

Reducing Stigma and Discrimination

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Author Note

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to write this scholarship paper to shed light on the stigma and discrimination related to substance use and reducing this in our society.

Abstract

This is a scholarship paper that will address the stigma and discrimination of substance use in our society and how it can be reduced. It will go over an overview of the stigma and discrimination that is faced in society and daily life. This paper will address why this topic was selected, what settings does this occur and who are the individuals that this affects. Additionally, this paper will address the negative aspects of this issue within our society. Lastly, the general assumptions that currently exist pertaining to this topic will be discussed.

Keywords: stigma, discrimination, substance use, assumptions

Reducing Stigma and Discrimination

Imagine having the world stack up against you and constantly feeling disgrace.

Individuals that have substance use issues are subjected to these feelings from society as a result of stigma and discrimination, that society has associated with use of alcohol and drugs. This paper discusses the current literature of individuals experiencing stigma and discrimination because of a substance use disorder. The significance of the latest research to help identify gaps has been beneficial to the profession. We have always known that stigma is associated with addiction but does this lead to discrimination which then becomes a barrier to seeking treatment. (Villa, 2021)

The significance of this research and how it can fill the gaps that are currently within our society. The stigma that is attached to addiction and the discrimination that these individuals go through is the main reason that these individuals do not seek treatment that they need for a disorder that they have and a common reason that they relapse. (Volkow, 2021)

Within the World of Stigma

Substance use disorders are also known as SUDs take a heavy toll on experiencing them as well as their family and friends. Not only are SUDs difficult to treat, but it is also challenging to get individuals to seek treatment among a population with existing increased relapse rates. (McHugh, 2015) As previously mentioned, this reinforces the stigma that individuals using drugs cannot be helped and causes negative branding to the profession. In society individuals that have never experienced addiction or had a family member with SUDs, often do not understand the breadth of the problem. Unfortunately, when individuals do not seek treatment, it leads to fatal consequences which impact the lives of family members and friends. (Wu et al., 2004)

Individuals with addiction commonly blame themselves for their disease. Although medically it has been proven that addiction is a complex brain disorder with behavioral components known as SUDs. (Volkow, 2020) Not only does the public within our society view addiction as a moral weakness and denounce individuals as flawed, but this also happens within healthcare facilities as well as our justice system This goes beyond community reach, but also applies to policy makers. Their bias reduces their enthusiasm to advocate for resources to appropriately address substance use disorder issues, which comes across as politically irresponsible. (Meisel et al., 2019) These resources can address substance use problems as well as limit programs that help the individuals that have substance use disorders.

Writer's Interest

This topic is of interest because I am currently within the Master of Social Work program at The University of North Carolina at Pembroke. I am also within the criteria C pathway to obtain my Clinical Addiction Specialist licensure as well as becoming dually licensed as a Clinical Social Worker. My areas of professional interest are mental health and substance use. Because often individuals present with both problems, I have some experience working with this population at past internships. Based on past research assignments, it has been discovered that these individuals are most at risk of not receiving care, unemployment, poverty, and suicide. (Thompson et al., 2016)

The statistics speak for themselves; co-occurring mental and substance use disorders affect 7.7 million adults. A total of 37.9% of the 20.3 million persons with substance use disorders also had a mental disease. (NIDA, 2018) During my internship in my undergraduate program, I was able to work in a mental health clinic and realized that many individuals that deal with mental health issues also have substance use disorders. The research is consistent in

reiterating that the knowledge of substance use for mental health professionals is beneficial and contributes to clients receiving quality treatment. (Cleary et al., 2017)

Settings of Issue and Individuals Affected

The issues of stigma and discrimination are prevalent in many settings. This also occurs in settings that are supposed to be assisting individuals as well because the language expressed by the clinicians are often not strength based. (L. W. Roberts & Geppert, 2009) The clinician needs to be aware of the ever-evolving language and how it can be perceived. It takes a lot for an individual to come in for services and if they feel stigmatized or discriminated in any way they can stop coming in for services or it has the risk of leading to a relapse. Just doubting or being non-supportive of a family member who is ambivalent regarding treatment is an example of stigma.

