Review Article

Mental Health Education and Awareness Raising: Innovative Strategies to Eliminate Stigma towards Psychiatric Illnesses

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ABSTRACT: Stigma surrounding mental illness is prevalent worldwide, causing numerous challenges and discrimination for those affected. This paper proposes two innovative strategies to eliminate the stigma associated with mental illness: establishing public welfare teams and producing observational documentaries. The public welfare teams aim to encourage public participation, making ordinary citizens volunteers who provide emotional and practical support to mental health patients. Through direct interaction, the public can change their stereotypes about mental illness and develop a correct understanding. Public welfare activities can also enhance the social status of these teams, creating a positive feedback loop. Observational documentaries use a documentary approach to vividly portray the daily lives of mental health patients, allowing the public to genuinely experience their inner worlds and understand that they are no different from others, except for facing certain life challenges. This initiative aims to dispel public fear and prejudice. These strategies overcome the limitations of traditional propaganda education by emphasizing public participation and personal experience, helping mental illness to be truly understood and accepted. These innovative attempts are worth promoting in the field of mental health education.

KEYWORDS: Mental Illness, Innovative Strategies, Public Welfare, Mental Health Education, Social Stigma, Social Media.

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) stated in the "2022 World Mental Health Report" that nearly 1 billion people worldwide suffered from mental illnesses in 2019 [1], meaning that one in eight people had a mental health disorder. The report also highlighted a 25% increase in cases of depression and anxiety globally following the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020. WHO has explicitly called for increased investment by countries in healthcare services targeting mental health [2]. Mental illnesses have become significant threats to human health, yet the stigmatization of mental illness severely impacts people's understanding and treatment of these conditions.

CURRENT STATE OF MENTAL ILLNESS DESTIGMATIZATION AND INSUFFICIENT RESPONSES

The term "stigma" typically refers to physical marks used to expose the bearer's moral status as unusual or disgraceful. Once branded or marked, the person becomes identified as a slave

[3], criminal, or traitor, and is shunned and avoided in public settings. The stigmatization of mental illness not only imposes a tremendous psychological burden on the patients themselves but also instils feelings of shame and guilt, further hindering their normal lives and treatment. Mental health patients often face societal prejudice and discrimination, stemming from various historical, social, and media factors. A lack of understanding of the devalued characteristics attributed to stigmatized individuals contributes to this [4]. Common stigmas include beliefs that mental health patients are troublemakers, less competent academically and socially than their peers, which can lead to disdain and rejection in educational and social settings [5]. This experience of stigmatization can exacerbate feelings of rejection and incompetence among patients, deterring them from seeking and continuing treatment [6].

Due to misunderstandings and stereotypes about mental illness, the public often views it as synonymous with danger. Media, in a bid for attention, focus on negative events involving mental health patients. Reports often highlight violent crimes committed by mental health patients, particularly mass shootings, while ignoring that most violence in society is perpetrated by individuals without mental health issues [7]. This phenomenon deepens the stigma associated with mental illness. The rapid spread of information online exacerbates this, leading to deeper public misunderstanding. Additionally, mental illness is generally perceived as a personal or familial problem, with no societal obligation to address or improve the situation. The lack of emphasis on mental health in the education system means that the general public has limited access to relevant knowledge and information, resulting in very limited acceptance and understanding of mental illness.

INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES

Research indicates that the higher the educational level, participation in mental health lectures, and interaction with mental health patients, the lower the discrimination against mental health patients. Therefore, the focus of destigmatization should be on correctly guiding the public's attitudes towards mental illness and fostering accurate recognition of mental health conditions. Only by improving public awareness can prejudice be eliminated and mental illness faced with a healthy mindset. Consequently, we propose the following two solutions:

(a) Establishing Public Welfare Volunteer Teams

Social contact can reduce the stigma of mental illness and promote symptom recognition [8]. Therefore, more people should be encouraged to interact with those suffering from mental illnesses. Currently, publicity and education in schools, companies, and social groups are typically conducted by official organizations within the field of mental health, consuming considerable time and effort with limited reach and effectiveness.

