Perceived barriers to help-seeking for depression among secondary school students in Lagos, Nigeria

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Abstract

Objective: In spite of a wide range of effective treatment options, a huge treatment gap persists for depression among adolescents especially in low and middle-income countries. The barriers to help seeking for depression among Nigerian adolescents are currently under-researched. Identifying these barriers is critical to the design of interventions towards better utilisation of mental health services. This study assessed the barriers to help-seeking for depression among adolescent secondary school students in Lagos Nigeria.

Method: Using a cross-sectional study design, 156 adolescent students attending a public co-educational secondary school in Lagos, south-West Nigeria completed a vignette-based questionnaire which assessed barriers to help-seeking for depression. The vignette depicted an adolescent with depression according to the DSM-IV criteria.

Result: The mean age of the participants was 15.9 (± 1.1) years and 49% were males. The most commonly perceived barrier to help-seeking for depression was stigma (50.6%). Other barriers reported included disapproval by families/friends (21.2%), illness-related factors (7.7%), negative attitudes to treatment (7.1%), financial constraint (5.1%), ignorance (3.9%) and preference for spiritual treatment (3.9%).

Conclusion: Stigma, ignorance, misperceptions and negative attitudes to treatment are major barriers to help-seeking for depression among adolescents. De-stigmatisation and mental health literacy interventions are crucial steps towards facilitating help-seeking among adolescents with depression.

Keywords: Depression, Barriers to help-seeking, Adolescents, Mental Health Literacy, Stigma, Treatment-gap, school-children, Nigeria

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Introduction

Depression is a major psychiatric disorder characterized by persistent low mood, loss of interest in pleasurable activities, low energy level, negative self-worth, hopelessness, lack of concentration, insomnia, poor appetite and weight loss⁴.

About 1 out of 5 people suffer from depression in their lifetime, and the onset of this disorder is common in adolescence⁵. Depression is a leading contributor to the global burden of diseases and is projected to become the second most burdensome disorder by the year 2020⁶. Despite the availability of a wide range of effective treatment options, there is a huge treatment gap for depression especially in developing countries where less than 10% of affected people receive treatment⁷. The Nigerian Survey of mental health and well-being revealed that only 0.6% of those with severe mental health problems including depression and anxiety had received treatment from mental health professionals⁸. The consequences of untreated depression include social isolation, decline in personal care and occupational functioning, deterioration in physical health, poor quality of life and suicide⁹.

Previous research highlighted a number of potential barriers to help-seeking for mental health disorders. These include structural barriers such as dearth of mental health professionals, non-availability of accessible mental health services in the community, and poor mental health care financing¹⁰. Apart from these structural factors, personal barriers such as stigma, ignorance, lack of confidence in the available treatment modality and poverty may also serve as obstacles to appropriate help seeking¹¹. There is a dearth of research on the barriers to help-seeking for depression among adolescents in Nigeria. Understanding the barriers to help-seeking is pivotal to the design of interventions targeted at promoting prompt help-seeking for depression, thereby improving outcomes in affected individuals. Therefore this study assessed the barriers to help-seeking for depression in a sample of adolescent secondary school students in Lagos, Nigeria.

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