Awesome Student

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The Fear of Crazy: Finding Answers About the Stigma of Mental Health

Growing up, I was conditioned to believe that I was utterly insane. Crazy, horrible, and morbid thoughts would cycle through my head all day with no relief. My fears were not considered normal by any known standards. While most kids were terrified of spiders and the dark, I feared the possibility that I was a psychopath. I would see a knife and imagine my arm personifying, taking hold of the knife, and plunging it straight through my heart. Worse than that, I would entertain the thought that maybe I would not be the victim, but my brother would feel the consequences of my loss of control over my body. I was never taught that intrusive thoughts like these were a symptom of OCD, and not a warning sign of a future serial killer. I was never told that I could tell someone about these thoughts; I assumed they were to be kept hidden so as to avoid burdening others with my problems. I never knew there were ways to help people learn to cope with these thoughts, so I considered suicide as the only way to protect the ones I loved from myself.

Many people do not realize the powerful impact the negative stigma surrounding mental illness can have on those struggling with their own mental disorders. A stigma is similar to a stereotype and is composed of harmful ideas regarding a certain group of people. Just as stereotypes surrounding race and gender slip into our media and other aspects of our lives, the stigma of mental health is more mainstream than one may think. In crime shows, the perpetrators are often portrayed as crazy and lawyers will try to get their clients off by reason of insanity.
Every time a mass shooting happens in schools, mental health is used as a scapegoat to avoid a debate over gun control. I have had friends tell me that America is a drugged up nation being prescribed pills they do not need. Meanwhile, I set an alarm to remember to take the Zoloft I apparently do not need in order to cope with my anxiety. Unfortunately, these are just a few examples of the harmful stigmas that plague our nation. While I have a good amount of knowledge of what these stereotypes are, I have always wondered how they came to be. How did different stigmas surrounding mental health develop? How have these stigmas hurt the mentally ill? More importantly, how can we change the negative stigma into a more positive one? I hope to gain answers to these questions so that in the future, I can help find a solution to end the negative stigmas that plagued me and many others.

To begin my research, I decided to go to the Wayne State Library website and searched ‘mental illness stigma’ under the psychology research guide. I browsed through the first few articles, skimming each one until I found a piece titled “The Stigma of Mental Illness” from a peer reviewed, psychology journal (Medina et al. 143). This article stood out to me because it is very universal in that it has answers to all my research questions regarding the stigma surrounding mental health. The article discusses possible answers to how stigmas developed, how they hurt the mentally ill, and what steps can be taken to reduce it. According to the authors, “mental illness has been viewed as a character or moral flaw” and this belief has contributed to the negative light we use to view the mentally ill and helps to describe possible origins from which many of the stigmas we have developed (Medina et al. 143). The preconceived notions we have about the mentally ill “significantly limits opportunities that are available for people with serious mental illnesses” and these negative notions can often be worse than the actual diseases themselves (Medina et al. 143). As for what we can do to minimize the stigma, this article
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describes education and contact as possible ways to help people change their thinking about mental illness. Often times “education is used directly to contradict myths with facts,” but has little effect on changing how people behave toward those with mental illness (Medina et al. 143). In order to help change behavior and affect a change in society, people need to interact more with the mentally ill. “Research that shows that interpersonal contact with someone with a mental illness is far more effective at mitigating stigma than… education” (Medina et al. 143). Although this article provides great answers to all three of my research questions, I want to expand on the answers I have found, especially trying to answer to what extent do stigmas affect the mentally ill, and why these stigmas have continued to plague the minds of modern society.

