

Review

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Review

The Impact of Stigma on the Quality of Life in Individuals with Mental Health Disorders

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Abstract: Mental health stigma is a significant barrier that directly affects the quality of life of individuals suffering from mental health disorders. This phenomenon has a profound impact, harming how individuals perceive themselves and how society treats them. Addressing and eliminating this stigma is crucial for improving the quality of life for those affected by these disorders. Our study explores the importance of addressing stigmatization and how societal attitude changes can lead to improvements in the lives of individuals facing these challenges. A comprehensive approach, including education and public awareness, can help reduce the negative impacts of stigma.

Keywords: mental health; stigma; quality of life; public stigma; self-stigma; social isolation; mental health disorders; treatment-seeking; discrimination; self-esteem; recovery; public awareness; mental health awareness campaigns; mental health interventions



Graphical Abstract (Generated using <https://chatgpt.com/>).

Introduction

Mental health disorders are one of the most significant public health issues, but individuals suffering from these conditions often face an additional obstacle – stigma. This stigma can manifest in two forms: public stigma, referring to societal attitudes and discrimination, and self-stigma, where individuals internalize negative societal views. Such stigma has a major impact on the quality of life by hindering those affected from seeking treatment and engaging in social activities. This study examines how both forms of stigma can diminish the quality of life for individuals with mental health disorders and why it is crucial to take this issue seriously (Link & Phelan, 2001).

The impact of stigma is undeniable, as it creates barriers that not only affect the psychological well-being of individuals but also their ability to lead fulfilling lives. Stigmatization perpetuates the belief that individuals with mental health disorders are different or inferior, which fosters discrimination and exclusion. Public stigma, when it is widespread in society, can make individuals feel marginalized, less likely to participate in normal life activities, and reluctant to pursue treatment. On the other hand, self-stigma is a destructive form where individuals internalize these societal beliefs, leading to feelings of inadequacy and isolation. Such perceptions diminish their overall quality of life and well-being, making it even harder to break the cycle of negative feelings and limited social participation.

Stigma, whether internalized or imposed by society, affects a person's self-esteem and well-being. For many individuals suffering from mental health disorders, the fear of being judged or discriminated against often discourages them from seeking help. This not only leads to social isolation but can also exacerbate the mental health condition itself, further diminishing the individual's quality of life (Vogel et al., 2006).

The fear of stigma often acts as a significant deterrent for individuals seeking help or pursuing treatments. Many people suffering from mental health disorders may view themselves as weak or flawed due to the negative views that society holds about mental illness. This perceived weakness discourages individuals from accessing the care they need, as they feel it may lead to further judgment or exclusion. The result is that untreated or poorly managed mental health conditions can worsen, contributing to a greater decline in the individual's quality of life. As these individuals continue to withdraw from social engagements and avoid seeking professional help, they risk falling into a pattern of isolation and deteriorating health, which only reinforces the cycle of stigma.

As individuals internalize the stigma associated with their condition, it can result in a negative self-image and feelings of shame, which further hinder their recovery. This internalized stigma becomes an emotional burden that impedes their ability to seek social support, adhere to treatment plans, or engage in meaningful life activities. Often, the stigma also leads to a reduction in personal motivation and a sense of hopelessness about their condition, thereby creating a vicious cycle of deteriorating mental health and increasing social withdrawal (Corrigan et al., 2006).

Internalized stigma is particularly damaging, as it directly affects the individual's self-worth and belief in their own capacity for recovery. When individuals accept the negative stereotypes imposed by society, they may begin to believe that they are not deserving of help or that their condition is insurmountable. This belief can result in feelings of shame, guilt, and helplessness, which in turn can reduce the likelihood of seeking professional help or engaging in therapeutic activities. Without support or intervention, the mental health condition can worsen, leading to a further deterioration in quality of life. Addressing and reducing internalized stigma is therefore a key factor in improving mental health outcomes and overall well-being for individuals facing mental health challenges.

Moreover, societal stigma, especially in cultures where mental health issues are heavily stigmatized, can create significant barriers to treatment. Many people with mental health disorders fear the social consequences of seeking help, such as rejection from family, friends, or colleagues. This fear of social exclusion leads to delays in seeking professional help, with many individuals turning to self-help or avoidance strategies, which are often less effective and could even worsen their condition over time (Pescosolido et al., 2008).

Cultural and societal attitudes toward mental health often contribute significantly to the stigma faced by individuals. In societies where mental health is not openly discussed or is viewed as a personal weakness, individuals with mental health disorders may feel reluctant to acknowledge their struggles. This can lead to a long delay in seeking professional help, which can have devastating effects on their health. Additionally, the fear of social rejection from loved ones, coworkers, or community members may discourage individuals from pursuing treatment, leaving them to cope with their condition on their own. As a result, many individuals may resort to unhealthy coping mechanisms or avoidance strategies, which only exacerbate the problem and further reduce their quality of life.

