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## Stigma to Strength: Analyzing Mental Health in Pakistani Society

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### Abstract

*We are living in the 21st century but mental health issues and problems are still a stigma and taboo in Pakistani society. Mental Health Statistics in Pakistan reveal an alarming picture. Approximately 50 million people or one in four Pakistanis experience mental health issues. The worsening situation of poverty, unemployment, social isolation, exam stress, and marriage pressure are some of the main reasons for mental health challenges like depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, and many more in Pakistani society. It is surprising that in this scientific and digital age, mental health is still a stigma in Pakistani society and has not been considered a curable disease. In this research, our aim is to find out the answer of such questions. To proceed our research, at first, we will try to find out the social, cultural, economic, educational and psychological reasons of this inhuman attitude of Pakistani society towards mental health and later on we will give our recommendations and suggestion to address this issue.*

**Key Words:** *Stigma, Illiteracy, Poverty, Superstitions, Lack of Awareness, Mental Illness, Social Attitudes*

### Introduction

Pakistan came into existence in 1947. It is a Muslim majority country. Before partition, it was a part of Hindustan. Sub-continent was a land of multi-religions, languages, colors, races, tribes, groups and sects. The dominated religion among all was Hinduism which had the historical background of BCE. Hindu culture was filled with superstitions and myth. Authority was for religious elite only. They had the right to explain and interpret the will of Brahman and scared text. Illiteracy of the people was the main tool for religious elite to misguide and treat them as animals. (Eaton, 2000; Metcalf & Metcalf, 2002)

Unfortunately, after the partition and emergence of Pakistan we failed to enlighten our society and the social and ethical evils like illiteracy, superstitions, poverty, lack of awareness, non-availability of health facilities, feudalism, tribal system, incompetent and corrupt religious and political leadership, misinterpretation of religion and contradictions gripped our society in their clutches. (Jalal, 1995; Lieven, 2011) Back in 2020, Bollywood actor Sushant Singh Rajput's suicide case was in the spotlight. Depression was the reason for his suicide and it was widely discussed all over the internet in India and Pakistan. (Chandra et al., 2020) Reverent personalities from all walks of life like scholars, intellectuals, writers, players, artists, actors and many others have talked about mental health issues. Many personalities from

above-mentioned fields are household names and somehow their lives, personal and professional, are discussed in our homes. (WHO, 2022)

We are living in an era where many people have access to the internet and smart phones. But, a real matter of concern here is that despite seeing the unfortunate consequences and outcomes of mental health problems of people around us, may they be common people or public figures, people remain silent and don't talk about the issues they are facing or going through. Why can't people talk about it openly and discuss it with people around them? The answer I find to this question is that we are still caged in a set of cultural and social barriers that were made hundreds of years ago. But we still follow them because we think this is how the system works or the society thrives. We live in a society where mental illness is still viewed as a personal weakness or a curse. People hesitate to discuss mental health issues due to the fear of being called "crazy" or "possessed". (Goffman, 1963; Corrigan, 2004)

It's the biggest stigma for women as well. Before marriage, they cannot talk about mental health issues because this seems a hurdle in the way to find a good proposal for them. After pregnancy, postpartum depression is not even considered a real thing. In some cases, it's due to a lack of awareness, limited resources, financial constraints, and self-stigma. (Niaz, 2004; Rahman et al., 2003) The above-mentioned factors are only a few and there are many more and some are not even known. World Mental Health is celebrated every year on October 10. This World Mental Health Day, let's normalize that Mental health is as important as physical health. Consulting a psychologist or psychiatrist is as important as going to a doctor of medicine. (World Health Organization, 2022)

#### **Rationale of the Study**

"Mental health should not be overlooked in favor of Physical health (World Health Organization, 2022). We should normalize that seeking help is a sign of strength (American Psychological Association, 2020). It takes a lot of courage to talk about mental health problems (Mental Health Foundation, 2021). The person who is consulting a psychologist or a psychiatrist is not "crazy" or "possessed" (World Health Organization, 2019).

We as a society should encourage people around us to talk about mental health issues and seek help when required because talking about it requires a supportive and non-judgmental environment (Corrigan, 2004). It is not easy to break the stereotypes and taboos at once but it's high time we should address these misconceptions about mental health and counteract negative stereotypes (Thorncroft et al., 2016). Our small efforts can save many lives (World Health Organization, 2021).

