

Assessing Attitudes Toward Mental Illness Among Postgraduate Medical Students: A Descriptive Study

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Abstract: *Doctors play a crucial role in treating patients with mental illness. However, negative beliefs towards mental illness can affect the quality of care provided. This study aims to determine the beliefs towards mental illness among postgraduate medical students, assess their self-stigma in seeking psychological help, and compare preferences for online versus face-to-face counseling. Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted with 72 postgraduate students from Shridevi Institute of Medical Sciences and Research Hospital. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire, the Belief Towards Mental Illness BTMI Scale, the Self-Stigma for Seeking Psychological Help Scale, the Online Counseling Attitude Scale OCAS, and the Face-to-Face Counseling Attitude Scale FFAS. Results: Positive attitudes towards mental illness were observed in 23.3 of postgraduate students. Self-stigma scores decreased from the 1st to the final year of study. Conclusion: Attitudes towards mental illness improve with increased exposure during postgraduate studies, and self-stigma in seeking psychological help decreases. Final year students showed a preference for face-to-face counseling over online counseling.*

Keywords: BTMI, postgraduate medical students, self-stigma, online counselling, face to face counselling

1. Introduction

Mental illness is common around the world and constitutes 14% of the global burden of disease.

Globally, people with mental illness frequently encounter stigma, prejudice, and discrimination not only by the public, but also by the healthcare providers. The prevalence of mental disorders in India is high, as in other parts of the world.¹ Doctors play an important role to treat patients with mental illness. Doctor's negative belief towards patients with mental illness could affect the quality of care to their patients. According to the World Health Organization, positive attitude among health care professionals towards mental illness is prerequisite for the provision of quality care.¹

Medical students seeking help for their mental health concerns face numerous barriers to engaging in treatment such as stigma and their attitudes toward help-seeking. Although online counseling provides these potential benefits, previous researchers have found attitudes toward this form of counseling to be less favorable when compared to the more traditional face-to-face method.³

The term BTMI stands for belief towards mental illness which measures the views and attitude of an individual regarding the social dysfunction, embarrassment, curability and other factors in relation to any psychiatric illness. Majority of patients seek help from general practitioners as stigma persists in consulting a psychiatrist and receiving treatment from them.⁴ This study is significant as it highlights the evolving attitudes towards mental illness among future medical professionals, which can impact the quality of mental healthcare provided. Understanding these attitudes and

preferences can inform targeted interventions to reduce stigma and improve counseling services.

Negative views about mental illness undoubtedly lead to a lower propensity toward seeking professional help and these constructs have been infrequently studied,

The purpose of the article is to determine the beliefs towards mental illness in medical postgraduate students, self-stigma of seeking psychological help, and preferences in seeking online versus face-to-face counseling.⁵

2. Literature Survey

In a study by V.poreddie et al 2015² on Attitudes toward people with mental illness among medical students showed improvement in students' attitudes after exposure to psychiatry in benevolent and stigmatization domains. Further, gender, residence, and contact with mental illness were the factors that found to be influencing students attitudes towards mental illness.

A cross-sectional study by N.M Moussa et al 2022³ showed that the scores of attitude of medical doctors towards seeking counseling services was low. The results showed that higher education students in the UAE have positive attitudes towards both face-to-face and online counseling, with a higher preference for face-to-face counseling over online one.

A study by J. Bathje et al 2014⁴ conducted among college students revealed that self-concealment was negatively related to attitudes toward both face to face and online counseling, while openness to experience and disclosure expectations were positively related, whereas self-stigma was

associated with negative attitudes toward face to face counseling, it was not related to attitudes toward online counseling.

A study by M.D Bird et al 2020⁵ done on college students, showed significantly higher levels of self-stigma and discomfort towards online counseling. Results suggested face-to-face counseling is more favorable method of service delivery compared to online counseling.

A study done by A.S panicker et al 2019⁶ on attitudes towards counselling among medical students in India found that 50% of the participants accepted that there was a need for counselling for both themselves as well as for friends and 75% also felt that that mild stress could be relieved with the help of counselling.

A study done by S Chandramouleeswaran et al 2019⁷ on Stigma and Attitudes towards patients with Psychiatric illness among Postgraduate Indian Physician showed that over 70% residents accepted mentally ill patients as friends and felt they were equally employable.