It is therefore essential to understand the profound and multifaceted impact of stigma on the quality of life of those living with mental health disorders. Addressing stigma should be a priority in public health initiatives to reduce its damaging effects.

By implementing education and awareness campaigns, providing support networks, and advocating for the rights and dignity of those with mental health conditions, we can begin to reduce the harmful effects of stigma. Increased public awareness about mental health disorders can encourage individuals to seek help without fear of judgment, allowing them to receive treatment early and improve their overall well-being. Additionally, reducing stigma can foster more inclusive communities where people with mental health disorders are treated with empathy and respect, rather than discrimination. Ultimately, combating stigma is not only essential for improving the lives of individuals with mental health conditions but is also crucial for promoting better mental health for society as a whole.

Methodology

To analyze the impact of stigmatization on the quality of life, studies from well-known journals and academic sources were reviewed. The research focused on literature that addresses the impact of stigmatization on individuals with mental health disorders, including conditions like depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia. The studies reviewed provide a comprehensive perspective on various aspects of stigma and its effects on the lives of those dealing with mental health conditions (Goffman, 1963). This analytical process helps identify opportunities for improving interventions and policies to better combat stigma.

Goffman's seminal work on stigma explored how societal attitudes towards individuals with mental health disorders can lead to the formation of "spoiled identities," which can significantly affect their self-esteem and social relationships. According to Goffman (1963), those who are labeled as mentally ill may face discrimination, exclusion, and prejudice. These stigmatizing attitudes prevent individuals from fully participating in society, diminishing their overall quality of life. In his analysis, Goffman highlights the pervasive impact of stigma on both the individual's internal sense of worth and their external social interactions. This theory of "spoiled identity" has been foundational in understanding the deep psychological and social consequences of stigmatization, offering insight into why individuals often avoid seeking help or treatment.

Several studies have highlighted the different dimensions of stigma and the specific challenges they pose for individuals with mental health disorders. These studies also explore the social and psychological consequences that stigma has on the lives of affected individuals (Pescosolido et al., 2013).

The work of Pescosolido et al. (2013) expands on this understanding by illustrating how stigma manifests not only as discrimination from others but also as self-stigma, where individuals internalize these negative views. This internalization can significantly impair an individual's self-esteem, making them less likely to seek treatment. Pescosolido's study underscores the complex relationship between mental health stigma and social rejection, emphasizing that individuals may feel ashamed of their condition, further reinforcing the negative societal views they encounter. This double burden of societal stigma and self-stigma can lead to a decreased sense of personal worth, contributing to social withdrawal and increased vulnerability to worsening mental health conditions.

The psychological toll of stigma is also explored in various studies, which indicate that individuals experiencing mental health stigma are at a higher risk of developing depression, anxiety, and other psychological difficulties. This exacerbates their initial condition, making it harder to break free from the cycle of stigmatization and poor mental health. The fear of being judged often prevents individuals from discussing their struggles or seeking necessary help, resulting in untreated conditions that can lead to further deterioration in their quality of life.

These findings highlight the crucial need for intervention strategies that address both public and self-stigma. By fostering an environment where mental health is discussed openly and with understanding, society can reduce the harmful effects of stigma. Social support, coupled with increased education about mental health, can play a pivotal role in alleviating these barriers to treatment and improving the overall well-being of those affected.

Results

Researchers have shown that both external stigma (public stigma) and internalized stigma (self-stigma) have a significant negative impact on the quality of life of individuals suffering from mental health disorders. Public stigma often leads to discrimination and social exclusion, making it difficult for individuals to seek treatment or participate in social activities. This directly impacts their quality of life, leaving them feeling isolated and ashamed. Those who experience this form of stigma often feel worthless and are less likely to seek help (Ritsher & Phelan, 2004).

Ritsher and Phelan's study (2004) reveals how societal attitudes towards mental health conditions contribute to public stigma, leading to social isolation and discrimination. They argue that individuals labeled with a mental illness may experience a sense of devaluation, affecting their ability to function in various aspects of life. This social rejection can deter individuals from seeking necessary support, as they fear judgment or discrimination. The sense of isolation caused by public stigma leads to a diminished sense of belonging and can lead to worsening mental health outcomes. This study highlights how stigma reduces the chances of recovery, as individuals avoid seeking treatment to evade the social consequences associated with their condition.

Self-stigma is also detrimental, as individuals who internalize stigma feel inadequate and unacceptable to society. This has direct consequences on mental health and can prevent individuals from seeking professional help. Many individuals affected by this form of stigma struggle to believe that treatment will be effective and may lose hope for recovery. They may feel hopeless and withdraw further from society (Vogel et al., 2006).

Vogel et al. (2006) examined the relationship between self-stigma and mental health outcomes, highlighting the psychological consequences of internalizing societal stigma. Their research found that individuals who internalize stigma feel inadequate, which leads to an avoidance of treatment. Internalized stigma often results in feelings of shame, guilt, and isolation, making it harder for individuals to reach out for support. This lack of self-compassion, combined with negative self-judgments, reinforces a cycle of hopelessness. When individuals perceive themselves as unworthy of help, they are less likely to engage in treatment, exacerbating their mental health challenges.

