Mental Health Professionals' Attitude towards the Use of Self-Help Resources in Psychiatric Care

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Abstract

Objectives: To study mental health professionals' attitude towards the use of self-help resources in psychiatric care within a specialized psychiatry hospital in the United Arab Emirates.

Methods: A cross-sectional and self-filled survey about beliefs and practices associated with self-help materials was administered to all mental health professionals who work with patients during March and April 2018 (n = 146).

Results: Almost all respondents (98.6%) had previously used self-help materials, mostly for treating depression or anxiety patients (47.9%) and mostly as a mix of formats (70%) including books, leaflets and websites. About 55% of respondents believed that using self-help material can improve mental healthcare and 46% believed that these resources improve the mental health literacy of patients. No significant differences in items about attitude were reported across gender, psychiatrists vs. nurses, and years of experience in mental healthcare.

Conclusion: The previous use of self-help materials for patients was found to be common among mental health professionals and for the treatment of various disorders. Further research is required to investigate the characteristics of healthcare professionals and patients that are associated with a higher perceived effectiveness of self-help materials in psychiatric care.

Keywords: Mental Healthcare; Psychiatry; Psychology; Nursing; Self-Help

Abbreviation

UAE: United Arab Emirates

Introduction

Mental health is increasingly becoming a global challenge. It is estimated that one in four families has at least one individual suffering from a mental or behavioral disorder [1]. Mental disorders carry a significant burden of disease and result in substantial psychological suffering and societal costs. Currently, mental disorders represent around one-third of the world's total disability caused by all health problems for the adult population [2].

To address this increasing demand for psychological care, the model of comprehensive mental health care was developed and has gained momentum [3]. This states that support, supervision, collaboration, information sharing and education across the different levels

of care are essential to all mental healthcare systems. The model promotes self-care while considering that people with mental disorders need to be involved, to differing degrees, in their own recovery. One approach for that is through the use of self-help materials.

The term "self-help material" can be defined in various ways depending on how the information is presented and the level of contact with clinicians. For the purpose of this study, self-help material is defined as an intervention that supports treatment and is based on self-care through providing patients with text (books, booklets, leaflets) or electronic resources (audios, videos, websites) [4]. These materials are usually informed by psychological treatments (for example, cognitive behavioral therapy) [5]. The goal is to increase the resilience of patients and if dealing with multiple disorders, then the content presented has to be arranged in a way that the patient benefits from the information provided.

Several systematic reviews and meta-analyses have shown evidence that self-help materials are a helpful resource for the treatment of common mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety [6-12]. Despite this evidence, very few studies have evaluated mental health professionals' views on the acceptability of these material as a resource that complements treatment. The importance of studying the views of mental health professionals also stems from the "Theory of Planned Behavior" in health psychology which states that whether a practitioner delivers an intervention partly depends on their views (or attitudes) towards that [13]. Previous research in that area has shown that self-help materials are widely used by clinicians with a concern that patients need a higher level of motivation to use and adhere to these interventions [13,14].

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), there is a high demand for mental health services. Data from the emirate of Dubai shows that around a third of its population needs mental health support [15]. In 2016, there has been 1.53 million visits to mental health facilities in Dubai alone and this indicator has been increasing by 8 percent annually since then [15]. Promoting self-care for alleviating depression, anxiety and other common illnesses has been highlighted as a strategy to address the increasing mental health burden while at the same time also improving community care and primary healthcare services [15]. In fact, the increased burden of mental disorders applies to the Arab region overall [16]. This is evident as the number of psychiatrists working in the mental health sector ranges between 0.2 and 2.7 per 100,000 in the region and this is much less than the average in high-income countries of 12 per 100,000 population [17]. Despite this treatment gap in the Arab world and the need for more human resources in the field of mental health, no studies have looked at the practices and attitudes of mental health professionals in the region towards the use of self-help materials.

Given this gap in the literature, the purpose of this study was to survey mental health professionals at a psychiatric hospital in Dubai to answer the following questions: (1) To what extent are self-help materials currently administered by mental health professionals? For what disorders, and in what format? (2) What is the attitude of these professionals regarding the usefulness of self-help material? (3) Is their attitude influenced by their previous use of such material for particular mental health conditions?

