



FIGHTING **STIGMA**

(OUR COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY)

We don't fully understand how the brain works yet, but one thing we DO know is that it is an organ. Yet our society doesn't readily accept brain disorders the way we accept other organ disorders. Why is this so?

Stigma! Is a harsh reality for people who have mental health problems, because it prevents them from enjoying a normal and productive life. So many people today feel uncomfortable about mental health issues, despite the fact that there is growing evidence that more and more people are developing these problems. In fact, many people are so uncomfortable with the stigma that they would rather suffer in silence than get the help they need.

Stigma is defined as shame and disgrace occasioned by mental illness. It's like a stereotype, and because it's based on myths and misunderstandings; it's always negative.

Stigma is hurtful and it can be dangerous. It can make it difficult for someone with mental disorder to be accepted by others and lead to discrimination. Because of stigma, people with mental disorders, through no fault of their own, find themselves denied housing, education, employment, income, criminal justice, parenting, and other basic rights that most of us take for granted. No one should have to hide his or her illness.

Stigma can lead to discrimination. It limits the amount of resources and rights sufferers can enjoy. It leads to constant relapse of those just recovering.

Here are a few of the most common misconceptions about those with mental health problems:

- Mentally ill people have a weak character or morality.
- Mentally ill people are potentially dangerous.
- People with mental illness should just "snap out of it"
- Mentally ill people are violent
- People with mental illness are irresponsible
- Poor parenting causes mental illness
- Treatment won't work

Sometimes these myths make people afraid of those with schizophrenia. They don't understand the illness, so they don't want to be around people with schizophrenia. When this happens, it's called stigma.



If you become ill, you would go to a doctor. Once you get better, you would expect to get on with life as usual. But it's not that easy for people who suffer from mental illness. Often, they can suffer from persistent rejections and exclusions by ill-informed members of the community. Some people have been denied loans, health insurance and jobs because of their history of mental health issues. Consequently, these people lose their self confidence and may develop further anxiety or depression, aside the issues they are already facing.

LOOK AT THIS YOUNG MAN.

Many years ago, a young man was diagnosed with schizophrenia. The majority of his friends deserted him; they weren't able to comprehend or cope with his altered personality and erratic behaviour. Within months he went from being a popular, vivacious and outgoing young man to a shattered, isolated loner. Over the following months, he sinks deeper into debilitating depression, which ultimately became so unbearable that he took his own life.

The CASE of a medical doctor.

Seven years after rigorous medical training, Ngozi was set to take the world. As a brilliant student, a glorious medical practice laid ahead of her. Her family was overjoyed during her graduation, not just because of the prospects associated with her field of study. Her colleagues at University of Benin (UNIBEN) described her as a "promising doctor" because of her academic exploits. "She was exceptional and stood out among the pack. So there was no doubt she had a great professional life ahead of her" one of them recalls.

Things started looking up for Ngozi as soon as she finished the mandatory one-year national service. While her colleagues were praying and hoping for employment, she got employed by The General Hospital, Broad street Lagos as a general practitioner.

At work, Ngozi continued with her strong, impressive showing. She was a darling to patients and colleagues, winning accolades and applause. For a year, she distinguished herself until sometimes in 1994 when she collapsed on duty at the casualty unit that fateful afternoon. Those around rallied to her help and she was immediately placed on medical treatment.

But diagnosis revealed she was a victim of stress. Subsequent tests showed she also had mental disorder. Before much could be done, a young, promising doctor had already hit the streets, totally insane.

For years, she walked half-naked on the streets of Lagos before relations managed to take her to a Psychiatric facility in Lagos where she received treatment for seven long, tortuous years. Today, Ngozi is a shadow of her old self.

Despite her coveted medical qualification, she is today unproductive and a strain on the society she so much loved to improve. Her certificate lies somehow in a cabinet as useless as one that was never obtained. Her medical skills and training are untapped. At the privately own Centre For Mentally Ill and Destitute Persons, Ajegunle an uptown districts in Lagos where the team of Mental Health Foundation met her, Ngozi is a pitiable sight. But she is lucky to be alive. Looking disheveled with her hair showing years of insanity, she says, “I found a home here. I found love and that is why I am able to come back to my senses. This is the only place where I feel human,” She adds in the midst of over 140 fellow inmates.

Ngozi is just one out of many Nigerians increasingly succumbing to mental disorder for reasons as varied as our tribal groups. There is no denying the facts that millions of Nigerians are under mental siege. Seeing naked, mad people on the streets is now a common sight. In Lagos and other parts of the country, most of them take refuge under bridges and public places, living in a

world of their own. Not a few of them constitute serious menace to the public, especially when they become wild. It’s all so easy to dismiss them as “undesirable elements” who probably inflicted the condition on themselves through wicked or unhealthy habits but psychiatrists say many more Nigerians are on their way to joining them on the street if serious efforts are not taken.

Why Should You Be CONCERNED About this Stigma?