To find my next source, I used the same search through the Wayne State Library psychology research guide. After browsing through a few mediocre articles, I eventually came across another great source from the Schizophrenia Bulletin journal titled “The Structural Levels of Mental Illness Stigma and Discrimination” (“Structural Levels”). The reason I choose this particular article was because of its explanation of stigmas being a structural problem within society and not just a problem among the general public. I want to know exactly how stigmas affect the mentally ill, and this article explains that stigmas run deeper than the public’s attitude and have influenced the laws in our legal systems. According to research studied by the authors, about one third of the states in America limit the right of the mentally ill “to hold elective office, participate in juries, and vote” (“Structural Levels”). Around fifty percent of the states limit the right for its mentally ill citizens to remain married as well as limit custody rights to these individuals (“Structural Levels”). Although I had known that there were laws restricting some rights to mentally ill, such as being able to purchase guns, I had no idea that these discriminatory laws extended to voting rights and even the ability to marry. The most appalling fact from this
article, however, was one of the trends found in the research. The article states that “other than in the area of divorce law, there has been no decrease in the number of States with laws that restrict the rights of people with mental illness” (“Structural Levels”). This article greatly expanded my knowledge on how the negative stigma of mental illness affects the mentally ill. However, this article was published in 2004, so I would like to find a more recent article to see if these statistics still ring true today. Also, it left me still wondering exactly why laws such as the ones listed in the article were created in the first place, how we as a country can move toward reversing some of these laws, and are there more emotional consequences from these stigmas.

The way I found my third source was different than how I found my first two. The second article I found gave a list of all the sources used by the authors, so I began to click on the ones that had hyperlinks to see if any would help to answer the questions I still had. My third article is a peer reviewed work titled “On the Self-Stigma of Mental Illness: Stages, Disclosure, and Strategies for Change,” and delved deeper into the emotional effects society’s negative stereotypes had on the mentally ill as well as more methods to help end the stigma (“Self-Stigma”). The article proposes that people begin to internalize the negative stereotypes the public may have about them or their illness which “can lead to low self-esteem and poor self-efficacy” as well as a development of self-stigma (“Self-Stigma” 465). Someone with a mental illness may begin to believe they are dangerous, crazy, or incapable of living a normal life simply because it’s what they have been raised to believe by society (“Self-Stigma” 465-466). Corrigan and Rao suggest that the first step in trying to limit self-stigma is being open about whatever mental illness the person is suffering from (467). There are too many people living with mental illnesses that think they have to hide what they are going through and this only adds to the negative thoughts they have about themselves. When a person opens up and acknowledges that they are
suffering from a mental illness, they can then receive the treatment they need and begin to understand that they are not alone ("Self Stigma" 467-468). This makes a lot of sense to me because I experienced a similar catharsis after I opened up about my obsessive thoughts. It wasn’t until I opened up about my disorder that I finally began to change the stigma I had set against myself in my own head. While this article does a great job describing the emotional affects the negative stigma of mental health has on the mentally ill and how to change it, it does not offer an answer as to how we can change the laws in our legal system that discriminate against the mentally ill. I also want a more in depth answer to how these negative stigmas developed and why they are still plaguing our nation today.

I learned a lot while writing this paper, not only about my research questions, but about how to further my research and answer the questions I still have. I wanted to know how the stigma toward the mentally ill developed and discovered that the negative stigma is rooted in the ancient belief that only the morally corrupted suffered from mental illness. I still want to know more about the development of the negative views we have of the mentally ill and why these views continue to exist today. My second question concerned how these negative stigmas affect the mentally ill. I learned that there are still many laws in place today that restrict the rights of those suffering from mental illnesses. Also, I learned that people with mental illnesses can internalize the stigmas they hear and develop a low self-esteem as a result. My last question asked what we could do to end the stigma. The best way to end self-stigma is to open up about your illness and getting the help you need. Educating the public with facts about mental illness is one step toward reducing the social stigma. Another way is by interacting more with the mentally ill. However, I am curious as to how we can reverse the laws that discriminate toward the mentally ill. After I found the three sources I talk about in this paper, a wonderful lady by the
name Judith Arnold, taught our class how to get the most out of the Wayne State Library website. To be honest, I had no idea that the library website offered so many articles for free. I have been accustomed to only using Google and Google Scholar. She also showed us how to narrow down our search results by using an advanced search line and limiting it to only showing me peer reviewed sources. I hope by using this method, I will be able to find the answer to the questions I still have about the mental health stigma. Through writing this paper, I learned that finding answers regarding the origins and solution to the mental health stigma is harder than I originally thought it would be, and research is a complex process that takes time and patience in order to find the perfect sources that provide great answers to your questions.
Works Cited