Therefore, language matters, and the language of recovery needs to be learned by every clinician working in the field of behavioral health. This will be helpful, so the client feels welcomed to the facility. Other significant settings are schools, the workplace, and housing. When we look at schools, we can see all the signs of substances as well as how schools reinforce the stigma related to substance use. In many small rural communities, word gets around who has substance use issues. As well as many individuals do not have many social connections or individuals willing to be a reference for them. This also is involved with housing and a reason why these two settings were included in this section. Therefore, in addition to stigma this contributes to discrimination in the workplace and with housing. When dealing with relationships it is hard for these individuals to stay connected to individuals. They tend to isolate themselves because they feel others do not understand them.

Negative Aspects

The negative aspect of this issue is that when dealing with the stigma associated with substance use is that this discourages individuals from seeking the care they so desperately need. Then when they do build up the courage to seek the care they need, they compromise, hide it from their loved ones, and are untruthful about their addiction. The feeling of shame and hopelessness causes individuals to relapse and fall back on the substance. The stigma that society places on substances also can make these individuals feel isolated and cut themselves off from the world around them. It is understandable why the individuals around them do not understand what they are going through because their experiences are unique.

These individuals also have fewer employment opportunities due to past substance use or due to the lack of references because of the isolation from social connections. (L. W. Roberts & Geppert, 2009) The employment opportunities missed leading to unemployment that can lead to homelessness because these individuals cannot pay their bills. Speaking on the individuals themselves, they can face bullying and harassment from this stigma, reducing their self-esteem. These were the negative aspects that I compiled on this issue.

Literature Review

The objective of the literature review is to make available a basis of knowledge for themes essential that can provide knowledge, adding to the insight of this paper. As previously mentioned, the topics of interest are stigma and discrimination of substance use in current society and what can be done to combat this issue. Stigma is how individuals mark others with disgrace due to a particular circumstance such as an individual that does substances. Discrimination is

treating another individual differently just because you can, an example is treating an individual unjust due to them partaking in substances. This topic is of interest because of the co-occurring concerns of mental health and substance use.

Additionally, many social workers are dually credentialed possessing licensures in social work and addictions. Therefore, the themes that were discovered while completing this literature review were; struggling with substance as a disease affecting the brain, risks of stigma and discrimination, and effects of substance use. All three themes are helpful in advancing the knowledge base for clinicians who work in the field of addictions and mental health hoping to achieve favorable treatment outcomes. There have been past studies focusing how the stigma and discrimination related to substance use; however, this paper takes it a step further discussing the impact of co-occurring issues.

Struggling with Substance Use

There have been varied outcomes on people's views and behaviors in the direction of individuals with mental health and substance use disorders, knowledge of these conditions can positively impact societal norms, when given the information that it is a brain disorder. (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine et al., 2016) The theme identified in this portion is struggling with substance use. The reason why this theme stood out was that each individual is unique, and dealing with their struggle in different ways. This is important to include as a theme to show how individuals manage their daily lives and coping mechanisms. Even though it has been proven that it is a brain disease, individuals' views, and behaviors towards both mental and substance use disorders varies. The science of knowing that it is a brain disease positively impacts the profession by providing creditable information.

This does help individuals struggling, know that it is a brain disease and something that is not their fault. I do not need treatment because I haven't yet reached "rock bottom".

(Mountainside, 2016) Clients who think they do not need treatment until hitting rock bottom is a very dangerous way of thinking. This rock bottom point may be a point of no return for many individuals, everyone's point of "rock bottom" is not the same. This is important to note because these individuals' struggles include highs and lows that are unique per individual.

Risks of Stigma and Discrimination

This section discusses risks associated with the factors. When an individual with mental or substance use disorders suppresses damaging stereotypes as well as public and structural stigma targeted toward these conditions, it is called self-stigma. (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine et al., 2016) The reason why this theme is important is that this paper is based on the stigma and discrimination that individuals face. The stigma is not just on the outside it gets internalized, they must live with these negative feelings even when they are alone.

The negative opinions and comments constantly racing through their heads in their thoughts. It is sometimes easy to brush what others say about us off but when we look in the mirror and feel these stigmas about ourselves, it is like being stuck in quicksand. It would contradict the presumption that individuals with substance use disorders who engage in unlawful drug usage should be considered delinquents, thus removing them from anti-discrimination safeguards. (Francis, 2019) This is discrimination because these individuals have been proven to have a brain disorder and have a substance use disorder. Instead of viewing them as criminals for engaging in substances and locking them in jails, there should be help based on the fact it is a brain disorder.

