Mental Health: Cultural and ethnic stigmas

27th September 2021

Mental illness is of such significant concern that the World Health Organization (WHO) has implemented a global Special Initiative for mental health. While mental health conditions are on the rise, research indicates that most people who have mental health problems still do not seek help. The reasons for this are numerous but one of the main factors is stigma.

Stigma is defined as a mark of disgrace and can make people feel alienated and discriminated against both within their own cultural group and in wider society. Cultural and ethnic mental health stigmas can affect people dramatically.

How culture and ethnic backgrounds affect mental illness

A person’s ethnic and cultural background shapes their beliefs, norms, and values. So it is likely to affect the way they view and treat mental illness. Addressing mental health can be difficult for people of certain backgrounds as it requires talking about things that often go unsaid in their community. In these environments unusual behaviour is interpreted in various ways and can be viewed as a stigma. Often these perceptions are based on cultural beliefs and ways of understanding mental illness. These attitudes are often not talked
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about and can exist within groups without anyone openly acknowledging them.

The prevalence of mental illness is similar across all cultures. However, it is noteworthy that there are significant differences in the expression of mental health issues between cultural and ethnic groups regarding:

- Rates of suicide, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or domestic violence.
- “Culture-bound” syndromes or “folk illnesses”—meaning diseases or conditions that are only recognised within a specific cultural or society e.g., specific sleep disorders and suppressed-anger syndrome.
- A prevalence of specific types of mental illness type such as depression for some groups or phobias in others for example.

A person’s gender can also have more significance in certain cultures than in wider society, and can be a key factor in the likelihood of a diagnosis of a mental health condition.

Negative attitudes within and among different cultures and ethnic groups

Cultural, racial, or ethnic backgrounds have been found to be a factor in the perceptions of mental illness. The following negative attitudes or stigmas have been found to exist within specific cultures and ethnic groups:

- Rating of people with a mental illness from a particular racial/ethnic group as more dangerous compared to the ratings of another racial/ethnic group.
- Increased desire to be separated from an individual with mental illness.
- Increased fear of treatment due to perceptions of unfair treatment in the healthcare setting based on race.
- Reluctance to talk about mental health with healthcare professionals, mental health professional, family members, or even friends.
- Mental illness seen as reflecting poorly on a person’s entire family, diminishing marriage and economic prospects.

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Healthcare professionals may also have implicit racial biases towards certain populations. Medical research suggests that there may be disparities in mental health care across ethnic groups. These biases may cause practitioners to give their patients who are people of colour inferior care and, in so doing, contribute to higher rates of mortality in those who experience severe mental illness.

Making progress

Anti-stigma and mental health awareness campaigns have been instrumental in reducing the shame attached to mental illness. Directing these campaigns towards specific ethnic groups may bring about increased benefits. Continuing to build a racially diverse workforce in the behavioural and mental health profession will also aid in reducing the stigma that individuals may experience in accessing services and treatment.

Stigma related to mental health is a complex issue. If you or a loved one needs support for a mental health concern, do not hesitate to reach out to your health care provider, a mental health professional, or your assistance programme.