Mental Health Promotion in Hong Kong: A Way to Prevent Stigmatization and Enhance the Early Intervention of Mental Illness

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Abstract

Mental health promotion has been given high priority in the delivery of mental health service in the United Kingdom. The prevalence of mental illnesses in Hong Kong would not be less than that in the United Kingdom and mental health promotion should not be ignored in Hong Kong. Mental health promotion helps to decrease the stigmatization adhered to mental illness, modify the pathway to care to mental illnesses, shorten the delay in help seeking, enhance the early intervention of mental illness, and probably improve the outcome of mental illness. In order to meet the need of the society and to be in line with the global trend of primary prevention, apart from mental health promotion and education on established mental illness, it is important to provide education on positive mental health, stress management, and the building up resilience in the society.

Keywords:Mental health promotion, stigma, pathway to care

Introduction

At any one time, around one in six people of the working age has a mental health problem, and most are related to anxiety or depression. On the other hand, about one in 250 people will have a psychotic illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar affective disorder (Department of Health, United Kingdom, 1999; Perala et al., 2007). The prevalence of mental illness in Hong Kong would not be far less than that overseas (Chen et al., 1993). The World Health Organization estimated that by the year 2020, depression will be the second most common cause of ill health and premature death causing substantial socio-economic burden worldwide, just followed that resulted from coronary heart disease (WHO, 2001).

Mental health promotion has been given a high priority in the transformation of mental health service in the United Kingdom (UK) and is incorporated as a policy by the government (Department of Health, UK, 1999). The National Service Framework for Mental Health: modern standards and service models, a policy paper published in 1999 by the Department of Health in UK, stated that "health and social services should promote mental health for all, working with individuals and communities; and combat discrimination against individuals and groups with mental health problems, and promote their social inclusion" (Department of Health, UK, 1999). Mental health promotion was put as the first (Standard one) among the seven standards (Standards two and three cover primary care and access to services for anyone who may have a mental health problem; Standards four and five encompass the care of people with

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severe mental illness; Standard six relates to individuals who care for people with mental health problems; Standard seven draws together the action necessary to achieve the target to reduce suicides) that the mental health organizations/ services have to reach and target at in service provision and delivery.

Mental health promotion to decrease stigmatization

Stigma of mental illness is so pervasive that it affects every aspect of the patient's life as well as the life of those related with the patient. In fact, apart from the patient, family and friends of patients with mental illness may have sustained "courtesy stigma", that is, a stigma by association (Goffman, 1963). Stigma of mental illness is a sign of disgrace or discredit and brings about shame, secrecy and social exclusion in the patients and their family (Byrne, 2000). Secrecy acts as an obstacle to the presentation and treatment of mental illness at all stages. On the other hand, social exclusion and the reduction of social networks could induce a worse outcome in chronic mental disorders (Brugha et al., 1993). The adverse consequences of stigma of mental illness on the behaviour of help seeking and the disease outcomes are further elaborated by Scheffer (2003). The stigmatization of mental illness and the lack of information on the symptoms of mental illness are seen as the main barriers to seeking help for mental health problems, and stigma has a negative impact on the patient's employment and social adjustments. Scheffer (2003) also pointed out that the most effective strategies in defeating stigma and in creating greater understanding and acceptance, are a comprehensive mental health promotion framework combined with a social marketing approach.

Mental health promotion and pathway to care

Mental health promotion can help to modify the pathway to care of mental illness and serve to shorten the delay in help seeking.

"Pathway" refers to the sequence of contacts with individuals and organizations prompted by the distressed person's efforts, and those of his or her significant others, to seek help as well as that is supplied in response to such efforts (Rogler & Cortes, 1993). The pathways to care of mental illness are likely to be influenced by conventions governing referral procedures, the relationship between primary and secondary care and simply the accessibility of services. Culturally embedded health beliefs, idioms of distress and social factors such as economic and educational status are important in determining the care pathway chosen by patients and his or her family members when seeking help (Bhui & Bhurga, 1998). These pathways are especially helpful with regard to determining the sources of delay in receiving care and deciding the training to provide to individuals and organizations that others might seek help from in order to facilitate early interventions and timely referral when necessary (Bhui & Bhurga, 2002). Taking the pathway to care for postnatal depression as an example, Whitton et al. (1996) studied the attitudes toward treatment of a sample of women with postnatal depression who delivered at two large maternity units in south Manchester. Ninety-seven percent of the participants recognized that there was something wrong with themselves, but only one-third believed that they were suffering from postnatal depression. Despite more than half of them had spoken to family or friends about their symptoms, only 9% had spoken to a health professional about how they felt and only 4% had informed their general practitioners. More than 80% said that they would not consider pharmacological treatments such as antidepressants. Out of these subjects, 51% gave as their reason that the depression would resolve without drug treatment and 19% were afraid of addiction. Whitton et al. (1996) concluded that if postnatal depression was to be more readily treated, women themselves needed to be more able to recognize its presence and be prepared to seek treatment. They suggested to increase the recognition of postnatal depression by mental health

promotion and antenatal education on the presentations, symptoms, treatments, and the ways of help seeking of postnatal depression. As illustrated in the study by Whitton et al. (1996), women with postnatal depression might talk to her friends, her family, her general practitioners of her symptoms, it is therefore worthwhile to extend mental health promotion to the women's family members, friends, and general practitioners so that the women could be encouraged to seek help earlier if they were in need.