Materials and Methods

Design and setting

A cross-sectional survey was administered to staff who work with psychiatry patients at a specialty psychiatry hospital in Dubai, UAE between March 2018 and April 2018. Mental health professionals who work with patients and included in this study were psychiatrists, general practitioners, nurses, psychologists and social workers. A total of 146 respondents completed the survey. Most respondents were females (70%) and were from the nursing profession (70.5%).

Measures

Demographic data including gender, profession and years of experience in mental health service was collected. A survey was developed that looked at several factors related to beliefs and practices associated with self-help materials. Professionals were asked about any previous use of self-help material as part of their practice for patients with: (i) psychosis, (ii) depression/anxiety, (iii) substance abuse/

others. They were also asked about the types of self-help material used pre-dominantly: (i) books, (ii) websites, (iii) printed materials, (iv) a mix of different resources. Lastly, the survey included questions about professionals' attitude towards self-help materials and specifically if they believe that these materials: (i) can improve mental health care, (ii) can improve the mental health literacy of patients, and (iii) can be developed by mental health professionals.

Procedures

The Ethical Review Board of the primary author's institution granted approval for the study. A self-filled questionnaire was administered to mental health professionals working at the psychiatry hospital. Prior to taking part in the study, participants were informed about the objective of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation and the confidentiality and anonymity of the data collected. The definition of self-help was explained as any type of supportive material like books, printed leaflets, websites, or other electronic resources that supplements the treatment of patients.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive analysis was conducted first for all the items in the survey. Chi-square tests were then run to compare the attitude of staff towards self-help materials across gender, years in mental health service (less than five years, 5 to 10 years, more than 10 years), and profession (psychiatrists versus nurses only due to small numbers from other professions). As a next step, chi-square test was also applied to compare the attitude of respondents depending on whether they have used such material before for specific types of mental health conditions: psychosis, depression/anxiety, or substance abuse/any other condition. A p-value of less than 0.05 was considered as statistically significant.

Results

Among respondents, 70.5% were females. Most of study participants were working as psychiatric nurses (70.5%) followed by psychiatrists (21.9%), social workers (4.8%), psychologists (1.4%) and general practitioners (1.4%). About 41% of the sample had more than ten years of experience in mental health service while about 36% had less than five years and 23% had between 5 to 10 years. Of all those surveyed, the percentage of ever using self-help material was 31.5% for psychosis, 47.9% for depression/anxiety, 43.2% for substance use/others and 98.6% for any of these. The predominant type of self-help materials used was a mix of resources (69.2%) followed by mostly websites (14.3%), printed materials (14.3%), and books (0.7%) whereas 1.4% had never used any of these materials as self-help resources.

Regarding the attitude of mental health professionals towards self-help materials, about 56% believed that these materials can improve mental health care. Around 46% believed that self-help materials improve the mental health literacy of patients while about 25% thought that mental health professionals can develop such materials themselves (Figure 1).
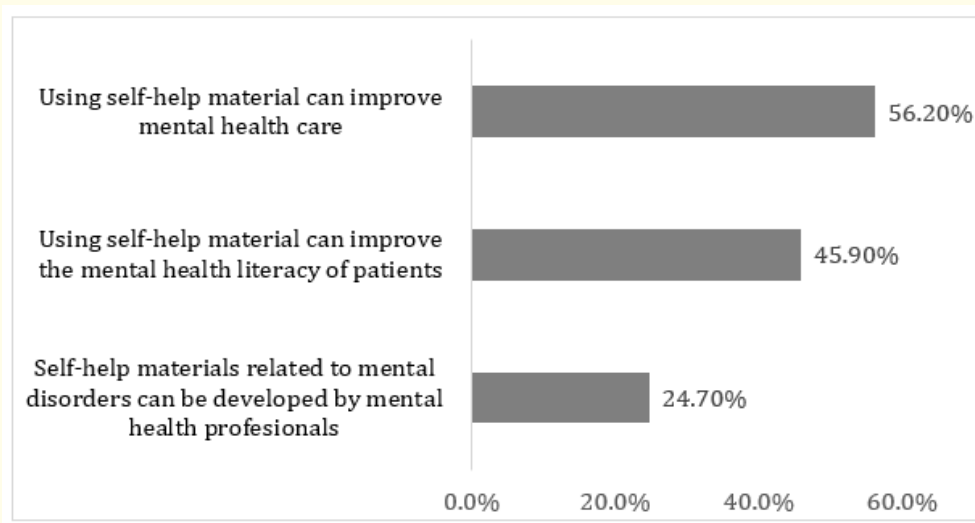

Figure 1: Attitude of mental health professionals towards self-help materials (n = 146).

