



ATTITUDE AND EMPATHY TOWARDS MENTAL ILLNESS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Abstract

Awareness of health issues among college students has gone up in recent years, yet stigma is still a challenge that people face and it is not easy to get rid of. A lot of students consider that they have a positive attitude on the one hand but on the other hand, they still show it by Mental illness is extremely common in the population of college students that is mainly due to the high demands of studies, social relationships, financial issues, and the emotional difficulties that come with the switch from being a child to an adult. During this time of development, students have a no less than perfect skin for the mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and stress-related disorders. Thus, the attitudes and responses of the college student cohort towards mental illness become pivotal as they affect peer interactions, help-seeking behavior, and the overall mental health climate on campus. Positive attitudes and empathy can really help to build understanding and inclusiveness while on the other hand negative attitudes and stigma can lead to discrimination, social isolation, and reluctance to seek help from professionals. This study analyzes the students' attitudes and empathy towards mental illness by referring to the main psychological and sociological theories that explain stigma as well as supportive behaviors. Stigma theory is the main approach taken to analyze how labeling, stereotypes, and prejudice together form negative attitudes towards individuals with mental illness. Contact theory is the second important point in the debate which highlights the necessity of direct and meaningful situations with people suffering from mental health problems in diminishing stigma and fostering acceptance. Besides, the empathy models are in discussion that how cognitive empathy which includes understanding another person's viewpoint and emotional empathy which encompasses feeling another person's feelings and so forth affect students' reactions to mentally ill peers.

Index Terms - Mental illness, college students, attitudes, empathy, stigma, mental health literacy

Introduction

Mental health issues have emerged as the most concern in the global context of public health, one of the major areas being the young adults' section in the educational institutions. The students in higher learning institutions normally experience a period that is marked by significant psychological, social, and academic transitions. The students are required to adapt quickly to the new academic environment by encountering a larger number of academic challenges than before, getting into new social circles, dealing with financial issues, self-identification, and being undecided about future careers. All these factors play a role in students' vulnerability, and if they do not get help, mental health problems may be one of the consequences disorder such as depression, anxiety disorders, stress-related conditions, and others. In recent years, research works have indicated that the problem of mental health among college students is still on the rise; hence, it is placed as a priority issue to be addressed at the level of educators, health practitioners, and policymakers. Mild to moderate depression and anxiety are reported as the most common psychological disorders among college students. The symptoms like constant sadness, loss of interest, worrying too much, having the fear, emotional exhaustion, and being unable to concentrate can make it difficult for students to perform well academically, and this will also affect their quality of life in general. Stress-related disorders, which are often the result of academic pressures, highly competitive environments, and poor time-management skills, are likely to worsen the situation. Mental health issues can have very harmful effects if not dealt with, and these can include academic failure, social withdrawal, drug or alcohol abuse, self-harm, and even suicide in extreme cases. Although counseling services are provided, discussions about men's mental health are becoming increasingly prevalent in the public arena.

Theoretical Framework

The attitudes and the empathy of college students toward mental illness, can be analyzed through the various psychological-theoretical perspectives such as Stigma Theory, Contact Theory, Empathy Theory, and Mental Health Literacy Framework. These theories describe how and through what factors social beliefs, personal experiences, emotional understanding, and knowledge interact and create the perception of mental disorders among students.

Goffman (1963) states in Stigma Theory that the socially prominent view of mental illness is that it is a source of shame and, thus, the patient is subject to labeling, stereotyping, and discrimination. In universities, the stigmas can manifest in the form of avoiding contact with the affected individuals, judging them negatively, and eventually excluding those students who are undergoing mental health issues. The presence of a stigma, in turn, reduces the need for help and cuts peer support; moreover, it increases self-stigma in individuals with mental problems.

Allport's (1954) Contact Theory claims that nothing works better to erase social prejudices and to turn negative attitudes into positive than having people with mental illnesses interacting directly and in a friendly manner with others. If college students are personally introduced to their classmates who have ongoing psychological problems, they will most probably be turned more compassionate and accepting through the process. Nevertheless, the degree of the contact effect is contingent on the quality of the interaction, since in some instances a negative experience can strengthen the stigma.

Davis (1983) in Empathy Theory argues that two types of empathy exist: cognitive empathy (perspective-taking) and affective empathy (emotional concern). If the levels of empathy are higher then the students will be able to empathize with the emotions of their mentally ill peers classmates, thereby being the source of their compassionate and supportive actions. In addition to the previously explained, empathy greatly contributes to fear and social distance being eliminated.

The Mental Health Literacy Framework emphasizes knowledge and consciousness as the fundamental elements that create attitudes. The mental health understanding at the students' level .

