

## Viewpoint

# MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS: EXPERIMENT WITH EXHIBITION AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATORY TRAINING

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### ABSTRACT

A multifaceted approach to mental health education is needed to mould the public's perception of mental disorders. The campaign aimed at the accurate portrayal of mental health issues, particularly in the context of media representation and public understanding. The demonstration of modified Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT) on a human replica sparked significant interest among visitors, facilitating discussions about shock therapy and its misconceptions. A dedicated module on substance use served as a platform to discuss the harmful effects of drugs and alcohol, mainly targeting adolescents and young adults. The evolution of mental health care over the past 250 years was presented through interactive biographical slides, fostering a deeper understanding of the historical context and the importance of positive mental health practices. The need to refrain from harmful stereotypes and misrepresentations in media, which can shape societal views, often portraying individuals with mental disorders as violent or unpredictable, was highlighted. The creation of a makeshift mini-theater for public awareness video shows and individual sessions conducted by trained volunteers was an effective strategy for engaging the community in mental health discussions. These initiatives aimed to educate stakeholders on the importance of accurate mental health representations and the detrimental effects of stigma. There is a necessity for comprehensive mental health education that addresses misconceptions, promotes positive behaviors, and encourages open dialogue within the community.

**Keywords:** Mental Health Awareness, Awareness Campaigns, Mental Health Awareness Exhibitions, Public Participatory Training,

## INTRODUCTION

Despite the increasing prevalence of mental health issues worldwide, negative attitudes toward mental health conditions are relatively common.<sup>1</sup> The National Mental Health Survey revealed the high prevalence of mental health problems and the treatment gap for mental morbidity in India.<sup>2</sup> The need for public mental health education to reduce public stigma towards mental illness has been emphasized in the literature.<sup>3</sup> Various campaigns have been conducted at regional

and international levels to improve public awareness about mental health issues.<sup>4,5</sup> Campaigns to raise awareness about mental health have produced fruitful results. Evidence-based mental health information should be readily available through participatory campaigns and the focused amplification of information technology.<sup>5</sup> Enhancing mental health awareness is expected to improve early recognition and access to treatment and preventive measures.<sup>5</sup> The experience of a mental health awareness campaign through exhibition and



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participatory training is shared in this communication.

The health education videos on mental health have improved people's self-perceived social support and mental health-related behaviors.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, universal school-based mental health awareness programs improve mental health-related outcomes among adolescent school students.<sup>7</sup> Community-based mental health awareness campaign activities, including educational materials, public meetings, musical announcements, quizzes, and street plays, improve awareness, attitude, treatment-seeking behavior, and acceptability among the community.<sup>8</sup> Social media platforms and digital technology, including artificial intelligence, have been utilized in mental health awareness campaigns.<sup>9,10</sup>

World Mental Health Day, observed every year on October 10, was initiated by the World Federation for Mental Health and endorsed by the World Health Organization (WHO). It plays a crucial role in promoting awareness of mental health in India.<sup>11</sup> These annual events have different themes, focusing on educating people on mental health, raising awareness of mental illnesses, and reducing associated stigma.<sup>12</sup> Public exhibitions incorporating new technologies can act as mediators by becoming spaces for public discussions and debates on health-related issues and raising societal awareness.<sup>13</sup> Public mental health awareness campaigns can be conducted through exhibitions. In connection with World Mental Health Day, we conducted awareness campaigns for the public in the last two years.

## OUR EXPERIENCE

In our campaigns, the concepts were divided into ten modules: brain and behavior, signs and symptoms, assessment and psychological tests, treatment and care including Modified

ECT, dealing with aggression, substance use, and its consequences, historical evolution of care, positive mental health, film on mental health themes, and public mental illness awareness module with an e-book. Postgraduate students of psychiatric nursing were trained as volunteers who explained the concepts behind the exhibits to the visitors. Most visitors were from schools and colleges. As most mental illnesses have an onset in adolescence and early adulthood, increasing awareness and knowledge of mental health disorders among this population is very important.<sup>14</sup>

A general understanding of the brain and its functions is essential for understanding the mind and mental health issues.<sup>15,16</sup> A module on brain and behavior was presented, which included original brain specimens, nervous system models, and charts with varying levels of academic complexity. Functional neuroanatomy and physiology were explained to the visitors, allowing them to connect various mental functions to specific brain areas. The module aimed to dispel the misconceptions about the causes of mental health problems.