A survey was conducted by K P Wong et al 2018⁸ with students from six universities in Malaysia which showed that approximately 35% of participants reported that they would be likely to utilize online counseling services but would be unlikely to participate in face-to-face counseling.

A study was done by V. Sujaritha et al 2017⁹ to see Attitude towards mental illness among doctors and nurses in tertiary care center, Pondicherry, India. Only 25% in doctors and 4.9% in nurses showed Positive attitude towards mentally ill patients.

3. Objectives

- 1) To determine the beliefs towards mental illness in medical postgraduate students.
- 2) To determine self stigma of seeking psychological help.
- 3) To determine preference in seeking online counseling differed to that of face-to-face counseling

4. Materials and Methods

Study design: This was a cross-sectional descriptive study which was carried out on postgraduates attending shridevi institute of Medical sciences and research hospital.

- a) **Duration of the study:** 2 month
- b) **Source of Data:** Post graduate students of SIMS&RH
- c) **Inclusion criteria:** 1) Post graduates in medical college
- d) **Exclusion criteria:** Post graduate students who are not willing to consent for the study
- e) **Sampling method:** Convenience sampling method
- f) **Sample size:** 72 subjects

Justification for sample size chosen:

The sample size is calculated using a study conducted in India by V. Sujaritha et al 2017⁹. The Prevalence rate of belief towards mental illness in doctors was 25%.

95% confidence interval and 5% marginal error, the sample size is.

$$\text{Sample size}(n) = \frac{Z_{1-\alpha/2}^2 * P * (1-P)}{d^2} = 71.63 \approx 72 \text{ subjects}$$

Where,

$Z_{1-\alpha/2}^2 = 1.96$ is standard normal distribution

P = Prevalence rate of belief towards mental illness was 25%.

q=1-p

d= 5% Marginal error

Method of Collection of Data

Upon reading and signing the informed consent form, Participants completed a demographic questionnaire in a google form, BTMI (belief towards mental illness)¹⁰ Scale, self stigma for seeking psychological help Scale¹¹, the Online Counseling Attitude Scale (OCAS), and the Face-to-Face Counseling Attitude Scale (FFAS)¹²

Statistical methods:

Statistical software SPSS (25.0 version) was be used to perform following statistical analysis.

Alpha - 0.05 level

Analysis of frequency and percentage analysis was done for demographic details

Descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation and range will be used to describe the outcome measure of the different variables.

Pearson's correlation is used, to correlate BTMI with SSOSH

One way ANOVA is applied to BTMI score.

The Ms-Excel and Word will be used to generate tables and graphs.

5. Results

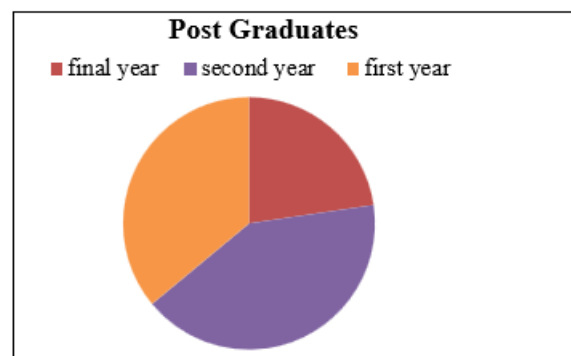


Figure 1: There were 72 postgraduate students amongst them first year by 36% second year being 41% and final year 23%.

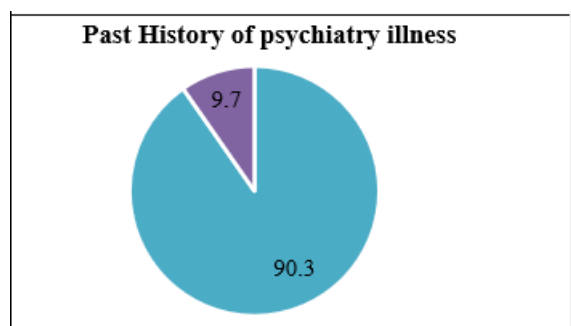


Figure 2: There were 9.7% of postgraduate students with past history of psychiatry illness.

