

## The Misconceptions on Mental Health Problem in Nigeria

By

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### **Abstract**

*Mental illness is a clinically significant disruption in a person's cognition, emotional control, or behaviour. Mental health problem are not uncommon in Nigeria; the cases of suicides reported over time shows the degree of occurrence in our society. Nigeria, a society with many cultural beliefs, misconceptions and misbeliefs about mental illness. Stigmatization of people with mental illness is very common as the level of awareness of the Nigerian public on mental issues is very poor: This paper reviewed the misconceptions on mental health problem in Nigeria. The findings of this paper revealed that almost all tribes in Nigeria possessed different myths and misunderstanding on mental health problem. Among the misunderstanding found include the myth that mental illness affect only people with low intelligent, mental illness has no prevention and cure, mentally ill person can not be independent. It was also found that anxiety, depression, Schizophrenia, eating disorder and addictive behaviors are common examples of mental illness in Nigeria. It was finally concluded that all tribes in Nigeria are holding different types of misconceptions on mental health problem. It was finally recommended that awareness programme should be carried out regularly through mass media on the facts about mental illness so as to reduce misconceptions about mental illness in Nigeria.*

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**Key words:** *Mental Health, Misconceptions, Mental Illness, Disorder*

### **Introduction**

Mental illnesses are not uncommon in Nigeria; the cases of suicides reported over time shows the degree of occurrence in our society. Nigeria, a society with many cultural beliefs have misconceptions and misbeliefs about mental illness. Stigmatization of people with mental illness is very common as the level of awareness of the Nigerian public on mental issues is very poor. The level of misconceptions regarding mental health has since flourished. Knowing the causes of mental illness is a step in good mental health (Mbamalu, 2019).

Mental illness which is also known as Mental Health Disorder refers to a wide range of mental health disorders that affect our mood, thinking and behavior, mental health disorders include depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders, and addictive behaviors. All these are on the rise globally and by the year 2020, it is projected to reach 15% (Olakitan, 2022)

Depression is a killing mental illness in Nigeria. An estimated 20%-30% of the Nigerian population is believed to suffer from mental disorders. This is a very significant number considering Nigeria has an estimated population of over 200 million. Several bodies including Nigeria Medical Association, Mental Health foundation of Nigeria, and Association of Psychiatric of Nigeria have been trying to create awareness to the public especially on depression. A lot has to be done. The impact of the stigmatizing attitude and poor knowledge of mental illness among Nigerians have shown to be a major challenge to improving mental health in Nigeria (Tolu, 2019).

According to World Health Organization [WHO] (2022), one in four Nigerians – some 50 million people – are suffering from some sort of mental illness.

The seventh-largest country in the world, Nigeria has Africa's highest caseload of depression, and ranks 15th in the world in the frequency of suicide, according to WHO. There are less than 150 psychiatrists in this country of 200 million, and WHO estimates that fewer than 10 percent of mentally ill Nigerians have access to the care they need.

There are only eight federal neuropsychiatric hospitals in Nigeria with dire budget and staffing shortfalls prompting doctors to go on strike, leave the country, or quit the medical profession altogether, the prognosis looks (Mbamalu, 2019).

The World Health Organization (2021) defines a mental disorder as a clinically significant disruption in a person's cognition, emotional control or behaviour. However, there are varying degrees or intensities of mental disease, ranging from mild to moderate to severe.

### **Misconception on Mental Illness in Nigeria**

According to the World Health Organization (2021), —at any given time, a variety of individual, family, community, and structural factors may interact to preserve or impair mental health. Despite the fact that the majority of people are resilient, those who are exposed to adverse conditions, such as poverty, violence, disability, and inequality, are at greater risk.

Dispelling myths about mental health can help break the stigma and create a culture that encourages people of any age to seek support when they need it. Here are seven common

misconceptions about mental health as proposed by United Nations International Children Emergency Fund [UNICEF], (2021):

1. **Myth:** If a person has a mental health condition, it means the person has low intelligence.  
**Fact:** Mental illness, like physical illness, can affect anyone regardless of intelligence, social class, or income level.
2. **Myth:** Only the victim need to take care of his mental health condition himself  
**Fact:** Everyone can benefit from taking active steps to promote their well-being and improve their mental health. Similarly, everyone can take active steps and engage in healthy habits to optimize their physical health.
3. **Myth:** Poor mental health is not a big issue for teenagers. They just have mood swings caused by hormonal fluctuations and act out due to a desire for attention.  
**Fact:** Teenagers often have mood swings, but that does not mean that adolescents may not also struggle with their mental health. Fourteen per cent of the world's adolescents experience mentalhealth problems. Globally, among those aged 10–15, suicide is the fifth most prevalent cause of death, and for adolescents aged 15–19 it is the fourth most common cause. Half of all mental health conditions start by the age of 14.
4. **Myth:** Nothing can be done to protect people from developing mental health conditions.  
**Fact:** Many factors can protect people from developing mental health conditions, including strengthening social and emotional skills, seeking help and support early on, developing supportive, loving, warm family relationships, and having a positive school environment and healthy sleep patterns.  
The ability to overcome adversity relies on a combination of protective factors, and neither environmental nor individual stressors alone will necessarily result in mental health problems. Children and adolescents who do well in the face of adversity typically have biological resistance as well as strong, supportive relationships with family, friends and adults around them, resulting in a combination of protective factors to support well-being.
5. **Myth:** A mental health condition is a sign of weakness; if the person were stronger, they would not have this condition.  
**Fact:** A mental health condition has nothing to do with being weak or lacking willpower. It is not a condition people choose to have or not have. In fact, recognizing

