

MEDIA RELEASE

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IMH's National Mental Health Literacy Study Shows Dementia, Alcohol Abuse and Depression are the Most Recognisable Among Common Mental Disorders

1. Researchers from the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) have found in a national mental health literacy study that more than 88 percent of those who were surveyed said seeking help from a psychiatrist would be helpful for someone with a mental illness.
2. *Mind Matters: A Study of Mental Health Literacy* was a nationwide study conducted among adult residents aged 18-65 years in Singapore. Started in 2014 and spearheaded by IMH, this study has obtained national information on people's recognition and beliefs about five common mental disorders - alcohol abuse, dementia, Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and schizophrenia. The study also examined and compared the extent of stigma associated with these mental disorders.

KEY FINDINGS

Recognition of Common Mental Disorders

3. The Mind Matters study found that across the five disorders (alcohol abuse, dementia, MDD, OCD and schizophrenia) recognition was highest for dementia (66.3%), followed by alcohol abuse (57.1%) and MDD (55.2%). Recognition was poorer for OCD (28.7%) and schizophrenia (11.5%).
4. Factors associated with recognition included:
 - a) **Age.** Older age was significantly associated with poorer recognition. Those aged 35-65 years were less likely to recognise OCD symptoms compared to 18-34 year olds.
 - b) **Gender.** Women were more likely to recognise depression and OCD compared to men.
 - c) **Ethnicity.** Indians were less likely to be able to recognise dementia and MDD compared to Chinese, while Malays were less likely to recognise dementia compared to Chinese.

- d) **Education.** Those with less education (compared to those with tertiary education) were less likely to recognise alcohol abuse, dementia, depression and OCD.

Beliefs About Help-seeking, Treatment Options and Outcomes

5. When asked about where someone with a mental illness should seek help from, *friends and family* was the most common response for alcohol abuse (30.1%), MDD (54.2%) and schizophrenia (21.5%) while *seeking help from a doctor or General Practitioner (GP)* was the most common source for dementia (53.8%) and OCD (26.8%).

6. After rating a series of interventions for someone with a mental illness as 'helpful', 'harmful' or 'neither', the interventions that were considered most helpful were to *see a psychiatrist* (88.4%), *read about how people dealt with similar problems* (86.4%), *take medication prescribed by a psychiatrist* (83.4%), *seek help from close family members* (83%), *see a psychologist* (82.8%) and *attend a course on relaxation or stress management* (82.8%).

7. The participants of the study felt the most harmful interventions were to *deal with the problems on your own* (64.6%), *have an occasional drink to relax* (55.4%), *take sleeping pills prescribed by a doctor* (39.1%), *take antibiotics* (34%) and *be admitted to an institution* (18.2%).

8. Seeking appropriate help for a mental illness was most commonly associated with having a full recovery although a relapse is a possibility. However in the case of dementia, the majority of those surveyed felt the outcome would be a partial recovery although the symptoms may resurface. If appropriate help was not sought, the overwhelming majority felt the outcome would worsen, for all the five disorders.

Stigma

9. Attitudes towards the mentally ill were classified into three distinct groups - the mentally ill are *'weak not sick'*, *'unpredictable/dangerous'* and the third related to the extent to which one distances himself from the mentally ill.

10. The study found that attitudes were associated with socio-demographic factors. Those of Malay and Indian ethnicity (compared to Chinese), as well as those with lower education and income, were more likely to perceive the mentally ill as *'weak not sick'*.

11. Those of Indian ethnicity (compared to Chinese) as well as those who were less educated and with lower income, were more likely to perceive the mentally ill as *'unpredictable/dangerous'*.

12. Attitudes towards the mentally ill differed across the five disorders: dementia, MDD and OCD were perceived to be less dangerous. MDD was more likely to be perceived as *'weak not sick'*. Alcohol abuse was more likely to be perceived as *'weak not sick'*, *'dangerous/unpredictable'* and to have the greatest 'social distancing'.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

13. Concerted efforts are needed to improve mental health literacy in relation to the recognition of specific disorders, especially for OCD and schizophrenia, as they are the least recognisable mental disorders. With OCD being among the top three most common disorders in the country (based on the 2010 Singapore Mental Health Study), there is a critical need to create awareness which may also narrow the treatment gap.

14. While the most frequently recommended sources of help were family, friends and GP, the majority also recognised that seeing a psychiatrist is the most helpful intervention.

15. There was considerable personal stigma towards mental illness as the majority of those who participated in the study shared the common perceptions that persons with mental health issues could get better if they wanted to, that the problem is a sign of personal weakness and also that these people are unpredictable. As such, there is a need for well-planned and culturally relevant anti-stigma campaigns. Qualitative studies are also needed to better understand the ethnic differences in the perception of stigma.

16. Socio-demographic characteristics influencing mental health literacy and stigma need to be considered when planning interventional strategies.

Conclusion

17. Some aspects of mental health literacy were limited including the ability to identify some mental disorders and to understand the importance and effectiveness of medical interventions.

18. The Mind Matters study is an evidence-based resource that can help guide public health policies and strategies for better educational programmes to increase awareness of mental health. There is a need to improve mental health literacy through strategic public education campaigns, which in turn can encourage early treatment and narrow the treatment gap.

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About Mind Matters: A Study of Mental Health Literacy

The aims of this study were to assess recognition and beliefs pertaining to causes, treatment options and outcomes for alcohol abuse, dementia, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder and schizophrenia. The study also examined mental health literacy and its socio-demographic correlates and compared the extent of stigma relating to these mental disorders.

This S\$1million study was funded by the Ministry of Health, Health Services Research Competitive Research Grant and was led by Principal Investigator, Prof Chong Siow Ann, Vice-Chairman Medical Board (Research), Institute of Mental Health.

A total of 3,006 Singapore Residents (including Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents) were interviewed for the study. The study was carried out from Mar 2014 to Mar 2015, with a response rate of 71.1%. Participants were randomly selected from a list of all residents in Singapore, and the three major ethnicities were equally represented. Interviews were conducted with respondents in their homes or another preferred location. Respondents had the option of completing the survey in English, Chinese, Malay or Tamil. A professional survey firm, Ascentiq Pte Ltd, was appointed to conduct the survey.

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Mind Matters: A Study of Mental Health Literacy

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