender Norms

Society often perpetuates different expectations and norms regarding emotional expression for men and women. Men are frequently encouraged to be stoic and strong, which can lead to reluctance in acknowledging and addressing mental health concerns. Conversely, women may face stigma related to being perceived as overly emotional or irrational, potentially leading to different barriers in seeking help. For example, after giving birth and your emotions are overly irrational due to change of hormones and you begin to show symptoms of postpartum depression, but due to some barriers, the individual is unable to seek help but have to endure it for the sake of not being labelled weak and unable to look after their child.

Help-Seeking Behaviour's

Research suggests that women are more likely to seek professional help for mental health issues compared to men. This could be attributed to various factors, including greater social support networks and more openness to discussing emotions (Vogel et al. 2014). In contrast, men may be more inclined to self-manage their mental health or seek support from informal sources, such as friends or family, due to concerns about appearing vulnerable or

weak. Indeed, male friends and family members may be particularly unlikely to refer men to seek mental health services, as it means going against the traditional male gender role proscription of talking to other men about emotional issues. The study is aimed to explore how men and women's experiences of gender role conflict may be associated with an increased endorsement of stigmatization around mental health concerns and, subsequently, a decreased willingness to refer friends and family members experiencing a mental health concern to seek help.

Impact of Stigma

Stigma surrounding mental health can have detrimental effects on both men and women. However, men may be particularly affected by stigma due to societal pressure to conform to traditional masculine ideals. Fear of being judged or ridiculed may prevent men from seeking help until their symptoms become severe, leading to delayed intervention and potentially more severe mental health outcomes. To add on, Men with greater gender role conflict (GRC) tend to exhibit a variety of body image concerns, including a drive for muscularity (DM). In accordance with the theory of planned behaviour (TPB), men with higher levels of GRC also report negative attitudes and a lack of intentions to seek help for problems.

Cultural and Intersectional Considerations

It's essential to recognize that gender norms and attitudes toward mental health vary across cultures and communities. Intersectional factors, such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status, can further shape individuals' experiences of stigma and help-seeking behaviours. Culture becomes a barrier mostly for men to seek help as it does not align with their cultural beliefs. For women, it mostly has to be the case of them being emotionally weak which leads them to being depressed and find it quite easy to become vulnerable and communicate with people around them and voice out their concerns. For example, in the African community men who go through mental health problems face discrimination from society and family and are deemed incapable. However, women who go through mental health problems face support and are considered to be strong after overcoming the mental health problem because they are labelled as weak.

In addition, socioeconomic disparities can contribute to perceptions of mental illness as a sign of personal weakness or failure, particularly among men. In some cases, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may face greater stigma and discrimination due to negative

stereotypes associated with poverty and mental health. Women from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds may experience intersecting forms of stigma related to gender roles, economic status, and mental health. This intersectionality can compound the barriers they face in seeking help and receiving adequate support.

Similarities in Gender

On the other hand, there is extensive research that goes to show that there are gender related differences when it comes to the views people have about mental health and help seeking behaviour, there also exists some similarities.

Perceptions according to Cherry (2023) “are shaped by our prior experiences, our interests, and how carefully we process information. This can cause one person to perceive the exact same person or situation differently than someone else.” This explains why there can exist both similarities and differences when it comes to the views that both genders have when it comes to mental health stigmas and help seeking behaviour. Perceptions are heavily influenced by the environmental contexts that people grow up in such as their cultures, ethnic groups and communities. This point is highlighted in a paper written by Kastanakis and Voyer (2014) in their paper entitled “The effect of culture on perception and cognition” where the researchers concluded that perception and cognition are influenced by culture, which subsequently has significant implications on behaviour and provides a better understanding of cultural variations in behaviour.

The study can therefore infer that people’s perceptions, beliefs and all the stigmas they may have about mental health can influence their willingness to engage in help seeking behaviour.

Socialisation and Mental health

Socialization is “the process by which individuals acquire social skills, beliefs, values, and behaviour’s necessary to function effectively in society or in a particular group.” according to the American Psychological Association (2018). Various cultures have different customs and practices regarding how men and women should express and deal with mental health issues. In a study on ‘Understanding and Addressing Mental Health Stigma Across Cultures for Improving Psychiatric Care’ by Ahad et al. (2023), the reviewed research explained that stigma around mental illness can take various forms depending on cultural views, values, and beliefs. This proves that cultural expectations can influence behaviour thus creating similarities in how people handle it. Culture Bound Syndrome is a condition in which there is a “pattern of

mental illness” or symptoms which are exclusive to a specific cultural denomination (APA, 2023). These kinds of cultural variations in beliefs and perspectives can lead to certain stereotypes towards mental health that become collective beliefs regardless of gender.