Sometimes because of the stigma associated with mental illness, people don't want to talk about the illness. For the person with schizophrenia, not talking about the disease can result in delays in diagnosis and treatment. There are many consequences:

- Self-medication,
- Alcoholism
- Drug abuse
- Marital crisis
- Mental or physical health getting much worse.
- Frustration over unmet expectations at school or work.
- Trouble with the law.
- Social isolation or neglect.
- Trouble getting a job or finding a place to live.



Families are often reluctant to talk about mental illness because of past experiences. Families who don't talk about the illness often:

- Feel guilty or ashamed.
- Have the added burden of trying to 'cover up' the illness.
- Suffer alone in silence.

When people don't address mental illness, the society suffers from:

- Loss of productivity on the part of the ill person and their family members.
- Higher health care costs.
- Eventual low National productivity and creativity.
- Misinformation and ignorance.

Expert opinion on the state of MEDICAL FACILITIES for mental health in the country and other issues.

An interview with a consultant Psychiatrist at Yaba Federal Neuro- psychiatric Hospital.

How prevalent is the rate of depression and psychiatry disorder in Nigeria?

Talking about depression, one does not need to go far to know Nigerians are massively affected. There is no official document on the prevalence possibly because it is not seen as a threat, whereas 20% of pregnant women in Nigeria are depressed. And the reasons are obvious. In Nigeria, there are social challenges to grapple with such as loss of loved ones, loss of job or something of great treasure. That is aside high unemployment and poverty in the land.

Those who have sicknesses such as diabetes, hypertension and chronic medical disorders are also more prone and vulnerable. There is no way Nigerians will not be depressed and vulnerable to psychiatric disorder.

In 1997, we used to see about seven to eight new patients a day. But now we see up to 20 new patients per day. I'm talking of those who have totally broken down. How about those who do not know how to access treatment? So it's a huge problem.

What are your observations in treating these patients?

Oh, they are in different dimensions. One question is, can those affected afford treatment? A significant part of them cannot afford treatment, even in government facilities. Two, I observed those who can afford treatment and actually get well still return to those factors that caused the disorder in the first place. These are the unemployed, those who lost their jobs or properties, or those exposed to traumatic events such as rape, armed robbery attack or any other shock. So even if they get well, I discover the conditions continue with difficulty, aggravating their conditions. That is aside stigmatization because the society does not believe they are well and can still be productive. So people get critical, harsh and isolated in dealing with them. That is why those who get well still have frequent relapse.

So you think we have not started waging the war against mental illness?

To some extent, we have started but we are not making adequate progress. We are not winning at all. The absence of a social security system is a major cause and until we put it in place, we have not started waging the war at all. We also need psycho education of the mass populace.

That is due to misconceptions about mental illness, some believe it is contagious, which is not. Some attribute it to evil spirits and demons that can be cast out. That is why they subject patients to serious beating with wounds leading to infections. Some people say, it is not curable and bound to relapse. Some see it as an act of God and punishment for wrong deeds.

Does Nigeria have what it takes medically to address mental illnesses?

That is a very important question. As of now, if we take it from the facilities on ground, we have eight Federal neuropsychiatric hospitals, some departments of psychiatry in teaching hospitals and in few general hospitals. But facilities are not adequate. We don't have the necessary infrastructures to handle the challenge. Also manpower is a big issue. As of now I don't think we have up to 100 psychiatrists to handles about 150 million Nigerians.

Why is that?

We don't have the necessary infrastructures to handle the challenge. .

Expert opinion reveals that most medical students shun the field like leprosy much because of stigma associated with the condition. And the bulk of those who dare to specialize in psychiatry move abroad for greener pastures.

Research results on SOCIAL DISTANCE towards people with mental illness

A research carried out by Dr. Biodun O. Adewuya, et al, Head of Department of psychiatry, Lagos state. College of Medicine, Ikeja reveals that about 60% of people in south – western Nigeria distance themselves from the mentally ill and this is a reflection of attitude towards mental health patients in sub- Saharan Africa according to emerging evidence.

The social distance and stigmatization stem from popular beliefs about the causes of mental illness.

It is widely believed that supernatural factors and the abuse of psychoactive substances are responsible for mental illness.

Contrary to assumptions that belief in supernatural causes of mental illness is mostly held by the uneducated or illiterates, research results show that even those who should be more knowledgeable about mental health such as doctors and students in Nigeria Universities also hold belief in supernatural causes of mental illness.

About 64% of doctors of less than 45 years of age, and with less than 10 years of clinical experience in eight selected health institution in Nigeria perceived the mentally ill as dangerous and therefore keep a safe distance from them.

Among the 1,668 students of a Nigeria federal University evaluated on a modified version of Borgardus social distance scale, more than 65% have a high social distance towards mentally ill people.

All of these research results challenge the notion that stigma and negative attitude towards the mentally ill are less severe in Africa than in western cultures.

CONCLUSION

Dr. Biodun O. Adewuya suggested the following ways of fighting social distance and stigmatization of the mentally ill.

