



Mental Health Promotion Interventions in Occupational Settings: A Review of Evidence

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Abstract

This paper focused on the review of mental health promotion interventions in occupational settings. Mental health was described as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can contribute to her or his community. Mental health promotions are actions aimed to create living conditions and environments that support mental health and allow people to adopt and maintain healthy lifestyles. The paper also highlighted the benefits of mental health promotion to the employee and the organization. The intervention strategies for mental health promotion at the workplace include health communication; health education; as well as policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change. However, these strategies need to be adopted to promote optimum health and well being of workers in their workplace or occupational setting. The author recommended among others that the government should intensify efforts to enhance the promotion of mental health in all occupational settings by employers to maintain a good state of mental health of employees.

Keywords: Mental Health, Mental Health Promotion, Interventions, Occupation, Setting

Introduction

Mental health promotion enables people to increase control over their own health. It covers a wide range of social and environmental interventions that are designed to benefit and protect individual people's health and quality of life by addressing and preventing the root causes of ill health in an occupational setting not just focusing on treatment and cure (World Health Organization [WHO], 2016).

Globally, mental health disorders are the leading causes of disability among individuals. In some high-income countries, as much as 40 per cent of disability can be attributed to mental disorders (WHO, 2016). In the WHO European Region, depression alone causes 13.7 per cent of all disabilities, alcohol disorders are ranked second with 6.2 per cent while schizophrenia and bipolar disorders are much rarer but often lasting many years; and rank numbers 11 and 12 respectively with just over 2 per cent each (Whiteford et al., 2013). To address this, it is important to encourage healthy lifestyle practices among individuals in their places of work. This is because of the amount of time individuals spend in their occupational environment (Ogunyomi, & Bruning, 2016; Ghodrati, Yiu, Wilkinson, & Shahbazpour, 2018; Tremblay, & Badri, 2018). It is no surprise that policymakers are concerned about the effects of mental disorders on society and the economy.

In Nigeria, the subject of mental health is often culturally evaded; as many people are not usually inclined to discuss it openly (Bakare, 2014). The reality, however, is that mental health statistics in Nigeria are alarming. According to a report, the prevalence of mental illness in Nigeria is about 20 per cent (Mental Health Leadership and Advocacy Program, 2012). It has also been reported that relative to a population of about 174 million (World Bank, 2013), 64 million Nigerians are deemed to suffer from one form of mental health illness or the other ranging from depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders and addictive behaviours (Oyewunmi, & Oyewunmi, 2014).

Occupation/occupational setting.

The environment in which occupations take place is known as an occupational setting. Occupations are the day-to-day activities that enable people to sustain themselves and to contribute to the life of their family (Tetrick, 2017). Also, occupations are fundamental to human health and well-being because they provide meaning, identity and structure to people's lives and reflect societal values and culture (Beus, Mccord, & Zohar, 2016). Because humans are generally occupational beings, occupations may have therapeutic potential. Occupational therapists categorize occupations as self-care, productivity and leisure (Nordlöf, Wiitavaara, Högberg, & Westerling, 2017). Self-care can be functional mobility and communication, home management, personal hygiene and productivity. The categorization also includes paid and unpaid work; Leisure activities - socializing, outdoor activities, games and sports. For people to have a good occupational life, they will have to be in good occupational health (Rojatz, Merchant, & Nitsch, 2017).

Mental health.

Mental health is defined as a state of wellbeing in which every individual realizes his or her potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can make a contribution to his or her community. Mental health includes emotional, psychological, and social well-being (WHO, 2014). Also, it further includes subjective well-being, perceived self-efficacy, autonomy, competence, inter-generational dependence, and self-actualization of one's intellectual and emotional potential among others. However, the well-being of an individual is encompassed in the realization of their abilities, coping with normal stresses of life, productive work and contribution to their community. It affects how individuals think, feel and act. It also helps determine how one handles stress, relate to others, and make choices. Thus, mental health is referred to as the level of psychological well-being or an absence of mental illness (WHO, 2014).

It is generally accepted that mental health plays an integral role in defining overall health. It is the foundation for the well-being and effective functioning of individuals (Cameron, & Schneider, 2018). The importance of mental health promotion is stressed in WHO's definition of health as a "state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". Mental health covers a wide range of activities related to the promotion of well-being, prevention of mental disorders, and the treatment and rehabilitation of people affected by mental disorders in an occupational setting (WHO, 2016).