the need to accept help for a mental health condition requires great strength and courage. Anyone can develop a mental condition.

6. **Myth:** Adolescents who get good grades and have a lot of friends will not have mental health conditions because they have nothing to be depressed about.

**Fact:** Depression is a common mental health condition resulting from a complex interaction of social, psychological, and biological factors. Depression can affect anyone regardless of their socio-economic status or how good their life appears at face value. Young people doing well in school may feel pressure to succeed, which can cause anxiety, or they may have challenges at home.

They may also experience depression or anxiety for no reason that can be easily identified.

7. **Myth:** Bad parenting causes mental conditions in adolescents.

**Fact:** Many factors – including poverty, unemployment, and exposure to violence, migration, and other adverse circumstances and events – may influence the well-being and mental health of adolescents, their caregivers and the relationship between them. Adolescents from loving, supporting homes can experience mental health difficulties, as can adolescent from homes where there may be caregivers who need support to maintain an optimum environment for healthy adolescent development. With support, caregivers can play an essential role in helping adolescents to overcome any problems they experience.

## Examples of Mental Illness

### 1. Depression

This is the most common cause of mental illness. It can be described as feelings of sadness, loss or anger that interfere with a person's everyday activities. It can be classified as a mood disorder. People experience depression in different ways. It may be in their working place, home, relationship with others and so on. It is quite normal to have sad moments but when it is a usual thing, it may have to do with depression. Many cases of suicide in Nigeria has been as a result of depression. Some have been hopeless, anxious, thinking too much, feeling sad, having difficulty in sleeping, having a loss of interest in things and so on. Depression is a serious medical condition and can make other health issues worse without proper treatment (Tolu, 2019).

### 2. Anxiety

There could be a mental disorder as a result of anxiety. People with anxiety disorders frequently have intense, excess and persistent worry and fear about everyday situations. These

people have trouble sleeping, have an increased heart rate, always feel nervous and restless, have a sense of impending danger and panic and so on. It is advisable to see a physician if there are symptoms such as these.

### **3. Schizophrenia**

This is a mental illness known to be caused by a combination of genetics, brain chemistry, and the environment. It is a serious mental disorder in which people interpret reality abnormally. It may result in some combination of hallucinations, delusions, and extremely disorder thinking and behavior that impairs daily functioning, and can be disabling. Early treatment is required in this case as it helps get symptoms under control before serious complications develop and may help improve the long-term effect (Astor, 2022).

### **4. Eating Disorder**

This is a mental illness that is characterized by irregular eating habits and severe distress or concern about body weight or shape. This disorder may include inadequate or excessive food intake which can ultimately damage an individual's well-being. This may be caused by a combination of biological, psychological, and/or environmental abnormalities which contributes to the development of these illnesses (Astor, 2022).

### **5. Addictive Behaviors**

Some mental health disorders are a result of addiction to many things such as alcohol, tobacco/nicotine, drugs, gambling, coffee, food, video games, internet/social media, sex/pornography, and so on. Symptoms may be seen on the person involved to struggle with mental health or physical health issues, the person has difficulties in keeping a significant relationship, the person experiences other negative consequences that are caused by chronic engagement in the behavior as well as having difficulty in engaging in these behaviors despite being aware of the negative consequences (Ejifoma, 2021)

### **Conclusion**

Based on this review it was concluded that Nigeria as a society with many cultural beliefs have many misconceptions and misbeliefs about mental illness. Stigmatization of people with mental illness is also very common as the level of awareness of the Nigerian public on mental issues is very poor. Therefore, increase awareness on facts about mental health problem in Nigeria is necessary in order to turn things around in this regard.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the finding of this paper, the following recommendations were made:

1. Awareness programme on causes and possible solution to mental health illness should be carried out regularly through mass media to reduce misconceptions about mental health problem.
2. Health personnels should double their efforts in enlighten public about facts on mental illness
3. Government at all level should made all medication and treatment for mental illness free of charge across the country.
4. Standard psychiatric hospital should be made available in all Local Government Areas across the country in order to make treatment easily accessible to all Nigeria.

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