Effects of Substance Use

Patients with severe mental illness are believed to have a substance use disorder up to 75% of cases. (Alsuhaibani et al., 2021) This data confirms that many individuals dealing with SMI also have SUD. The theme identified within this section is the effects of substance use. There are many effects when dealing with substance use, both physical and mental. The specific effects differ from person to person and are also dependent on the medicine, dose, and route of administration. (Eske, 2020) This again contributes to the statement that each individual's effects on substances are unique depending on the individual, the substances they are using, and the way they are using the substances. This can also affect the way they cope with their brain, disorder, and the way the individual behaviors in their daily lives. What can be determine from this theme is that each individual has their unique effects from substances, and we have to look at each case with different lens considering each unique factor.

Summary Statement

The objective of this literature review was to present insight into a variety of themes within substance use, stigma, and discrimination. By no means does this even scratch the surface of where substance use begins or where stigma and discrimination ends. But what it does give the reader is some awareness into the lives of what the individuals that live with substance use go through on a daily basis; the struggles they face, the risks of stigma and discrimination, and the effects of substance use within individual's lives.

This is not to say that a different reader would come up with the same themes after reading the included articles. The context of this literature review focused on the stigma and

discrimination that individual's experiences which leads to negative outcomes. It is also critical to note that perception and language are very important when addressing substance use disorders.

Synthesis of the Research Findings

The relevant issue that is seen within society and outlined throughout this paper is that although substance use is recognized as a brain disorder, it continues to be stigmatized. This also leads to discrimination against individuals who may benefit from treatment. The media and society still stigmatize and discriminate against individuals that have substance use issues. The purpose of the literature review is to demonstrate daily life struggles those individuals have to experience as a result of societal reactions to substance use disorders.

The research concludes that there is a significant impact on their emotional and mental state on a daily basis that leads them to have mental health disorders. (Aas et al., 2021) The reason why this is so important is that they are receiving stigma and discrimination from their loved ones, family, and friends. The individuals that love them the most are sometimes the ones that are inflicting the most pain. This must be affecting them emotionally and mentally because they have no family support at that point.

The substance user internalizes everything that is around them to the point it becomes self-stigma and affects their self-esteem. As well as substances affect the mind and an individual's mental state, sometimes permanently. (Prosek et al., 2018) In the bigger picture, our emotional, psychological, and social well-being are all part of our mental health. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018) When looking into how an individual is affected by substance use, their emotional, psychological, and social well-being are all affected. The substance user all deteriorates over time negatively, they lose positive relationships, hurt their loved ones, and lose themselves, sometimes in the process.

Implications for Practice

This section of the paper offers an insightful interpretation of the primary research, effectively leading towards the final perspective of the discrimination and stigma attached to substance use. In this case, it is that the stigma and discrimination of substance use needs to be addressed. Included is the significance of what was discovered, learned and the current gaps that are still needing to be addressed. Lastly, this section discusses the ongoing implications for practice as they relate to clients, communities, and the overall profession of social work.

Insight of Primary Research

The interpretation of the primary research is that while there is a lot of stigma and discrimination going around both socially and professionally, there has also been strategies to address this professionally. The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) which is a part of the National Institute of Health (NIH), has created a series of teaching tools to incorporate within educational programs for physicians. (Levine, 2009) While this is not clinicians within substance use, everyone gets seen by a doctor and creating education they can pass to their patients and unbiased opinions of substance use patients can be the difference of that individual seeking help or continuing to not receive help. So, with this piece of knowledge, we must look at the glass half full. In the bigger picture, our emotional, psychological, and social well-being are all part of our mental health. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018)

The repeated impact these individuals deal with daily affects three parts of their well-being. Which in turn affects their mental health, while they have been diagnosed with a substance use disorder, the research within this paper has also shown that they have also been affected mentally.

Final Perspective

The final perspective on this issue is that stigma and discrimination is a huge issue that is affecting the substance use community and needs to be further addressed. As stated earlier the consequences of individuals having to face this repeated use by society lead them to have other mental health disorders. These individuals struggle with enough daily because you never overcome substance use because it is a brain disorder, it is something these individuals live with daily. As well as everyone is unique so you cannot look at one's life story and say it is the way, they all have lived or feel.

While it has come out that this is a brain disorder many people do not believe that, as you cannot believe everything you hear, so it is important to educate that this is a fact so that these individuals can live a life free of stigma and discrimination. (Leshner, 1997) This education does not just need to be addressed to general society, it also needs to be addressed within the medical and mental health community as well.

