

Mental Health Literacy among Family Caregivers of Schizophrenia Patients

Mohamad, M. S.¹, Zabidah, P.², Fauziah, I.¹ & Sarnon, N.¹

¹ School of Psychology and Human Development, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia

² Department of Nursing, Faculty of Medicine & Health Science, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Kuching, Malaysia

Correspondence: Mohamad, M. S., School of Psychology and Human Development, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia. Tel: 60-3-8921-3655. E-mail: msuhaimi@ukm.my

Received: June 4, 2012

Accepted: June 16, 2012

Published: July 16, 2012

doi:10.5539/ass.v8n9p74

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ass.v8n9p74>

Abstract

The benefits of public knowledge towards physical health are widely accepted but the area of mental health literacy remains undervalued and relatively neglected. The study aimed to identify caregivers' mental health literacy in Malaysia. There were 154 family caregivers participated in the face-to-face semi-structured interview regarding their personal caring experiences. This study found that majority of the caregivers was women aged less than 60 years. Most of the caregivers have some understanding about their relatives' mental illness. More than half of the participants found that the doctors were considered as their primary source of information about mental health. Consistent with previous literature in Malaysia, most of the caregivers used religious and traditional coping mechanism in their help-seeking processes. Each ethnic group had their own strong cultural beliefs about mental illness. The implications for mental health services are that many of the caregivers need help to educate their family members about mental illness. While this study emphasized on the family members who should be targeted to improve mental health literacy it also become significant to the public to reduce stigma towards the person with mental illness and their family.

Keywords: mental health literacy, family, caregiver, schizophrenia, Malaysian

1. Introduction

Advancements in information technology and medical technology stimulate the capacity of the public to be better informed and educated about the nature of many diseases and illness. The core of this capacity is the concept of health literacy. [DeWalt et al. \(2004\)](#) defined health literacy as both the ability to read, write, and comprehend word or phrases and the ability to use health and medical knowledge to promote and maintain physical health. Many countries include an objective to improve health literacy as one of the agendas for their Health Communication Report ([Nutbeam and Kickbusch, 2000](#)). The field of health literacy has advanced since the 2004 but health literacy in developing countries still remains poor and unresolved ([Ganassen et al., 2008](#)). What is more alarming is that the health literacy issues are worsening in developing countries especially in the component of mental health.

People with mental illness and their families struggle throughout their life by being stigmatised by the public prejudices and stereotyping against mental illness. [Cohen et al. \(2002\)](#) suggests that the public have the mistaken beliefs that mental illnesses are not real and disabling conditions and hence it discourages people from seeking care. As a result, mental health efforts do not receive equivalent resources as those of other health problems ([Cohen et al., 2002](#)). This is also demonstrated in public knowledge when the importance of health literacy for physical health is widely acknowledged but the area of mental health literacy has been comparatively neglected. [Furnham et al. \(2011\)](#) reported that most of the literature found that mental health literacy among the general public is lamentably poor.