Mental health problems can affect an individual's functional and working capacity in numerous ways. Depending on an individual's age at the onset of a mental health problem, his or her working capacity can be significantly reduced. In the workplace, this can lead to absenteeism, require sick leave, and reduce productivity. Long-term mental health difficulties are, according to a WHO (2014) report, one of the three leading causes of disability, along with cardiovascular disease and musculoskeletal disorders, and they are a major reason for granting disability pensions in several countries including Nigeria. Mental health problems do not just affect the individual, they impact the entire community. This can be reduced through mental health promotion.

Mental health promotion.

The concept of mental health promotion has been variously defined. The World Health Organization (2016) defined mental health promotion as actions to create living conditions and environments that support mental health and allow people to adopt and maintain healthy lifestyles. These include actions to optimize people's chances of experiencing better mental health. The WHO (2016) noted that fundamental to mental health promotions are actions that facilitate an environment that respects and protects basic civil service, political sectors, socio-economic and cultural rights. Without the security and freedom provided by these rights, arguably it is difficult to maintain high levels of mental health. The WHO (2016) argued that mental health policies should include mental health promotion and not be limited to the health sector, but also involve education, labour, justice, transport, environment, housing, and welfare.

Mental health promotion in the occupational setting and primary prevention interventions have attempted to react to an increasing burden and a changing spectrum of disease as well as especially from an economic view high levels of sick leave. The knowledge that at least parts of modern society's diseases are caused primarily by unhealthy behaviour, and are therefore preventable, triggered multiple behavioural interventions in the areas of physical activity and nutrition (Alarcón, Acuña, Diethelm, & Pellicer, 2016). Education and awareness interventions must be based on pertinent themes such as active living/fitness, healthy eating, alcohol and smoking cessation, managing workload and interpersonal relations, adapting to changes, managing realities constructively, building emotional stability, developing resilience and seeking counselling.

Benefits of mental health promotion.

Mental health promotion is a science that draws from the biological, environmental, psychological, physical and medical sciences to promote mental health and prevent disease, disability and premature death through education-driven voluntary behaviour change activities (WHO, 2016). It is the development of individual, group, institutional, community and systemic strategies to improve mental health knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviour (Cameron, & Schneider, 2018). The purpose of mental health promotion is to positively influence the mental health and cognitive capability of employees as well as the living and working conditions that influence their mental health and overall wellbeing.

The benefits of mental health promotion to employees include a safe and healthy work environment, enhanced self-esteem, reduced stress, improved morale, increased job satisfaction, improved sense of well being and increased skills for health protection. To the organization also, health promotion promotes: a well-managed health and safety programme, a positive and caring image, improved staff morale, reduced staff turnover, reduced absenteeism, increased productivity, reduced healthcare/insure costs and reduced risk of fines and litigation (Cameron, & Schneider, 2018).



Intervention Strategies for Mental Health Promotion at the Workplace

Mental health promotion programs can improve health at every stage of life. To achieve this, there are several strategies for integrating mental health promotion into everyday practice in the occupational setting. The strategies are health communication; health education; and policy, systems, and environmental change.

Health communication.

Health communication includes verbal and written strategies to influence and empower employees, populations, and communities to make healthier choices. Health communication often integrates components of multiple theories and models to promote positive changes in attitudes and behaviours. Health communication involves the development of activities and interventions designed to positively change behaviours. Effective health communication strategies include the following components: understanding conventional wisdom, concepts, language, and priorities for different cultures and settings; consideration of mental health literacy, internet access, media exposure, and cultural competency of target populations; and development of materials such as brochures, billboards, newspaper articles, television broadcasts, radio commercials, public service announcements, newsletters, pamphlets, videos, digital tools, case studies, group discussions, health fairs, field trips, and workbooks among others media outlets (Wierenga et al., 2013; Rojatz, Merchant, & Nitsch, 2017).

Health education.

Health education is one strategy for implementing mental health promotion programs in the workplace. Health education provides learning experiences in mental health and safety. Health education strategies are tailored to their target population. Health education presents information to target populations on particular mental health topics and provides tools to build cognitive capacity in an appropriate setting. Examples of health education activities include lectures, courses, seminars, workshops and classes.