Significance

The significance of what was discovered during this paper was that the research that I pulled in to determine to what extent does the stigma and discrimination affect substance use individuals, is affecting their mental health. I wanted to see the effects that these individuals receive daily led them to have mental health issues. There is a significant impact on their emotional and mental state daily that leads them to have mental health disorders. (Matusow et al., 2013) During this paper, the research kept repeating how much the individual and their family were impacted. This emotional and physical trauma is internalized, the negative relationships that they build, their sense of self deteriorates over time without help.

Contributing to the overall research stating that their mental health is affected by this disorder. What was learned during the process of this paper that stigma and discrimination come in all shapes and sizes. It comes from even the most unlikely places, sometimes it comes from the people that are supposed to be the source of help, and sometimes it is the individual themselves. That should never be the case, an individual should never be in that place, but the sad reality of life is they do find their selves there and we should not be the person that led them there, we need to be the light that guides them out, to a bright future.

Current Gaps

The current gap that still needs to be addressed is that most of the society still views addiction as a choice and stigmatizes and discriminates against it. These individuals within our society are not just uneducated people walking the streets. They are family members of our clients; they are helpers that our clients receive services from and sometimes they are the clients themselves. These gaps are only becoming bigger because they are causing these individuals to have issues affecting their emotional, physical, and mental health. These gaps need to be filled with education for both the clients, workers, and the public, reaching through the media and a political standpoint. Raising awareness about these issues and showing support for these individuals. The only way to close gaps is by filling them, not by walking over them or looking the other way.

On-going Implications

The ongoing implications of this issue for practice relate to clients, communities, and the overall profession. The way it relates to clients is that while in the judicial system they may seem to receive increased justice and fairness when referred to the “brain disease model” but they are

fair higher degrees of public stigmatization. (Berryessa & Krenzer, 2020) The way it relates to communities is when this same model is produced it increases community support for these individuals as well. The way it relates to the overall profession of social work is that it is an ongoing process. As it states within the National Association of Social Worker's Code of Ethics, we must remain competent and promote social justice for our clients. (NASW, 2013) This includes advocating for the rights of these individuals, they have a right not to fear being stigmatized and discriminated against.

Conclusion

The topic of this paper was to address the stigma and discrimination of substance use in our society and ways it can be reduced. It gave an overview of the stigma and discrimination that these individuals face within our society in their daily lives. The reason why it was selected, the settings that it occurred, and the individuals that it affects. This paper outlined how this society can allow this population to overcome adversity. Based on current literature how this stigma and discrimination has affected the substance use disorder community.

The themes that I discovered during the scholarly articles that I read through were; struggling with substance use, risks of stigma and discrimination, and effects of substance use. This literature is significant because it gives background, information, and study on the subject. The importance of this research and how it can help to close the gaps that exist in our society today. The question that is proposed within this paper is seeking to what extent does the stigma and discrimination affect substance use individuals, is it affecting their mental health. My assumption that the effects that these individuals receive daily led them to have mental health issues.

They all deteriorate with time, losing healthy relationships, hurting loved ones, and occasionally losing themselves in the process. With all the material, it is apparent that this disease has a negative impact on their mental health. The significance that I found during my research was when it comes to how substance use affects a person's emotional, psychological, and social well-being, there are several considerations. Everyone is unique, and they deal with their struggles in different ways. Confirming that substance use with prolonged stigma and discrimination is deteriorating to individuals and can lead to mental health issues.

It is also shown that, even though it has been proven that it is a brain disease, individuals' views, and behaviors towards both mental and substance use disorders have still varied. It amazes me that even with scientific proof in front of individuals that they can turn their heads and not be satisfied with that information. To go to the lengths of discriminating against someone for something they cannot control. The significance of this topic stems from the fact that it is a major social issue including substance use and mental health, and you are working with a particularly vulnerable group. Because there is no specific age category, this is a diverse group of people.

They have already been known to have substance use disorder and the environmental factors that are accompanied by this. Throughout my research, I came across several chronological gaps in the literature, and many studies and reports on the stigma and discrimination associated with substance usage only look at the physical consequences. The goal of my proposal is to raise awareness about the importance of mental health concerns among people who suffer from substance use and are subjected to stigma and discrimination. The value of the social work knowledge base in this area is that it may be shared with addiction specialists.

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