

REDUCING STIGMA THROUGH COMMUNITY-BASED MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Essential to the social and economic participation of people who have experienced mental illness is the reduction of stigma. Mental illness stigma has been identified as one of the main targets to free consumers and their families and carers from discrimination. Many types of interventions have been developed to address stigma, including community education and contact programs, where people who have experienced mental illness aim to inform the community by sharing their lived experiences. Schools have been identified as a particularly important setting for such interventions—to change the attitudes and behaviours of young people toward consumers and carers, and also to encourage early mental health help-seeking behaviour for young people. This study investigated the impact of a school-based education intervention (Mental Illness Education ACT) where personal contact between students and consumers and carers aims to reduce stigma, and increase mental health literacy and intentions to seek help for a mental health problem amongst high school students. Changes in empathetic concern and barriers to seeking help were investigated as possible mediators of program effectiveness. A sample of 694 students (251 males, 443 females), aged between 11 and 19 years, across 13 public and private high schools and colleges throughout Canberra, the capital city of Australia, was obtained. Students completed self-report questionnaires before and after participating in the education program and their results were compared with a control group.

CONCLUSIONS

Results indicated the program was effective in decreasing stigma and increasing knowledge, but still had limited effect on encouraging help-seeking intentions. The research contributes to our

understanding of how coalitions across diverse sectors and settings, in this case schools and consumer advocacy groups, can be effective in reducing stigma. The research also contributes to the emerging evidence base regarding how factors that reduce discrimination and increase social participation can be effectively and efficiently addressed.

CHARTER RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendation from this research for the Charter to take mental health promotion and prevention of mental disorder from margins to mainstream is to fully support and integrate contact-based consumer and carer-led community education programs within a recovery-oriented mental health system.