We can make people aware of mental health issues and encourage them to seek help through a coordinated effort (World Health Organization, 2013). We should highlight successful recovery stories to motivate people and make them realize that their condition is manageable and curable (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2018). Social media is a powerful weapon these days (Pew Research Center, 2019). We can use social media to spread positive messages regarding mental health (Naslund et al., 2016).

We can initiate mental health campaigns on social media to make people aware of mental health issues (World Health Organization, 2020). Similarly, articles, stories, and blogs on mental health should be written to reach maximum readers (Mental Health Foundation, 2021). Other than that, in order to reach the maximum number of people, TV programs, serials, and podcasts should be made in all local languages to make sure every common Pakistani can understand mental health problems and learn about them without any language barrier (UNESCO, 2018).

Community events should be arranged in societies, towns, and villages alike to spread awareness about mental health (World Health Organization, 2013). Similarly, mental health awareness campaigns should

be arranged every month in educational institutes and workplaces to make young minds aware of the problems (World Health Organization, 2020). Public figures should keep sharing their mental health struggles as it gives courage to their followers that this is normal and they can also talk about it (Time to Change, 2015).

Last but not least, we should discuss about mental health in our everyday family discussions and keep on checking our loved ones and people around us to make sure no one is fighting alone (World Health Organization, 2021). By these steps we can encourage the suffering people to recover. It will be a big step to revolutionize the society because sometimes people are waiting only for 1st step to begin and act.

### **Research Gap**

The issue of mental health is multifaceted (World Health Organization, 2022). There are number of factors and reasons behind the emergence of this health issue in a normal person (Patel et al., 2018). Despite the fact that a significant population live in urban areas, even they are not ready to consider mental health a disease (Karim et al., 2004).

Generally, mental health issue is considered as the outcome of magic or possession rather than a medical issue (Gadit, 2007). In the beginning of this millennium the issue of the mental health has been highlighted (World Health Organization, 2001). Valuable researches by intellectuals, scholars, psychologists and experts have been done on this issue. Social media, main stream media, and print media played their role to give consciousness to society (Pew Research Center, 2019).

Most researches prove that mental health issues are clinical and epidemiological issue (Patel et al., 2018). No doubt this aspect is of grave importance. But there are number of other factors like society, culture, economics, illiteracy and poverty that create mental health issues (World Health Organization, 2010).

In previous researches this issue has not been discussed in the perspective of above-mentioned aspects. The purpose of this research is to discuss this issue in the light of above-mentioned factors. Further, in this research the role and responsibilities of all social institutions along with educational and health sector is highlighted and determined.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To know the issues of mental health in Pakistan
2. To investigate the social and cultural factors which are the hurdles in mental health issues treatment in Pakistan
3. To examine the effects of this stigma in consultation with other fellow beings
4. To determine the role of all institutions and units of society: religion, family, educational bodies and media
5. To highlight and suggest policies for reducing stigma to give the awareness and improve the mental health

### **Research Questions**

1. In what way can we know the issues of mental health in Pakistan
2. How can we investigate the social and cultural factors which are the hurdles in treatment of mental health issues in Pakistan
3. In what way we can examine the effects of this stigma to consult with others
4. How can we determine the role of all institutions and units of society: religion, family, educational bodies and media
5. How can we highlight and suggest policies for reducing this stigma. And how can we make people aware of its consequence.

## Review of the Literature

Mental health issue is one of the gravest issues of Pakistani society. This one is the most ignored issue in our society. A superstitious socio-cultural perspective of our society is also one of the main causes of this stigma. Mostly people are not ready to consider it a disease. Now the new avenues of research in this respect have been opened in Pakistan. This report provides a foundational overview of mental health stigma in Pakistan, highlighting how Wali pointed out that the main causes of mental health stigma in Pakistan are pseudo cultural traditions and lack of awareness. (Wali, 2019)

According to another research, unexamined religious beliefs and mythological interpretation of the phenomena of life are the main causes of this stigma. (Kainnat et al., 2024) There is another opinion that self-made **cultural stories and social customs** are major sources of mental health stigma particularly in tribal and feudal societies. (Daraz et al., 2025) A group of researchers pointed out that the irresponsible and distrust behavior of the mental health professionals is a major hurdle in the treatment of this stigma. (Javed et al., 2023)