1. The need to incorporate anti stigma educational programmes into the mental health policies of countries in sub-saharan Africa.
2. Anti-stigma programmes should focus on identifying the population at risk, and properly address the causes of mental illness.
3. The need to review the medical curriculum to combat the cultural beliefs prevalent among Nigeria doctors. Anti-stigma campaigns should start from medical doctors.
4. The needs for intensive public awareness, effective stigma- reducing educational programmes and more research in this area.

You can contact Dr, Biodun O. Adewuya via e-mail: biodunwuya@yahoo.com



How to FIGHT STIGMA

Help your family member:

- *Treat them as a person you love and respect, not as someone who is sick. Focus on the person not the illness.
- *Be a role model when it comes to accepting the illness.
- *Attempt to help them keep alive as normal as possible.
- *Be supportive when they face difficulties in daily life.
- *Understand that daily tasks may not be easy anymore.
- *Help them see that not all problems are related with the illness.
- *Find ways to deal with embarrassing situations so they do not feel ashamed or at fault.

Help yourself:

- *Join a local self-help, support or family education group.
- *Learn all you can about the illness so you can share information and help dispel myths and misunderstandings.

Become an Ambassador: Changing people's attitudes and perceptions about mental illness is one of our greatest challenges, but you can help!

An ambassador of the Mental Health Foundation must be knowledgeable about the facts related with the illness and educates others about mental illness. As an ambassador of the Mental Health Foundation, you promote a greater understanding of what mental illness is, and that there is help and hope for all those affected by the illness. You are an agent of change, working towards a world where people affected by mental illness either mild, moderate or severe enjoys full rights and privileges. Your active participation in this campaign will ensure those people do not face the stigma currently associated with the illness.



OUR MISSION

Mental Health Foundation is dedicated to creating awareness on the state of mental health of our people, promoting mental health, preventing mental disorders and rehabilitating the mentally ill through, advocacy, education, and professional services.

OUR VISION

To free Nigeria and its environs of naked walking mentally ill, beginning from Lagos. By working with the Local Government councils and the Ministry for Youth, Sports and Social Development, we also want to advocate for care, support and campaign against stigma of the mentally ill.

PROJECTS

As part of the mandate of Mental Health Foundation to educate people on how to maintain and retain their dignity in the face of mounting problems, challenges, and disorders that confront them in their daily encounters, the following contains but not limited to our projects:-

- Emotional Development Academy
- Nationwide Reformatory Centers.
- Soul Institute (Open and Prison versions)
- The Companion
- Care on Wheels
- Mental Health and You Publication series
- The Relief Panel

PARTNERSHIP AND NETWORKS

PARTNERSHIPS

- Institute for National Transformation
- International Institute for Church Growth
- Rachael Adelaja Memorial Foundation.
- Daystar Christian Centre, Lagos.
- Federal Neuro-Psychiatric, Hospital, Yaba. Lagos
- Federal Psychiatric Hospital, Calabar. Cross River State.
- Cross River State Ministry of Women of Affairs, Calabar. Cross River State.
- National Orientation Agencies, Uyo, Akwa Ibom.
- Lagos State Television, LTV, Ikeja, Lagos
- Freedom Foundation. Lagos. Nigeria
- Global Youth International, USA.

NETWORKS

- British Council Human Right information Network
- Baobab Connections, Canada.
- UN Youth Flash Network.
- International Youth Leadership Stakeholders Forum.
- Taking It Global, Canada.
- Coalition on Issue based and Politics and Good governance, a project of Nigeria Economic Summit Group Lagos.
- Global Youth International, USA.



MENTAL HEALTH FOUNDATION is a Non Governmental Organization based in Lagos, Nigeria. It was duly registered. Its administration and network comprise of psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, educationists, inspirational writers and psycho-dynamic counsellors, coupled with a fleet of dynamic young non-religious motivational speakers who have saddled themselves with the responsibility of coaching and inspiring the enormous depressed/stigmatized ones in Africa.

We strongly advocate massive awareness of the mental health of citizenry as it represents a vital integral element of every individual's overall health and well being. We advocate against stigmatisation and solicit policy reform for the care of people living with mental disorders.

Mental Health Foundation works assiduously to help all people prevent and overcome mental disorders, providing adequate information, education, encouragement, and support for people living with either mild or severe mental disorders alongside their family member.

On the other hand, we believe our society can be healed from the rampaging social ills, juvenile delinquent, secret emotional pains/disturbances and other influences that distort behavioural/thinking patterns. Knowing fully well that the law never changes the mind nor does it impact values, but teaching not only changes the mind, it instils values which in turn corroborates the law by setting the standard of behaviour.

Suffice to say, a mentally ill person is not only limited to the one with torn clothes, the beggars, penniless, rootless, homeless, those found under bridges, in uncompleted buildings or even wandering about. Psychiatrists however, faulted this view of mental illness, saying it is narrow. There are many people that are mentally ill and not psychotic.

ACTION AREAS

- Social reforms and Mental/emotional rehabilitations.
- Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- Information and training.
- Stress Management/Counselling.
- Capacity building.

For counselling, partnership and sponsorship please contact:



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