On the other hand, it is not uncommon for Chinese people with mental illness in Hong Kong to seek help from the appropriate professionals years after their first onset of the symptoms of mental illness. In the Chinese culture, some people believe that mental illness is a punishment for the misdeeds of ancestors, the removal of spirits by shamanism, or the imbalance of the "Yin-Yang forces" inside the body (Wong et al., 2003). Sometimes because of such beliefs, Chinese people would be less ready to seek help from psychiatric professionals and they are afraid of the stigmatization brought about by mental illness. Despite the fact that Hong Kong has developed into a modern city in the past few decades, there are still people in Hong Kong having these traditional practices and beliefs. Therefore, better and wider delivery of information about different mental illnesses and the available services can possibly shorten the delay in seeking help from psychiatric services. This also helps to enhance early treatment which brings about a better outcome of mental illness.

The importance of mental health promotion in Hong Kong

Given that mental illnesses are prevalent all over the world including Hong Kong and that there are different types of effective treatment options (such as psychotropic medications and psychological treatments) available, with much better disease outcomes when treated and intervened early, the importance of

mental health promotion cannot be denied. As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, mental health promotion can help to decrease stigma, increase the awareness of the presentations and treatability of mental illness, decrease the delay in help seeking, and enhance the early identification and intervention of mental illness, and improve its treatment outcome. Moreover, mental health promotion has to reach different levels, from the patients to their family members and caregivers, their friends, and health care professionals who have the chance to manage people with established or suspected mental health problems.

Public Education Subcommittee of the Institute of Mental Health

The Institute of Mental Health (IMH) of Castle Peak Hospital, established in 2002, is a centre for the promotion and advocacy of better community mental health, through advancing science and disseminating knowledge in mental illness by intensive education, quality training, and rigorous research. IMH consists of six subcommittees and the Public Education Subcommittee (PES) is one of them. PES of CPH aims at increasing public awareness, dealing with stigmatization and encouraging the early identification and early intervention of mental illness by the promotion of general mental health education to the public through multi-media and multi-activity programs, or joint ventures with community partners.

Throughout these years, the PES has conducted mental health education for the public through the mass media, including newspaper columns and radio channels. It has produced pamphlets and exhibition boards on different types of mental health problems. More than two hundred items of mental health education materials, including pamphlets, exhibition boards, and compact discs, are now available for public access. The PES has held workshops and lectures on mental illnesses on its own and in collaboration with external agencies. In the recent two years, the PES has started to hold certificate courses in mental

health tailored for health care professionals who have the chance to manage people with established or suspected mental health problems in the frontline. The certificate courses are taught in the forms of lectures, workshop and skill demonstration by video and role play. From October 2009 to March 2011, the PES of IMH has hold four certificate courses and 3 advanced certificate courses in mental health for different health care professionals and more than 450 professionals have completed the course. Each of the professionals who attended the course would be asked to complete an evaluation questionnaire and almost all the professionals expressed that they would like to join the subsequent courses or programs organized by IMH. On the other hand, evaluation questionnaires of public educational workshops, lectures, talks organized by the IMH revealed that the public are most interested in topics like "stress management", "maintenance of mental well-being", "substance abuse", "child and adolescent mental health", and "care-giving skills". These findings illustrate that apart from public education on the presentations, symptoms, and management of established mental illness, it is the need of the society to promote positive mental health, stress management, and the building up of resilience in an attempt to prevent the development of mental illness. The promotion of positive mental health as the primary prevention of mental illness is in fact in line with the global trend of the promotion of a healthy lifestyle as a primary prevention of physical illnesses such as diabetes mellitus and hypertension.

Conclusion

Mental health promotion is an important strategy to decrease the stigmatization adhered to mental illnesses in the society. It helps to modify the pathway to care of mental illnesses, shorten the delay in help seeking, enhance the early intervention of mental illness, and probably improve the outcome of mental illness. Mental health promotion can be delivered in different forms (workshop,

lectures, talks, mental health course, educational materials) and should reach different levels to the patients, their family members and friends, and different health care professionals, and the general public. In order to meet the need of the society and to be in line with the global trend of primary prevention, apart from mental health promotion and education on established mental illness, it is important to provide education on positive mental health, stress management, and the building up of resilience in the society.

Acknowledgements

摘要

香港的精神健康推廣：減低歧視及促進精神病的及早干預

在英國的精神健康服務中，精神健康推廣及教育佔了很重要的部份。在香港，精神病的發病率並不少於英國。因此，精神健康的推廣及教育不容忽視。精神健康推廣幫助減低大眾對精神病的歧視，改善精神病的求助途徑，促進精神病的及早干預，令精神病的治療更見功效。為了更加切合社會的需要及配合世界各地對疾病採取基層預防的趨勢，精神健康推廣及教育除了幫助大眾認識各種精神病外，亦要在正向心理健康，壓力處理，堅韌力的提升等課題上加以推廣及教育。

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