From stigma to support: The OPPA framework for elder peer support in mental health

Khadijah Hasanah Abang Abdullah[1,2], Mohd Radzniwan A Rashid[2,3], Nurazah Ismail[1], Jasmine Hazel Mohd Nasir[2,4], Nur Raihana Zakaria[2,5], Balqis Muhammad Kasim[2,6], Ahmad Fairuz Mohamed[2,7], Tengku Amatullah Madeehah Tengku Mohd[2,8]

[1]Department of Psychiatry, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, 71800 Bandar Baru Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, [2]Green Crescent Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia, [3]Family Medicine Unit, Department of Primary Health Care, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, 71800 Bandar Baru Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, [4]Neurogenesis Sdn Bhd, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, [5]Obstetrics and Gynaecology Unit, Department of Surgery, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, 71800 Bandar Baru Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, [6]Ministry of Health Malaysia, Putrajaya, Malaysia, [7]Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, International Medical University, 57000 Bukit Jalil, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, [8]Public Health Unit, Department of Primary Care, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, 71800 Bandar Baru Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Mental health remains a growing public health concern globally, with older adults often facing stigma, limited awareness, and reduced access to psychosocial support. In Malaysia, misconceptions surrounding mental health are prevalent, where the term is often narrowly associated with severe psychiatric illness or "madness." Such stigma discourages help-seeking behavior and reinforces isolation within the community. However, older adults themselves represent a valuable but underutilized resource for mental health advocacy and peer support, given their lived experiences, wisdom, and strong community presence. The Older Persons Peer Support Agent (OPPA) program was designed with the objective of educating older adults to provide peer support, increase community awareness, and reduce stigma related to mental health. **Materials and Methods:** A structured two-day training program was developed using an evidence-informed approach. The training module comprised four key components: (i) emotion recognition, to help participants identify and understand basic emotions in themselves and others; (ii) introduction to common mental health problems, including stress, anxiety, and depression; (iii) effective communication skills, with emphasis on active listening and being a supportive peer; and (iv) pathways to care, introducing available community and professional services to OPPA agents to link people requiring care. A total of 100 older adults were recruited and trained as OPPA agents. Upon completion, participants were stationed at three local masjids to act as peer support providers, where they could be approached by community members in need of guidance, emotional support, or referral. **Results:** The training was well received by participants, many of whom expressed surprise at the breadth of mental health issues beyond severe psychiatric disorders. Participants highlighted that they had previously believed mental health referred only to individuals who were "crazy," but the training opened their perspective to the everyday challenges of emotional well-being, stress, and common disorders faced across the lifespan. Furthermore, the module increased their awareness of the variety of mental health services available in the community, many of which they had not previously known. Participants reported feeling empowered, excited, and more confident to play an active role as peer supporters within their local communities. Initial feedback from community members suggested that having older adults as peer support agents stationed at masjid provided a culturally acceptable and accessible avenue for initiating conversations around mental health. **Conclusion:** The OPPA program demonstrates that older adults, when provided with structured training, can serve as effective peer support agents and advocates for mental health within their communities. This initiative not only enhances older adults' knowledge and capacity but also contributes to breaking stigma and normalizing conversations on mental health at the grassroots level. The program leverages the unique position of older adults as trusted community figures, allowing the impact to extend beyond the individual to families, religious spaces, and the wider society. Importantly, involving older adults in peer support initiatives is both cost-effective and sustainable, as they are motivated by community service rather than financial incentives. By engaging older adults as mental health advocates, the OPPA program helps bridge gaps in awareness, promotes help-seeking, and contributes to a more supportive and mentally healthy community.

Keywords: Mental health, peer support, older adults, community