There were no statistically significant differences in the responses of participants on each of these items across gender and categories of years of experience in mental health service (less than five years, 5 to 10 years, more than 10 years). When comparing psychiatrists to psychiatric nurses, there were also no significant differences in attitudes. Psychologists, social workers and general practitioners were excluded from the comparison across professions due to having a small number of respondents.

The attitude of respondents was also compared depending on whether they have used such material before for specific types of mental health conditions: psychosis, depression/anxiety, or substance abuse/any other condition. Results show that significantly more of those who have used such materials to treat depression/anxiety believed that self-help material can be developed by mental health professionals (34.3% versus 15.8%, p-value = 0.01). Moreover, a higher percent of those who have used them for treating substance abuse/other disorders believed that these materials can be used to improve mental health literacy (57.1% versus 37.3%, p-value = 0.017). There were no other statistically significant differences in respondents' attitudes according to if they had used self-help materials for the treatment of particular conditions or not.

Discussion

This is the first published study in the Arab world that describes the use of self-help material among mental health professionals and also their attitude towards that. The findings show that these materials are widely applied by respondents (98.6%) and in support of various types of mental disorders. This is consistent with other similar studies from the UK and the US where a high percent of respondents have used these materials to some extent [13,14]. Results show that these materials are being administered mostly as a mix of formats (70% of respondents), including books, leaflets, and websites.

Almost all respondents have used self-help materials at least once, however, there is a disagreement among staff about these resources. Only half of the professionals believe that these resources have a role in improving mental healthcare. However, these are subjective opinions/attitudes that are not necessarily supported with evidence [6-12]. Further research is required to study the reservations of professionals about the use of these materials and if that is justified.

In addition, only around half of the professionals think that the use of these materials increases mental health literacy. There is another factor here that could relate to that and this is the motivation of the patient to adhere to and be interested in these types of interventions. For example, a previous study has shown therapists to believe that patients with higher levels of education and an internal locus of control will find self-help resources more effective [13]. For the last item studying attitude "Self-help materials for mental disorders can be developed by mental health professionals", about a quarter of respondents have agreed to that. This may reflect the fact that these materials can be challenging to develop. Mental health professionals may have limited time for that combined with a preference for resources that are already available.

This is also the first study of its kind to look at the impact of previous experience with these resources and for specific conditions on attitude. Prior experience with these tools for different types of conditions (psychosis; depression/anxiety; substance use/others) did not change professionals' belief that these materials can improve mental health care. Other than that, it is to be noted that no significant differences in these items on attitudes were reported across gender, psychiatrists vs. nurses and years of experience in mental healthcare showing no resulting contribution of these factors on attitude.

Notwithstanding these significant findings, the study results have to be interpreted in light of the following limitations. First, self-help was defined in the general context as an intervention that is supportive during the course of treatment, however, the level of guidance that patients receive from clinicians may differ across resources (for example, patients may use these materials completely independently, or with guidance and follow-up from the clinician). Also, more data could have been collected about the frequency of using these materials and for what percent of patients. In addition, the study did not evaluate whether the professionals have received previous training on self-help materials or not. Lastly, although best asserted through evidence, more information can be collected about staff's perceived usefulness of such materials with regards to increasing the efficiency of mental healthcare.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study is unique for researching the use of self-help materials among mental health professionals in the Arab region. The findings show that most clinicians have used self-help materials at some point, across various types of conditions, and mostly as a mix of formats. Prior use of these materials for specific type of disorders did not have a significant impact on the attitude of mental health professionals towards them. A study that addresses the limitations is recommended through investigating clinicians' role in these self-help materials, the frequency of their application, having previous trainings about them along with the effect of these materials on the efficiency of clinical care.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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