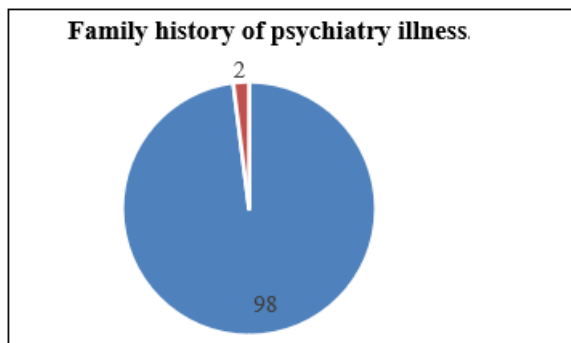


Figure 3: 2% had family history of psychiatric illness

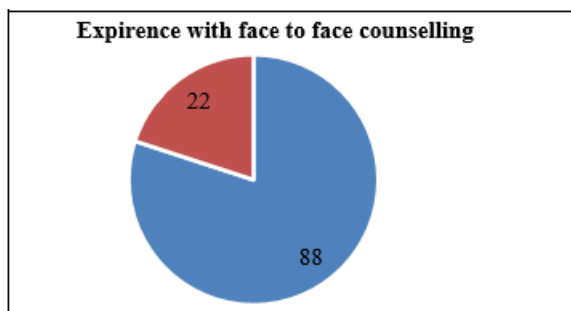


Figure 4: 22% had previous history of face to face counselling

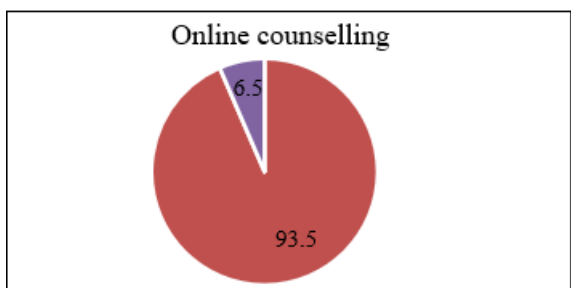


Figure 5: 6.5 % had previous history of online counselling

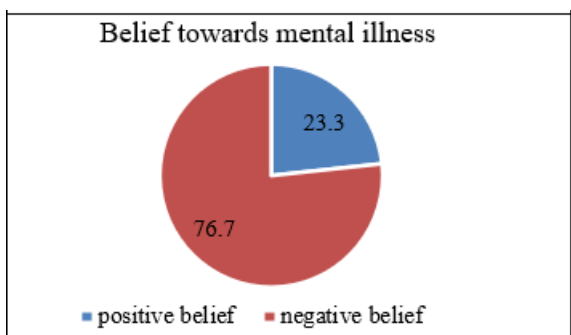


Figure 6: Positive Belief towards mental illness in all postgraduate students was 23.3 %

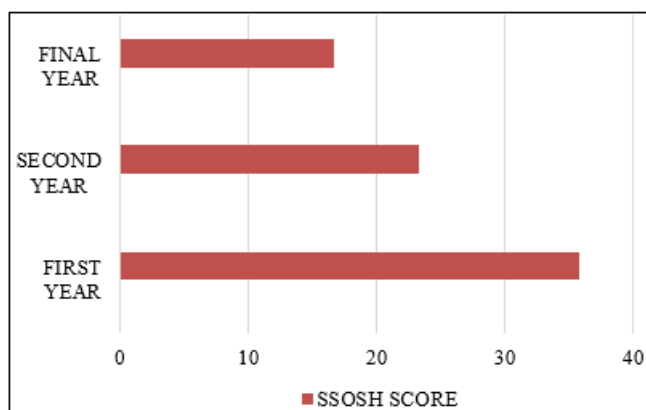


Chart 2: As per chart 2, self- stigma is seeking psychological help score (SSOSH) decreases from 1st year postgraduates to final year postgraduates

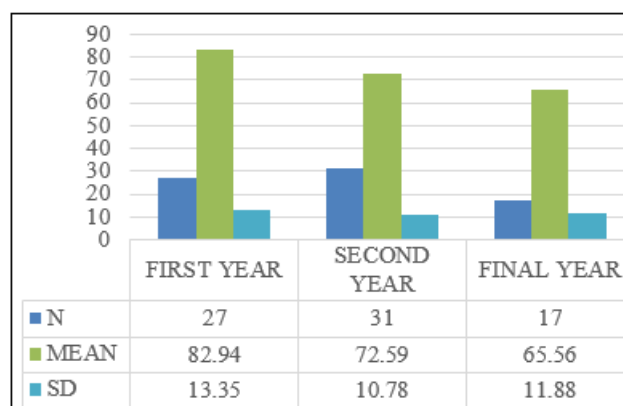


Chart 1: Mean Score of BTMI in 1st year, 2nd year and final year post graduates

As there are 3 groups, one way ANOVA is applied to BTMI score, P value is found to be < 0.05 i.e., there is an association between year of exposure to mental illness patients and attitude towards patients with mental illness.

