Social Stigma Surrounding Mental Illness Among College Students

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Honors Project Summary: Social Stigma Surrounding Mental Illness

Among College Students

By: Samantha Brown

Research has shown that mental disorders affect tens of millions of people each year in the United States (Statistics, 2016). From that, only about half receive treatment (Statistics, 2016). College campuses are in fact at the heart of the mental health issue (Reece, n.d.). A major reason for not asking for help is that students don’t want to be associated with the stigma or “stereotypes” surrounding mental health issues and treatment services. These stereotypes often pair mental illness with violence, incompetence, and blame of the person for their illness (Corrigan, 2004, p.616). The choice to not receive treatment then leads to the high rate of students with mental disorders we see drop out of college each year (Gruttadaro & Crudo, 2012). The current study assessed attitudes towards illness including mental and physical illness held by students at the University of Rhode Island (URI), as well as attitudes towards receiving mental health help for the participants themselves.

In the framework of a project assessing stigma, this study targeted one key group; all undergraduates that currently attend URI. To assess the attitudes of undergraduate students, one survey containing three separate parts was administered via Survey Monkey. The first part included two vignettes which were randomly assigned to participants. One vignette described a fictional female student with a physical illness (i.e., broken leg) and the other described a female student with a mental illness (i.e., anxiety). The participants were then asked to rate their level of agreement to questions that assessed attitudes toward the student in the vignette that could be influenced by stigma. The second part of the survey, given to all participants, asked them to rate their own attitudes and general attitudes regarding a fictional student in the participant’s class.
with a mental illness. The last part of the survey was also given to all participants to assess their level of willingness to receive mental health help if they had symptoms. Participants who completed the survey also could enter a random drawing to win 1 of ten Amazon gift cards (valued at $10.00 each). Undergraduates who were 18+ and currently enrolled at URI were qualified to complete the survey. Questions focused on stigma surrounding mental illness and mental health help on the college campus.

Results of the survey (N=221), showed that there is stigma held towards a student with mental illness when compared to the same attitudes than physical illness by undergraduate students at URI. Results also showed that males hold more stigmatizing beliefs than females towards mental illness. When considering if the participants would seek help for mental illness, females were more likely than males to report willingness to do so. Participants who reported some history of treatment for mental illness (i.e., therapy, medication) were more likely to report willingness to seek future treatment.

This project demonstrated there is stigma surrounding mental illness and mental health help here on the URI campus that is different from typical views of medical illness. There is room for improvement in the way we treat the individuals that do have an illness. With proper education and attention towards the prevention of stigma, we could decrease the likelihood of stigma towards mental illness existing on the URI campus. We could also help more people feel comfortable seeking help for their mental illness in hopes to help them. Further research is needed in order to understand how and in what forms education would help reduce stigma for the students.
References


