# Deterioration of Stigma Surrounding Mental Health

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Paper

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Mental illness is defined as, "health conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking or behavior (or a combination of these). Mental illnesses are associated with distress and/or problems functioning in social, work or family activities."[1] Individuals with mental illnesses have been viewed, almost throughout all of recorded history, as a liability at best. Only in the past 50 years or so has the mistreatments of people with these disorders impairing basic function been brought to light. The treatment of mental health patients is drastically changing and improving, due to the negative stigma and outspokenness of the topic. Redefining the terms "mental health" and "mental illness" has been a recent goal to many in our society, who are taking actions through various movements and organizations, such as the World Health Organization, who focus on educating the public on mental health issues.[2]

People with mental health struggles were seen as something to fear invoking containment, shunning, and dehumanization of this group of misunderstood persons.[3] The stigmas surrounding mental health patients resulted in the topic being a rarely discussed subject and in turn, a social taboo. Many people thought they were alone in their struggle and that if they were to come out and express their issues that they would be shunned and told to suck it up. In past times, around the world, it was a social stigma that if you had a mentally ill family member that your genes were no longer considered quality, and your family may no longer be considered an honorable lineage. This resulted in the isolation and concealment of those with mental disorders. Many were also thrown on the streets due to their "unmanageable" and/or "dangerous" tendencies, leading them to be locked up in prison for life. The reality of the issue is that they were not alone, and mental health issues, from small scale to a large scale,

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[1] *What Is Mental Illness?*, www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/what-is-mental-illness.

[2] "Investing in MENTAL HEALTH." © World Health Organization, 2003.

[3] Sheldrick, Oliver. "Mental Illness: Changing Attitudes, Then & Now." *The Great British Community*, 24 Apr. 2015, greatbritishcommunity.org/disability-changing-perceptions-then-now/.

were much more common than made obvious. In a study done in 2018 it's shown that 1 in 5 adults experience mental illness each year.[4] Not many statistics are shown as to how many people were affected in earlier times such as the 1900s, due to it being a social taboo, but in theory the numbers would be around the same. However, it was uncommon to hear any talk about someone's mental health, good or bad, or for people to seek help.[5] Often times others would fear those with mental issues, simply because they didn't understand the concept, and the unknown turns into fear, which in turn transforms into hatred.

Myah, a 23 year old woman diagnosed with bipolar disorder, was interviewed with stigma based questions to get a look into today's mental illness patient.[6] When asked, "How has being diagnosed with bipolar disorder changed how you view yourself?", her response was, "I don't like that part of me. I just wish it didn't exist. And when it comes out I hurt people, and embarrass myself." When asked, "How has it changed how others view you?" she responded with, "I haven't told many people, but the ones that I do tell, it feels like they are uncomfortable or don't think I'm like that at all." Obviously, her own personal view differ greatly from that of society. She sees it as a huge issue within her personality, but to the average person that is not close with Myah looking in, it is not extremely noticeable, until she mentions the topic on her own. Although mental health and mental illness is a more accepted topic of discussion those diagnosed still are ashamed and have a hard time opening up about their condition to the public, leaving a large portion still untreated. When asked, "Do you feel like people are accepting of it, or rather judgemental?" her response was, "Some people you can feel the judgement. I don't tell many people in order to avoid that. If anything I'll joke about it." Her response to this statement shows

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[4] "NAMI." *NAMI*, www.nami.org/learn-more/mental-health-by-the-numbers.

[5] "NAMI." *NAMI*, www.nami.org/stigmafree.

[6]Ackley , Ella. "Interview of Myah Ness." 5 Jan. 2020.

that although there is growth in positive stigma surrounding mental health and illness, there is still much room for improvement and further education of the public to help ease confusion and common misconceptions that may cause judgement.[7]

Because of the decrease in negative stigma surrounding mental health and mental illness, and more of a normalization of it, more research and effort has been put into creating a more effective and more ethical treatments for each individual illness and for an array of options to be provided to fit different peoples' needs. However, treatment wasn't always this helpful and open for patients. Forms of inhumane treatments for mental illness date back as early as 5000 B.C. with evidence of "trephined skulls".[8] This was the act of drilling a hole into one's skull to "release" demonic possession and evil spirits, as believed was the reasoning behind mental illness in the ancient world times. Native Americans also had similar beliefs that what was behind mental illnesses was that of a dark and spiritual nature, that could be expelled through various rituals.[9] While these early beliefs on mental health were religious and spiritual a philosopher named Hippocrates decided to look at mental illness from more of a medical approach. He determined that these illnesses were "natural occurrences in the body". He came to the conclusion that it stemmed from imbalances in the body's four essential fluids: blood, phlegm, bile, and black bile. To treat these imbalances techniques such as bloodletting, either surgical removal or using leeches to remove blood from a patient; purging, inducing a patient to vomit; and imposing diets. This idea later became more popular and spread into areas such as England, where the technique was

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[7] Corrigan, Patrick W, and Deepa Rao. "On the Self-Stigma of Mental Illness: Stages, Disclosure, and Strategies for Change." *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry. Revue Canadienne De Psychiatrie*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, Aug. 2012, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3610943/.

[8] Hardy, James, et al. "A Beautiful Mind: The History of the Treatment of Mental Illness." *History Cooperative*, 24 Aug. 2019, historycooperative.org/a-beautiful-mind-the-history-of-the-treatment-of-mental-illness/.