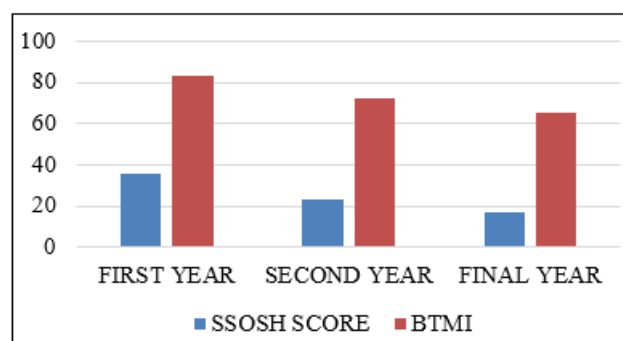


Chart 3

Table 1

SSOSH Score	35.76	23.34	16.72
BTMI	82.94	72.59	65.56

There is a correlation between SSOSH and BTMI score when the coefficient of correlation was found out the R value came out to be 0.99. Thus establishing positive correlation between the two and hence proving that as there is more years of exposure to mental illness there is reduced self stigma in seeking psychological help.

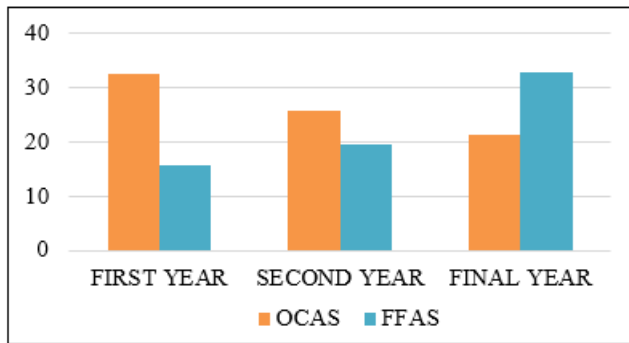


Chart 4

Table 2

	First Year	Second Year	Final Year
OCAS	32.45	25.67	21.24
FFAS	15.78	19.45	32.67

When we tried to establish correlation between belief towards mental illness and preference for face to face counselling, correlational coefficient came out to be 0.4, which is not showing positive correlation.

And when correlation was tried to establish belief towards mental illness and preference for online counselling, the correlation coefficient came out to be 0.6, which signifies slightly positive relation.

6. Discussion

In a study done by Yadav et al 2012¹³ over medical students and interns, found that interns had more favorable attitude towards mentally ill as compared to medical students from different years as assessed by BTMI scale and AMIQ. Similarly in our study the Belief towards mental illness in postgraduates is 23.3% and is improving with more exposure to patients with mental illness.

A study done by Kumar et al 2019¹⁴ found that medical students had stigma that people with mental illness are dangerous and don't want to work with a colleague if they are suffering from mental illness. Similarly in our study the self stigma for seeking psychological showed positive correlation with Belief towards mental illness which means exposure to mental illness reduces self stigma in seeking help.

A study done by AlSamhori et al 2024¹⁵ on university students found that being a medical student and having prior mental health education were linked to more favorable outcomes and positive attitude towards seeking help. Similarly in our study the self stigma for seeking psychological showed positive correlation with Belief towards mental illness which means exposure to mental illness reduces self stigma in seeking help.

A study done by Ielardi E et al 2024¹⁶ evaluates the effectiveness of online versus face-to-face counselling during COVID-19. Both methods effectively reduced psychological distress, but only face-to-face increased life satisfaction. Similarly in our study it's seen that final year pgs prefer face to face counselling.

7. Conclusion

Our study concludes that doctors' Attitude towards person with mental illness tend to become more positive as they progress in their year of post graduation. Self stigma in seeking psychological help is reducing as they progress in their year of Post graduation. Preference for Face to face counselling is more in final year students but overall students prefer online counselling. Doctors with more self stigma in seeking psychological help prefer online counselling.

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