Characteristics of health education strategies include the participation of the target population; completion of a community needs assessment to identify community cognitive capacity, resources, priorities, and needs; planned learning activities that increase participants' knowledge and skills; implementation of programs with integrated, well-planned curricula and materials that take place in a setting convenient for participants; presentation of information with audiovisual and computer-based supports such as slides and projectors, videos, books, CDs, posters, pictures, websites, or software programs; and ensuring proficiency of program staff, through training, to maintain fidelity to the program model (McCoy, Stinson, Scott, Tenney, & Newman, 2014).

Policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change.

For mental health promotion to be successful, policies, systems, and environments must be supportive of mental health. Policy, systems, and environmental change strategies are designed to promote healthy behaviours by making healthy choices readily available and easily accessible in the community. PSE change strategies are designed with sustainability in mind (Rojatz, Merchant, & Nitsch, 2017).

Policy change.

The policy is a tool for achieving mental health promotion. Policy decisions are made by organizations, agencies, and stakeholders. Policy approaches include legislative advocacy, fiscal measures, taxation, and regulatory oversight. Examples of mental health promotion policy approaches include establishing policies prohibiting fights and quarrels; establishing healthy working environments devoid of noise; requiring the use of safety equipment in a work setting.

Systems change.

Systems change refers to a fundamental shift in the way problems are solved. Within an organization, systems change affects organizational purpose, function and connections by addressing organizational culture, beliefs, relationships, policies and goals. Examples of systems change in mental health promotion include developing plans for implementing new interventions and processes; adapting or replicating a proven mental health promotion model; implementing new technologies; and creating training or certification systems that align with policies.

Environmental change.

Environmental change strategies involve changing the economic, social, or physical surroundings or contexts that affect mental health outcomes. Environmental strategies address mental health outcomes and are best used in combination with other strategies. Examples of environmental strategies for mental health promotion include installing signs that promote the use of walking and biking paths; and availability of mental health experts in the occupational setting.

The Way Forward: Workplace Mental Health Promotion

Mental health promotion component needs to be strengthened with simple, cost-effective, innovative, culturally and geographically appropriate models, combining the issue-based and settings-based designs and ensuring community participation. Replicability of successful health promotion initiatives and best practices from across the world and within the country needs to be assessed. For effective implementation of mental health promotion, there is a need to engage sectors beyond health and adopt an approach of mental health in all policies rather than just the health policy.

The need to ensure the optimum mental health of workers in their workplace or occupational setting cannot be overemphasized because of the following: healthy workers are productive and raise healthy families thus healthy workers are a key strategy hence goal for overcoming poverty; safe workplaces contribute to sustainable development; occupational safety and mental health can contribute to improving the employability of workers through workplace (re)design, maintenance of mental health and safe working environment, training and retraining, assessment of work demands, medical diagnosis, mental health screening and assessment of functional and cognitive capacities.

Conclusion

The promotion of mental health in the workplace must begin with the commitment and proactiveness of efficient management of employees and consultation with employees to assess mental health needs and design policies and interventions/programmes that will complement these needs. The organization must formulate a strong policy that expresses commitment to the promotion of mental health of the employees. This should be followed by a plan that correlates with the mental health needs assessment as defined by the policy. The plan must specify objectives, appropriate interventions, identify and empower motivated advocates and practitioners, set a time frame, provide a budget and funding options.

In terms of interventions, the Nigerian workplace setting will benefit immensely from education and awareness on the pervasiveness of mental health problems, common misconceptions and lifestyle choices that will foster positive mental health. Education and awareness interventions must be based on pertinent themes such as active living/fitness, healthy eating, alcohol and smoking cessation, managing workload and interpersonal relations, adapting to changes, managing realities constructively, building emotional stability, developing resilience and seeking counselling. In recruiting new employees, many human resource managers are likely to be interested in the brightest candidates without necessarily considering their mental health profiles. Pre-employment medical assessments usually include a mental health assessment and employee training programmes do not cover the area of mental health. Human resource personnel must know about mental health, to provide support, counselling and an inclusive environment for employees.

Recommendations

Based on the discussion, the following recommendations were made:

1. The government should intensify efforts to enhance the promotion of mental health in all occupational settings by employers to maintain a good state of mental health of employees.
2. Employers of labour should try as much as possible to provide a favourable working environment for all their employees also in a bid to maintain a good state of mental health of employees.
3. The government should set aside punishments for employers whose employees exhibit low mental health, as this will help mandate employers to provide favourable working conditions for employees.
4. Non-governmental organizations in collaboration with the government should provide funds for the provision of efficient facilities and regular payment of workers' salaries which will, in turn, enhance the attainment of mental health promotion of workers.

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