Coping Strategies and Mental Health

When it comes to help seeking behaviour approaches to coping strategies used can be the same. While the exact coping mechanisms may differ from person to person, both men and women may use coping tactics that discourage or delay seeking help. Avoidance, denial, or self-medication with drugs or alcohol, for instance, might ease symptoms temporarily but eventually make mental health problems worse. These coping mechanisms can be used by people of either gender to manage symptoms without seeing a doctor which can unfortunately exacerbate these symptoms in the long run. Research by Kuhlberg et al. (2016) has shown how both sexes may use maladaptive coping mechanisms to avoid or put off getting help. This avoidant behaviour was shown to be frequent among people of both genders and were linked to greater symptom severity and lower chance of seeking professional help. This therefore shows a similarity in the perspectives about help seeking behaviour between men and women

Clement et al. (2015) examined the obstacles that both men and women with common mental health illnesses had when trying to get care. Common concerns regarding the efficiency and availability of mental health services were voiced by both sexes, who highlighted issues including lengthy wait periods, few available treatment alternatives, and the shame they felt came with seeking professional assistance. This therefore exists as another shared perspective when it comes to help seeking and mental health stigma

Course of Action to Eradicate Mental Health Stigma

Reducing mental health stigma in gender differences requires multifaceted approaches. Understanding and addressing the unique challenges each gender faces is crucial, and these include:

Gender-Specific Outreach

Tailoring campaigns to address the unique mental health challenges faced by different genders. For example, campaigns might focus on issues like postpartum depression in women or the stigma surrounding help-seeking behaviour's in men

Highlighting Diversity

Showcasing diverse experiences within genders to challenge stereotypes and encourage inclusivity. For instance, campaigns can feature individuals from various cultural backgrounds, sexual orientations, and gender identities sharing their mental health journeys

Empowerment and Resilience

Empowering individuals to recognize their own mental health needs and seek help when necessary. This could involve providing resources such as helplines, online support groups, or self-care strategies tailored to specific gender-related stressors.

Debunking Myths

Addressing common misconceptions about gender and mental health, such as the idea that men should always be stoic and strong, or that women are more emotionally unstable. Educational campaigns can provide facts and statistics to challenge these harmful beliefs.

Promoting Open Dialogue

Encouraging open conversations about mental health within families, communities, and workplaces. This can help normalize discussions about emotions and mental well-being, making it easier for individuals of all genders to seek support without fear of judgment.

Training and Education

Providing training for healthcare professionals, educators, and community leaders on how to recognize and address gender-specific mental health issues. This can improve access to gender-sensitive care and support services.

By implementing these strategies and others, educational campaigns can contribute to a more inclusive and understanding society where individuals of all genders feel supported in their mental health journey. Conversations about mental health in gender differences provide an opportunity to educate communities about the prevalence and impact of mental illness. This can lead to increased awareness, empathy, and support for those struggling with their mental health.

Normalizing Help-Seeking Behaviour's

When individuals feel comfortable discussing their mental health struggles openly, it reduces the fear of judgment and encourages others to seek help when needed. For example, support groups specifically for men can provide a space for discussing emotions and mental health challenges without feeling emasculated

Sharing Personal Stories

When individuals share their experiences with mental health issues, it humanizes the struggle and demonstrates that anyone can be affected regardless of gender. For instance, public figures or celebrities openly discussing their battles with mental illness can inspire others to seek help and reduce feelings of shame or isolation.

Promoting Inclusivity

Destigmatizing conversations ensure that individuals of all genders feel seen and supported in their mental health journey. By acknowledging and addressing the unique challenges faced by different genders, it promotes inclusivity and reduces the marginalization of certain groups. For instance, creating LGBTQ+-inclusive mental health resources acknowledges the intersectionality of gender and sexual orientation in mental health experiences.

Collaboration and Coordination

Gender-sensitive mental health services collaborate with other healthcare providers, community organizations, and social services to provide holistic care. This may involve referrals to specialized services, such as reproductive health care for women or vocational support for men, to address the intersecting needs of individuals. By taking a comprehensive approach to mental health care, services can reduce stigma and improve outcomes for individuals across genders.

Advocating for Policy Changes

Research findings can inform advocacy efforts aimed at promoting policy changes that address gender disparities in mental health care access and treatment. By providing evidence of these disparities, researchers and advocates can push for policy reforms that reduce stigma and improve access to gender-sensitive mental health services.

Conclusion

By recognizing and addressing the unique challenges faced by men and women in navigating mental health stigma and seeking help, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for everyone to prioritize their mental well-being.

There are both similarities and differences in mental health stigmas.

Understanding the similarities in men's and women's perceptions regarding help seeking behaviour's and mental health stigma might help mental health providers and policymakers create focused treatments and programs that break down barriers and promote

early intervention for both sexes. Encouraging inclusive, stigma-free environments that put accessibility, cost, and efficacy first can enable people of all genders to get the mental health care they require all while removing the barriers they may be using as excuses to not get help

However, while there are some similarities in mental health stigma and help-seeking behaviours across genders, the differences often outweigh these similarities. Research consistently indicates that societal norms, cultural expectations, and gender roles significantly shape how men and women perceive mental health issues and seek help for them. Understanding and addressing these gender-specific barriers is also crucial in developing effective interventions and support systems to promote mental health and well-being for all individuals, regardless of gender.

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