[9] "Native View of the Cause of Illness." *Indigenous Religious Traditions*, 14 Feb. 2011, sites.coloradocollege.edu/indigenoustraditions/6-%E2%80%A2-independent-projects/indigenous-view-of-the-cause-of-illness/.

reproduced, as well as modified in many ways to cure the imbalances. Come medieval times the preferred practice was isolation, which gave rise to the spread of insane asylums or madhouses. When those affected by mental illness became too much of a burden for their families and society to deal with they would be put away in one of these inhumane institutions to be hidden from the rest of the population, and often forgotten.[10] These asylums were advertised to be the best solution for those with an illness seeking treatment, but consisted of primarily awful living conditions, as well as poor treatment towards the patients from the caregivers. Topeka State Hospital was one of the United State's many active insane asylums, infamous for it's poor treatment of the residents and it's relatively laid back admission procedure, allowing those without true mental illness to be forced into the torture awaiting them. Patients admitted to Topeka State experienced horrid mistreatment such as being left in restraints for hours, rape, forced steralization, and other dehumanizing acts.[11] Residents of these asylums were seen as no more than sick animals, and that's how they were treated.[12] Many of these asylums would also use inhumane treatments such as pouring ice water or boiling water over patients to burn them, restraints, isolation, lobotomies, electroconvulsive therapies, etc. A lobotomy is a surgical operation using an incision to the prefrontal lobe of the brain to treat mental illness. Another commonly used therapy was insulin coma therapy. This method was used from 1927 until the 1960s. It was believed large alteration in insulin levels could affect how the brain functions. These comas were successful for some patients, however, could result in death. Later on electroconvulsive therapy was deemed a "safer" method. Patients were strapped down and repeatedly shocked until convulsing, in hopes it would affect

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[10] "Mental Healthcare Challenges Today: Wake Forest University." *WFU Online Counseling*, 6 Aug. 2019, counseling.online.wfu.edu/blog/5-challenges-of-mental-health-care-today/.

[11] Ugc. "Topeka State Hospital." *Atlas Obscura*, Atlas Obscura, 24 Apr. 2013, www.atlasobscura.com/places/topeka-state-hospital.

[12] "Topeka State Hospital." *Topeka State Hospital - Asylum Projects*, www.asylumprojects.org/index.php?title=Topeka_State_Hospital.

their brain function. This is still used in some extremely severe cases of depression and psychological mania today.[13]

Due to the breakthrough in the negative stigma, mental health has become a more openly discussed topic, which proved it to be a larger issue than previously believed, and one that deserves more recognition and attention. The advancement in technology has created a variety of many more humane treatments, with considerably more beneficial results. Psychotherapy paired with medication is one of the most common and effective practices that we have today for those who are struggling, and seeking help. Psychotherapy is the use of a trained professional to take a psychological approach to benefiting ones mental well-being, while also taking a look into where the true issue lies, diagnosing the illness, and being able to access the appropriate medication to help treat the illness. Opiums such as Zoloft or Bupropion might be used as daily intake to ease the effects of depression, anxiety, attention deficit disorder, or a combination of many of these in patients' minds, however, they cannot be used to "cure" mental illnesses. Hospitalization is also another modern and effective method, but unlike the insane asylums of the past, these hospitals contain specially trained individuals that can closely monitor behavior, as well as adjust/prescribe medication and help to take the stress of daily responsibilities away while you're recovering.[14] Support groups are another beneficial way for people to deal with their mental illnesses, it helps to show them that they are not alone and that there are others that are struggling too, and there is hope for them. Even small steps such as helping the mentally ill all across the spectrum find jobs that fit their personality helps them to regulate themselves. Although there are still a considerable amount of people struggling with mental illnesses to this day, it is evident that improvement has been made from even just a century ago, to present day. Even the suicide in men has

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[13] "Taking Depression Seriously: Breaking down Barriers to Care." *Wu Tsai Neurosciences Institute*, 13 May 2019, neuroscience.stanford.edu/news/taking-depression-seriously-breaking-down-barriers-care.

[14] "Mental Health Treatments." *Mha*, www.mhanational.org/mental-health-treatments.

gone from the seventh leading cause of death to the eighth leading cause of death from 1980-2017. It is a small step, but is a step in the right direction. Females do not have suicide in the ten leading causes of death. Patients can now seek help and not be afraid of what's to come, but rather feel a sense of comfort and hopefulness that they will be able to find the treatment they need to be able to live a fulfilling, happy life. This is all thanks to the development in research on mental illnesses and the modern, evidence-based care.[15]

Mental illness is a concept that hasn't been taken seriously until the last half century or so. Treatments for those struggling from chemical imbalances in the brain didn't involve treatment at all, but instead received isolation, containment, etcetera. Today, mental health is taken seriously. It is no longer a stigma to near the extent it was in the past, and is treated with the most recent and effective methods. Recognizable as something that can't simply be fixed, nor something that can be ignored, mental health is a major issue with intense focus in current society, largely due to the enormous portion of the population affected and the recognition of the mistakes made in the past in terms of treatment of the mentally ill.

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[15] Mechanic, David, et al. "Mental Health Services Then And Now." *Health Affairs*, www.healthaffairs.org/doi/full/10.1377/hlthaff.26.6.1548.

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