Adolescents cope with mental illness stigmas, report CWRU researchers

EurekAlert

Living with a mental illness can be a tough experience for adults, but with the increasing numbers of youth diagnosed and taking medications for mood disorders, it can become a time of isolation, according to a study from Case Western Reserve University Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences.

In one of the first studies of adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 with mental illnesses and taking medications, researchers found that at least 90 percent of the study's participants reported experiencing some form of stigma. It has lead to shame, secrecy and limiting social interactions.

Forty adolescents in the study reported that the attitudes of parents and schools either protect against or magnify the youth's feelings of being different or ashamed that they have a mental illness.

Much is known about the stigmas suffered by adults, but researchers wanted to determine how similar or different the adolescent experience is from the adult one.

The findings from this stigma study came from a secondary data from a major study that investigated the subjective experience of adolescent psychotropic treatment.

Individuals, young and old, with mental illnesses suffer from public and self-stigmas. The researchers were concerned about how the youth internalized the public discrimination, or stereotyping of their illnesses, and if these stigmas experienced at a young age might impact the individuals as adults.

Parents were found to be either positive or negative key players in buffering their child against these stigmas by helping them lead a normal life or they can contribute to the youth's feelings of being different.

"Parents, who embrace and love their children for whom they are and accept the illness as part of their child's being, help their children overcome these stigmas," said Derrick Kranke, the lead author on an article in *Children and Youth Services Review* article, "Stigma Experience Among Adolescents Taking Psychiatric Medications."

Besides parents, the researchers found that the school environment can have devastating effects upon the youth if they feel ostracized by their peers and teachers. The ostracism can lead youths to drop out of school, or worse, commit suicide.

Kranke, a former elementary school teacher, is a Case Western Reserve University

postdoctoral scholar at the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences at Case Western Reserve University.

He said the study's information aided researchers in building a model to demonstrate how stigmas impact young people. Educators and social workers can design interventions to break the cycle in schools and help students accept their illnesses and become integrated into the school environment.

This new study builds on another study underway at CWRU about the transition from home to college for students with mental illnesses and who take psychotropic drugs experience.

"If parents ask at orientation what can be done to help their child's transition, it's too late," Kranke said, Coping with stigmas needs to begin as early as the diagnosis and the onset of medications, he explained.

In an effort to understand what happens before these students arrive on campuses, Kranke studied 40 youths between 12 and 17. The students described their experiences during interviews and answered questions adapted from an adult stigma survey. Kranke also interviewed their parents about their child's mental illness.

The group studied was comprised of 60 percent females and 40 percent males. On average, the youth take two psychiatric medications. The most common mood disorders in the group were bipolar disorder and depression. More than half the group had more than one diagnosed mental illness.

SOURCE [1]

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