Internal feelings of shame in patients due to the lack of cooperation from society is the grave reason to avoid treatment of this illness. (Khan & Irfan, 2022) Tauhid pointed out that poor health policies and unavailability of the infrastructure for the treatment of such diseases is the serious cause of this issue. According to him, to resolve this issue, structural hindrances should be removed. (Tauhid, 2025)

The ratio of mental health issues is alarming in men. Latif highlighted that as a male member the expectations of family and society on one side and the non-availability of the opportunities from the system on the other side are the cause of day to day increasing of this stigma in youth. (Latif et al., 2024) Mansoor & Warsi mentioned that a fear of labelled as a metal patient, not only ordinary beings but the educated persons do not go for treatment. (Mansoor & Warsi, 2023). Sohail illuminated that the development of the feelings of the self-confidence and courage to face the society are the most effective tools to eliminate this stigma. (Suhail et al., 2024)

## Research Methodology

According to the nature and requirements of the topic, qualitative research method will be adopted to proceed research. To determine and evaluate the mental health issues in Pakistani society and to address and provide a solution of those issues, the study of socio-cultural perspective of the society is inevitable. In this perspective, the qualitative methodology would be suitable and appropriate. **Interpretivist paradigm** would rationalize the further process of research to get the practical guidance in this regard. **Phenomenological approach** will be helpful to analyze the mental health stigma at 1<sup>st</sup> and then to transform it in to resilience and strength.

## Definition of Mental Health

Mental health refers to an individual's psychological and emotional well-being. According to the WHO (2022), mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which individuals realize their abilities, cope with normal stresses of life, work productively, and contribute to their communities.

## Common mental disorders include:

- Depression
- Anxiety disorders
- Bipolar disorder
- Schizophrenia
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Substance use disorders

**Frequency of Mental Disorders in Pakistan** According to WHO approximately **24–50 million people in Pakistan suffer from mental health disorders** (WHO, 2021). Particularly the situation of following sections of the society is vulnerable in respect of mental health problems:

- Gender discrimination and domestic violence for women
- Lack of social identity and academic and unemployment pressure for young ones
- Living below poverty rate
- Psychological distress due to urbanization and socioeconomic stress

### **Mental Health Infrastructure in Pakistan**

Shortage of trained mental health professionals is the one of the major challenges in addressing mental health issues in Pakistan. The country has a very limited number of psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychiatric nurses compared to the size of its population. According to WHO estimates, Pakistan has fewer than **500 psychiatrists for a population exceeding 240 million** (WHO, 2021). This results in a severe imbalance between the demand for mental healthcare and the availability of qualified professionals.

### **Limited Mental Health Facilities**

- Treatment Gap
- Lack of awareness about mental health
- Social stigma and discrimination
- Financial constraints
- Limited access to healthcare services

### **Definition of Stigma**

Stigma is a Greek word. It means a mark or brand. In ancient Greece its use was to mention socially undesirable persons by showing cut mark on skin, to highlight physical burnt spot, a mark to point the slaves, convicts, or traitors. **So, stigma means a social disapproval, bad tag, disgrace, dislikes, dishonor or shame for an individual or community due to a typical feature.** (Goffman, 1963)

### **Stigma in the perspective of Mental Health**

It is very sad and pain full that in Pakistani society the Mental Health stigma is extremely humiliating and personality damaging. Society is not ready to consider it a curable disease like other normal diseases.

**Due to this approach community adopts a** discriminative approach towards such persons, hurt them psychologically, isolate them sociology and push them from main stream rather than help.

### **Psychological Meaning**

Stigma refers to **internalized shame and fear** experienced by individuals who are negatively judged by society.

### **Mental health stigma includes:**

- Public stigma (society's negative attitudes)
- Self-stigma (internalized shame)
- Institutional stigma (systemic discrimination)

**Stigma is a socially constructed mark of disgrace that leads to stereotyping, discrimination, and marginalization of individuals or groups.** We can explain above mentioned three main types of stigmas as follows:

- **Social or Public stigma** – It points out to the negative attitude of society towards a being.
- **Self-stigma** – The feelings of shame, dishonor or ignores within a person due to the sick behavior of others.
- **Institutional stigma** – The discriminative and biased policies, role and system of institutions (Corrigan & Watson, 2002; World Health Organization, 2001)

Above mentioned three types of stigmas are the main causes of the suffering of mental disorders.