Establishing public welfare volunteer teams can provide mental health patients with opportunities to express their emotions normally, as well as offer emotional and practical assistance. Due to severe stigmatization, patients often struggle to express their emotions openly, facing discrimination, exclusion, and unfair treatment in society, which leads to social isolation. By setting up specialized social support agencies and encouraging participation from various individuals, effective public welfare teams can be formed to assist mental health patients. In the process, the public can interact with patients, change their stereotypes about mental illness, learn relevant knowledge, and spread this knowledge to others, thus achieving widespread awareness and destigmatization.

Initial Team Formation and Operation Model:

i. Team Composition:

Professionals including psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and counselors who can provide professional emotional and practical support. Volunteers from various walks of life, who are the main group for destigmatization. After training, they can offer basic support to mental health patients and, through their involvement, increase their understanding of mental illness. Psychologists and counselors provide professional psychological counseling and therapy, while volunteers offer emotional support through listening and companionship.

ii. Operation Model:

Volunteers are selected and trained rigorously to ensure they have basic psychological knowledge and skills. Volunteers are matched with patients based on the patients' needs and the volunteers' strengths to ensure compatibility and effectiveness. Various social activities such as sharing sessions, cultural activities, and sports events are organized to promote interaction between patients and volunteers. One on one or small group face to face interactions help build trust and provide emotional support. An online community and communication platform facilitate continuous communication and sharing between patients and volunteers. Regular feedback and evaluation sessions help understand the experiences and needs of both patients and volunteers, improving service quality continuously. Experts are regularly invited to provide professional guidance and training, enhancing the capabilities of volunteers and staff.

(b) Producing Observational Documentaries

The stigma surrounding mental illness primarily stems from a lack of understanding and awareness. Gaining a deep and comprehensive understanding of mental illness requires significant knowledge, and simply lecturing people on the subject often fails to provide a systematic and accurate understanding due to varying levels of acceptance and learning abilities. Therefore, we aim to use more intuitive methods to increase awareness of mental illness and achieve destigmatization.

The public is most concerned about whether mental health patients will affect their normal lives and whether it is necessary to care about mental illness and its patients. Thus, by filming the daily lives of mental health patients and producing an observational documentary, we can provide the public with a direct way to experience the inner world of these patients and deeply showcase the daily lives of ordinary mental health patients. This will demonstrate that mental health patients are ordinary people with their own emotions and fears of discrimination, needing care just like anyone else. Showing various life experiences can help people understand that life is challenging for everyone and encourage them to face mental health issues and patients with a healthy mindset. The desire to destigmatize mental illness is also shared by patients themselves, with many willing to participate in such projects. The public's curiosity about mental illness means they are likely to seek information through the internet, media, and books, aiding in the spread of awareness.

Documentary Filming Approach:

i. Filming Ideas:

Use documentary style to authentically record the changes in the lives and emotions of mental health patients with the help of welfare teams. Emphasize patients' real feelings and experiences, using delicate filming techniques to showcase their inner worlds and daily life moments. Interview professionals, volunteers, patients, and their families to understand their

views and experiences with welfare teams, digging deep into the stories and emotions behind each role to enhance the film's authenticity and impact. Records of various activities organized by welfare teams, such as sharing sessions, cultural activities, and sports events, highlighting the positive interactions between patients and volunteers. Track the daily lives of some patients, showing the changes before and after receiving assistance, emphasizing the improvement in their quality of life due to the welfare teams.

ii. Distribution Channels and Promotion Suggestions:

Online Platforms: Publish on major video platforms like YouTube, Vimeo, and Bilibili to attract a wide audience. Promote through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WeChat, and Weibo to expand influence. Post on the welfare teams' official websites, providing relevant information and interactive platforms.