Misconceptions about psychological phenomena and clinical features of mental illness are prevalent among the public.<sup>17</sup> Simulations of the perceptual phenomena of psychiatric illness are feasible with the utilization of technology in public education about mental illness.<sup>18</sup> A hallucinatory experience box was created with visual and auditory experiences to simulate psychological experiences for exhibition visitors.

There are various misrepresentations of the mental health assessment process in the media.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, mirroring mental illness

stereotypes, the stigmatization of mental health professions is common.<sup>20</sup> It is essential to educate the public about the assessment process of mental health issues. The assessment module introduced specialized psychological tests, including intelligence, personality, and neuropsychological assessments. Hand-on experience with short-form questionnaires and tests improved the participatory nature of the experience.

The treatment-related section explained various therapeutic modalities, introduced medicines used in various psychiatric conditions, psychotherapeutic and social interventions, and the modified ECT procedure. Due to media portrayal, there is a widespread negative perception of modified ECT among the public and professionals.<sup>21</sup> Modified ECT procedures were demonstrated on a human replica, generating considerable interest among the visitors. The module helped initiate a conversation on their perceptions of shock therapy. Visitors were also explained the scientific methods in aggression management, as public perceptions of mental illness have violence at the forefront.<sup>22</sup>

The module on substance use was a starting point for the discussion on the ill effects of drug and alcohol use. The module generated curiosity among the visitors, particularly among the youngsters, and the volunteers sensitized them to the harmful effects and consequences of substance use. When educating adolescents and youngsters about substance use, the focus should be on harm due to the use of drugs and on promoting positive behaviors.<sup>23</sup>

The historical evolution of mental health care was discussed through interactive biographical slides and events that covered

the development of understanding and care for mental health over the last 250 years. The module on positive mental health covered the importance of healthy behaviors, which was interactive and self-explanatory.

Films have a substantial influence on the perceptions of the viewers about mental illness, and the perception is blurred with misrepresentations and false narratives.<sup>24</sup> Films are an integral part of our culture and reflect the everyday life of society. People with mental illnesses are often portrayed as violent, dangerous, odd, unclean, and unpredictable.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, movies have been instrumental in positive attitudes toward mental health issues and disorders.<sup>26,27,28</sup> Film clips, as audiovisual aids in public mental health education, capture their attention and can open up discussions on perceptions about mental health issues.<sup>29</sup> Educating the stakeholders on the accurate portrayal of mental disorders and the harm caused by harmful and inaccurate depictions is important.<sup>30</sup>

Our module on film and mental illness included interactive slides with QR codes of selected thirty movies from different languages followed by a brief film clip-show cum discussion. A makeshift mini-theatre was created for this purpose. Public awareness video shows were also arranged. Trained volunteers conducted individual sessions with visitors on the topic.

The module on common mental disorders was intended to give a brief idea of the nature of psychiatric disorders and their management. The content was presented in descriptive charts arranged on standees, and the information was made available as a brochure and a downloadable e-book.

When volunteers introduce the modules to visitors, who are often new to the topic, the explanation of the theme should be both scientific and realistic, which makes the experience more compelling. Contextualizing experiences like hallucinations for visitors requires expertise and involvement from the volunteers. Training volunteers and orienting them about the exhibition's scope is crucial. The design of exhibitions and encompassing aesthetics that evoke emotions create engaging experiences, which demand resources. The use of digital technology and virtual experiences can help capture their attention. Art and literature as tools for understanding mental health will bring appeal and creativity. Collaborating artists, curators, and mental health professionals in awareness campaigns bring more meaning to the exhibitions. Feedback from the exhibition's visitors generally reflected the need to raise mental health awareness among the general public, and exhibitions provide a realistic understanding of mental health problems, evoking emotional involvement.

## CONCLUSION

Innovative methods for mental health awareness campaigns are needed in this time. Exhibitions and technology-integrated activities can communicate with large population groups. Scientific and creative planning of events can influence the perception and clear misconceptions about mental health issues. The increasing trend of using social media and digital technology must be considered to make mental health awareness programs effective.<sup>31</sup>

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## Conflict of Interest

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