The studies examined demonstrate that stigma, whether public or self-imposed, plays a critical role in reducing the overall quality of life for those with mental health conditions. In some cases, this stigma leads to a worsening of the condition, as individuals are less likely to seek support or engage in treatment due to fear of judgment or discrimination (Clement et al., 2015).

Clement et al. (2015) emphasize the impact of stigma on mental health treatment outcomes, noting that individuals who experience stigma are less likely to seek help due to fear of being judged or discriminated against. This, in turn, can delay or prevent recovery, leading to a prolonged suffering of mental health issues. Their study also highlights the importance of reducing stigma in healthcare settings, as healthcare providers' attitudes toward mental health can either exacerbate or alleviate the stigma that patients experience. By creating an open, nonjudgmental environment in healthcare settings, individuals are more likely to seek treatment and engage in their recovery process, improving their overall quality of life.

These findings underscore the need for a multifaceted approach to addressing stigma, which includes not only educating the public but also creating supportive environments for individuals suffering from mental health disorders. Understanding the damaging effects of stigma is a crucial step in reducing its impact and improving mental health outcomes for affected individuals.

Discussion

The studies reviewed consistently emphasize that stigma is a key factor preventing individuals with mental health disorders from seeking the help they need. Both public and self-stigma have significant consequences for quality of life, including the loss of opportunities for social engagement and negative impacts on mental health. Many individuals who experience stigmatization are prone to withdrawing from society and not seeking professional help, which risks further deterioration of their mental health (Schnittker, 2008).

Schnittker's (2008) research highlights the powerful role stigma plays in discouraging individuals from seeking help, contributing to a continuous cycle of isolation. He found that individuals with mental health disorders often internalize the negative societal views about their condition, which exacerbates feelings of shame and inadequacy. This makes them less likely to reach out for support, further isolating them and worsening their symptoms. The reluctance to seek help due to fear of judgment or discrimination increases the severity of mental health conditions and leads to a diminished quality of life.

Moreover, the experience of stigma can create a negative cycle that makes individuals feel isolated, worthless, and unable to change their situation. This is not just a psychological issue but also affects physical health, as higher stress levels can lead to other health problems. For this reason, addressing stigma is essential for improving the quality of life and providing individuals with better opportunities for recovery and social integration (Evans-Lacko et al., 2012).

Evans-Lacko et al. (2012) explored the correlation between stigma and stress, illustrating how the fear of being stigmatized leads to increased stress levels, which in turn affects physical health. The stress caused by social rejection and discrimination can result in negative physiological outcomes, such as a weakened immune system and increased vulnerability to chronic diseases. Addressing stigma is crucial not only for mental health improvement but also for overall physical well-being, as it can mitigate stress levels and promote recovery. Reducing stigma encourages individuals to seek treatment, preventing the deterioration of both mental and physical health.

Interventions that target stigma reduction are crucial for facilitating better access to care and support for individuals with mental health disorders. These efforts should focus on public education, raising awareness, and promoting positive attitudes toward those affected by mental illness. Changing societal views and providing supportive environments can reduce the stigma individuals face and, in turn, enhance their mental and physical well-being (Thornicroft et al., 2016).

Thornicroft et al. (2016) emphasize the importance of stigma-reducing interventions in improving access to mental health services. Their study found that public education campaigns designed to challenge negative stereotypes about mental illness can significantly reduce stigma and encourage individuals to seek help. The creation of supportive environments, whether in healthcare settings, schools, or workplaces, can help individuals feel more accepted and understood. These efforts are essential for improving the mental and physical health outcomes of individuals with mental health disorders, as they create safe spaces where people feel empowered to seek the care they need without fear of discrimination.

The research underscores the necessity of addressing both public and self-stigma through targeted interventions that aim to reshape societal attitudes and provide individuals with better opportunities for recovery. By combating stigma, society can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment that promotes the well-being of individuals with mental health disorders, ultimately leading to an improved quality of life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, stigma is a major issue that has a detrimental impact on the quality of life of individuals suffering from mental health disorders. Both public and self-stigma must be addressed with seriousness and eliminated to enable a more inclusive and accepting society for those facing these conditions. This can be achieved through public awareness, education, and inclusive policies that ensure equal access to care and support for all. Only through such an approach can the quality of life and opportunities for recovery be improved for individuals with mental health disorders.

In addition to policy changes, it's essential for communities to embrace individuals with mental health conditions and provide support without judgment. Individuals who feel accepted and understood are more likely to seek help and engage in treatment, ultimately improving their overall well-being. Efforts to break down the societal barriers of stigma must be ongoing and incorporate the voices of those who have lived experience with mental health disorders. This can help foster empathy and reduce the harmful effects of stigma on mental health recovery.

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