Offline Channels: Screen in cinemas and film festivals to increase exposure and influence. Organize screenings in community centers, schools, and libraries to interact directly with target audiences.

Promotion Suggestions:

- Engage major news media and social media for coverage through press releases, interviews, and special programs to enhance publicity. Collaborate with mainstream TV and radio stations to air film clips and trailers, attracting more viewers. Design attractive trailers and posters for wide promotion on social media platforms. Conduct social media activities such as topic discussions and online interactions to increase audience engagement and spread.

- Cooperate with related public welfare organizations, mental health institutions, and educational institutions to jointly promote the film, expanding its reach. Launch joint activities such as special lectures and public welfare events to enhance the film's social impact.

- Encourage audience word of mouth to share viewing experiences and feelings, generating spontaneous dissemination and promotion. Display audience feedback and reviews on major platforms to increase the film's credibility and appeal.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND FINDINGS

(a) Public contact and understanding of mental health patients can effectively eliminate misunderstandings and biases about mental illness. Volunteers can spread the knowledge and experiences they gain to those around them, further expanding the impact.

(b) Providing normal social opportunities for mental health patients reduces their social isolation, promoting better integration into society. Interaction between volunteers and patients helps establish a supportive social environment.

(c) Participating in public welfare activities can enhance volunteers' sense of honor and social status, motivating more people to join, creating a positive cycle. Welfare teams can gain social recognition and support, attracting more resources and volunteers.

(d) Authentic records and touching stories in documentaries can evoke emotional resonance in the audience, fostering greater understanding and attention towards mental health patients. Positive changes in patients and volunteers' selfless dedication convey positive social energy.

(e) The dissemination of films helps eliminate public misunderstandings and biases about mental illness, promoting destigmatization. Viewers can see the real lives and inner worlds of mental health patients, changing stereotypes. Increased societal attention to mental health promotes more participation in related public welfare activities. Successful film dissemination can attract more support and resources for welfare teams, further advancing the project.

CONCLUSION

Enhancing public understanding of mental illness is crucial for destigmatization. Establishing volunteer teams and producing observational documentaries are two effective methods to reduce prejudice and misunderstanding, promote patient treatment, improve social support systems, drive policy and resource investment, and leverage the positive role of media and education.

- Establishing Volunteer Teams: These teams provide emotional support, practical assistance, and social activities for mental health patients. Through professional training, volunteers can understand mental illness characteristics and patient needs, offering more effective help. These teams not only support patients and their families, reducing their sense of shame but also interact with the community to change public stereotypes about mental illness, fostering societal attention and understanding of mental health issues. Public welfare activities effectively enhance public awareness, reduce bias and discrimination, and encourage more people to support mental health patients, creating a more inclusive and understanding social environment.

- Producing Observational Documentaries: This intuitive and powerful promotional method can deeply showcase the daily lives, treatment processes, and social interactions of mental health patients, breaking stereotypes through real cases and enhancing public empathy. Filming should adopt a realistic and empathetic visual style, using close ups, detailed shots, and handheld cameras to increase the authenticity and emotional impact of the footage while protecting patients' privacy and dignity. Wide dissemination through media and educational systems can guide public understanding, reducing prejudice and misunderstanding about mental illness. Social impact assessment through audience feedback and social media interaction can optimize promotional strategies.

In summary, establishing volunteer teams and producing observational documentaries can comprehensively promote the destigmatization of mental illness, creating an understanding, supportive, and inclusive social environment, improving patients' quality of life and treatment outcomes, and fostering correct societal recognition and active response to mental health issues. Future research should focus on optimizing the operation model of specialized social support agencies, evaluating the practical effects of public welfare activities, exploring the synergy between the two approaches, and achieving destigmatization through comprehensive measures and cross sector collaboration. These studies can provide a more comprehensive understanding and improvement of existing solutions, enhancing support effectiveness for mental health patients and advancing societal understanding and acceptance of mental health issues.

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