### **Superstitious and illiterate approach of Pakistani culture towards Mental Illness and vulnerable situation of affected being and parents**

Still in 2026, majority of Pakistani society is living in mythological and superstitious mental state. It is a misfortune that in Pakistan, instead of considering mental illness a medical issue, people consider it a result of magic, witchcraft, the evil eye, malevolent spirits, the effects of amulets or attribute it to supernatural powers. On the other hand, majority of the society is not ready to consider it a curable disease but a stigma. Often this stigma becomes a main hurdle in the employment, marriages and the social role of such patients. This situation becomes more severe in the cases of female patients. Due to this attitude of the society, victims of this stigma neither disclose it in family nor go to hospitals. So, society rather than helping the patients of such kinds, deprived of them from any kind of treatment even from consultation with psychiatrists or psychologists. Society is full of so-called and fake fraudulent, dishonest and two-faced people who name them as spiritual healers. Such patients were taken to those deceivers and two-faced people, who create new delusions. Gradually the patient goes in isolation and society snatch the opportunity of enjoying the healthy life from such people.

### **Major social, cultural, political, and educational factors which influence mental Health in Pakistan**

Illiteracy, poverty, gender inequality, lack of awareness, superstitious approach of the society, extremism, instable political system, corrupt elite, lawlessness, high objectives of the youth, non-availability of the opportunities, disowning of the state to youth, failure of the system to address the problems of the young ones, misinterpretation of religion, failure of the representatives of the religious leaders to lead people and to resolve issues of the time. (World Health Organization, 2001; World Bank, 2022; UNICEF, 2021)

### **Way forward for transforming stigma into strength**

Following are the major important steps to address the mental health stigma into strength.

#### **Campaigns for the awareness of public**

In the respect the 1<sup>st</sup> step is to start the public awareness programs on permanent basis. In this way we can educate our society that mental health is not a stigma a curable disease like other diseases. We should open rational talks on this issue for awareness at public level. Introduction of mental illness as an ordinary disease will also play a pivotal role to eliminate this stigma. In this regard a continuous effort for a social support and an empathetic approach towards the victims of this stigma is also required.

#### **Mental Health treatment at Primary Health Unit level**

State should put special focus on this issue and manage its treatment at gross root level in basic health units which have been established in remote villages. A regular mechanism for the trainings of basic health units' staff should also be developed.

#### **Mental Health Education in Schools**

From primary schools to university level the counseling services should be provided. Teaching, training and healing strategies in this regard should be included in curriculum.

#### **Community groups, organization and NGO's participation**

All welfare organizations should keep this issue on priority basis to give awareness by involving parents, families, trainers, educators and local representatives. They should also prepare society to help such patients for treatment and to live a healthy life.

#### **Legislation for reforms and state policies**

A thorough and comprehensive legislation is required in this regard at state level. Special funds should be allocated for the treatment of such patients. A mechanism of the continuous training sessions,

seminars and lectures should be developed for experts and public. Welfare organization and charity institutions should also be invited to play their role in this aspect.

#### **Involvement of religious leaders**

Religious leaders, Imam's of Masjid and teachers of the madrasas and seminaries should be involved in this campaign also. Because they have deep roots in society and grave influence on masses. They should be requested to address this issue in their sermons, meetings, public gatherings and speeches.

#### **Conclusion**

As we have discussed and analyzed in above discussion that seven in 2026 the mental health is a stigma in Pakistani society. It is a complex issue in which all sections and factors like family, society, culture, illiteracy, poverty, ignorance, unawareness, negligence at individual and state level, corruption of the political, so-called irresponsible religious elite, non-availability of the opportunities and insecurity about future to youth, urge for wealth and propagation with neck breaking speed and discontentment etc. are involved in it.

It is a multidimensional and multi facet problem. The resolution of this stigma requires a common wisdom and a collective unending struggle from all sections of society. By taking wise steps in policy matters, by legislation to reform health sector and initiating a campaign at country level at emergency basis for the awareness of public by involving community groups, organization and NGO's, religious leaders, we can address this stigma positively and move forward to transform this stigma into strength.

#### **Recommendations**

- The engagement of policy makers institutions
- Nationwide campaigns for the awareness of public
- Prioritization of this issue at both public and state level
- Engagement of masjids, madrasas, seminaries, theological institutions and the representatives of religion
- Counselling, consultation, teaching and training at all teaching institutions
- Encouragement of research scholars to provide updated research, data and solutions in this regard
- The live and dynamic participation of media platforms

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