Discussion

The literature that has been published until now continually exhibits a very strong and positive connection between empathy and favorable attitudes toward mental illness among college students. Students with higher empathy levels are more likely to consider mental illness as a real health issue rather than attributing it to personal weaknesses, lack of willpower, or character flaws. Empathic students usually present more excellent emotional understanding, less fear, and lesser social distancing, which all lead to more positive and inclusive attitudes toward their classmates who are undergoing mental health issues. Moreover, research shows that personal interaction with mental illness considerably boosts the empathic understanding of the students. Those who have undergone mental health challenges, or have friends or relatives with mental illness, tend to be more compassionate. The empathy of the unmentioned group is partly based on the getting of the common view about mental illness that it is a wrongful notion, and therefore, needs one to take the perspective of the person who has it. However, despite the fact that the awareness and the empathy towards the common conditions such as depression and anxiety have increased, stigma still prevails especially in the case of severe mental illnesses like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. These disorders are usually linked with fear, unpredictability, and social exclusion. The outcomes from this research point to the fact that awareness alone will not eradicate the problem, thereby marking the necessity for thorough mental health education. Schools will have to change their policies and practices regarding mental health; they will have to be more culturally sensitive in their handling and will not just give out information but develop the students in empathy and emotional engagement alongside gentle contacts with people who have suffered through the affliction of mental illness. It is these types of projects that will bring about stigma reduction that is lasting in the college environment.

Practical Implications

her limitation stems from the fact that most studies on this topic rely on students' self-reports, which can be subject to several biases. Students may underreport their negative attitudes towards mental illness due to social desirability or overstate their empathic feelings because of the tendency to give socially accepted responses. Thus, it is possible that the research results might not reflect the actual situation and the existence of an unrecorded stigma against mental illness may still be present among the college student population. Moreover, the current state of the art in this research area is mostly limited to the university context and particularly to students living on campus, which may not represent the whole student population. Most studies do not take into account students living off-campus or other catchment areas, which constitutes another limitation of the research done so far. Such students may have different attitudes and levels of empathy towards mental illness when compared to their campus counterparts due to less interaction with the mental health services provided by the university, or even the lack thereof if they do not live near the university. Furthermore, the timing of data collection can also be an issue in studies on college students. Many universities have specific times of the year when they focus on mental health, which may lead to different attitudes and empathy levels in students during these periods. For example, an anti-stigma campaign run during the exams might not have the same impact on students' attitudes and empathy as one run during the vacations. Finally, the applicability of the research findings is a major concern. Many studies examine attitudes and empathy toward mental illness among a particular group of college students; hence, the results cannot be generalized to all students enrolled in universities. There are several factors such as the cultural background of students and the location of the institution that can affect the outcome of the study and consequently, the findings might only be true for that particular university or student group. In conclusion, although there is a considerable body of research conducted on college students' attitudes and empathy toward mental illness, many issues are still left unaddressed. Specifying the nature of the relationships between these three variables of interest and identifying the direction of their influence require longitudinal studies with more diverse samples and different types of data collection methods, such as explicit and implicit measures and multi-source reports. All these efforts are gradually taking place, together with regular mental health awareness and advocacy campaigns; thus, it is only the matter of time until the stigma surrounding mental illness will be significantly reduced in the academic community through proper engagement

Conclusion

The attitudes and empathy shown by college students toward mental illness are very crucial in determining the overall mental health atmosphere in universities. Young adults have to deal with various factors namely academic pressures, social changes, and personal problems. Under such circumstances, having peer groups that are supportive and understanding becomes very important. The educational initiatives and public discourse have contributed to the improvement of the mental health issue awareness, yet the stigma and misconceptions still exist on college campuses. The negative attitudes and small empathic comprehension can discourage students from seeking help, thus leading to increased social isolation, which, in turn, affects their academic performance and emotional health negatively. Empathy has built its case to be called the main factor which is responsible for stigma reduction and acceptance promotion. The students with a high degree of empathy are the ones who will perceive mental illness as a legitimate health problem and act with understanding instead of condemning. The empathy can be strengthened through habituated mental health education, meaningful contact with those who have the testified personal experience, and culturally equipped interventions which will all lead to the transformation of the attitudes. The universities are to go past the approaches based on awareness and through that, they will be able to develop emotional understanding and encouraging actions among students. Research should be conducted continuously in order to understand better the changing relationship between attitudes, empathy, and mental health outcomes in different cultural settings. Also, it is necessary to integrate research findings in the practical campus interventions to make sure that the college community is so inclusive, supportive, and mentally healthy.

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