

**ADOLESCENT BELIEFS TOWARDS MENTAL DISORDERS: A SURVEY AMONG  
ADOLESCENTS IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL IN ABUJA MUNICIPAL AREA  
COUNCIL, FEDERAL CAPITAL TERRITORY, ABUJA, NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

**Background:** Beliefs about mental illness shape individuals' behaviour towards people with mental illness. Adolescents and young adults are susceptible to developing a mental disorder comes with the unwillingness to seek professional help and their belief. This study seeks to assess the beliefs of adolescents towards mental disorders in a Secondary School in Abuja Municipal Area Council, Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria, **Methods:** This was a descriptive cross sectional study designed to determine belief of adolescents about mental illness in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. Multistage sampling method was used to select participants. Data was analyzed using statistical package for social sciences (SPSS 25) version. **Results:** Only 18.8% of the adolescents correctly stated that mental illness is like any other illness. Three-quarters believe that anyone can become mentally ill even celebrities. A high proportion of the adolescents (44.7%) knew that mental illness can be passed from one generation to another. The most commonly endorsed cause of mental illness as believed by the adolescents were; drug abuse (91.3%), brain injury (78.7%), evil spirit (73.1%), diseases (58.1%), and poverty (53.1%). Punishment from God was not a common response as 71.9% disagreed with this item. Only 26.6% of the adolescents knew that being bullied can cause mental illness. Adolescent's belief about symptoms of mental illness showed that only a few adolescents were able to correctly identify symptoms of mental illness as sadness (18.5%), and excessive fear (27.9%), restlessness (25.7%), insomnia (24.7%). Half of adolescents (52.3%) identified seeing things that are not there as a symptom of mental illness and less than half (39.7%) knew that people that talk to themselves are mentally ill. **Conclusion:** Mental health experts should engage the cultural and social institutions in communities to enlighten them about the features, causes, risk factors and management of mental illness in order to entrench the correct belief about mental illness among adolescents and young people.

**KEYWORDS:** Beliefs, Mental illness, Mental disorders, Adolescents, Mental health.

**INTRODUCTION**

Societal beliefs play a critical role in their daily life activities and in turn affect their way of life and response to public health and mental health matters.<sup>[1,2]</sup> Communities have shown a poor understanding of mental illnesses and have certain preconceived notions about those who suffer from them. This level of understanding is found in most geographical, cultural, and religious boundaries. In Nigeria, the public's view about mental disorders is unfavourable, with their

reaction to the mentally ill being fear, disgust and embarrassment.<sup>[2,3]</sup> This situation is worse for adolescents and young people.

The adolescent years are a crucial time in the lifespan of an individual because so many stressful events occur around that time which could generally lead to the development of a mental disorder. Mental disorders are common in childhood and adolescent years and are also prevalent among younger people aged 16-24 years more

than any other stage of life of an individual. This high susceptibility of adolescents and young adults developing a mental disorder comes with the unwillingness to seek professional help and their belief. One of the reasons why there is a reluctance to seek professional help is because of the negative attitudes toward mental illness and also the lack of knowledge in society.<sup>[2,5,6]</sup>

Research has shown that the beliefs of causation is frequently related to supernatural causes (witchcraft, evil spirits, divine punishments, etc.), psychosocial causes (poverty, stress, drug and alcohol abuse, traumatic events, shock), and medical causes (genetics, brain dysfunction, and other biological factors). The most believed cause of mental illnesses in our communities are the supernatural causes.<sup>[2,4,7]</sup> There is a strong belief that mental disorders are due to evil spirits, divine punishments, witchcraft and other unseen forces.

In Africa, agreed that 63% of the respondents believed that mental illness is genetic, 25% believed it was caused by evil spirits and 77% of the participants believed people with mental illness cannot tell the difference between good and bad. Majority (82%) did not believe that mentally ill people should live only among themselves, and a few (9%) did not believe that mentally ill people should be prevented from walking freely in public places. This believe in evil spirit and supernatural powers causing mental illness resulted in the majority 80.2% of the respondent's first place of health-seeking was from traditional healers with only 17.4% seeking psychiatric care from the start as seeking professional help was the last stitch effort.<sup>[8]</sup>

Beliefs about mental illness shape individuals' behaviour towards people with mental illness.<sup>[9][11]</sup> For instance, the belief that people with mental illness are violent and dangerous leads to social distance. In a mental health survey carried out in Nigeria the majority (69%) of the respondents said that they would not engage in any relationship with someone with mental disorders. Reasons stated by the respondents were, personal safety (58%), lack of ability to make a sound judgment (17%), perception of the public when being seen to be relating with people with mental disorders (15%), and belief that mental disorders are transferable (5%) and heartbreak (4%).<sup>[2]</sup>

Beliefs about mental illness vary across regions and cultures. Studies have shown that beliefs held about mental illness could affect their attitudes to treatment and attitudes to people with mental illness.<sup>[12]</sup> In South Africa, majority (76.8%) of the respondents considered mental disorders to be stress-related rather than having medical aetiology and the majority of the respondents (84.8%) recommended "talking it over" as treatment rather than seeking medical advice.<sup>[13]</sup> And among Arabs in the United States, only a minority (25%) of the respondents believed that mental disorders are caused by

demonic or satanic possession, however, is a prevalent belief among the Arab community, and because of this belief, the respondents believed it would be best to seek religious or supernatural healing instead of formal mental health services.<sup>[14]</sup>

In some western countries<sup>[9]</sup> people believe mental illness is caused by psychological factors like social and environmental stressors and biological factors are not exactly recognized as causal factors or are not regarded as consequential as environmental factors<sup>[9]</sup> In a study carried out to investigate the public beliefs about causes and risk factors for mental disorders in Japan and Australia, the study revealed that in both countries, there was a common belief in social and environmental stressors as causes of mental disorders only that Australians were more likely to believe in viruses, infections and genetics as a cause of mental disorders. The majority of the Japanese believed depression (91.8%) and chronic schizophrenia (91.2%) were caused by day-to-day problems. Death of someone close (depression 79.8% and chronic schizophrenia (73.4%), Traumatic events (depression 82.6% and chronic schizophrenia 80.8%), problem of childhood (depression 81% and chronic schizophrenia 89.0%), Nervous person (depression 81.4% and chronic schizophrenia 81.8%), weakness of character (depression 69.2% and chronic schizophrenia 82%). While majority of Australia.<sup>[15]</sup> believed depression (50.5%) and chronic schizophrenia (33.6%) was caused by virus and infection, day to day problems (depression 96.8% and chronic schizophrenia 86.6%), Traumatic events (depression 93.9% and chronic schizophrenia 82.8%), problem of childhood (depression 91.3% and chronic schizophrenia 91.4%), Inherited or Genetic (depression 68.0% and chronic schizophrenia 73.7%).<sup>[15]</sup> Thus, a survey among adolescents in a Secondary School in Abuja Municipal Area Council, Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria to identify their beliefs towards mental disorders is necessary to understand the mental health needs of this important age group. It reveals adolescents belief about mental illness, belief about the causes of mental illness, and belief about symptoms of mental illness.

## METHODS

This was a descriptive cross sectional study designed to determine belief of adolescents about mental illness in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. The study participants consisted of consenting adolescent secondary school students in Gwarinpa, Abuja Aged 10-19 years. The federal capital territory (FCT), Abuja, is the capital city of Nigeria with a population of 3,564,126.<sup>[16]</sup> Abuja is divided into 6 area councils, among these councils is AMAC (Abuja Municipal Area Council) which consists of 6 districts Gwarinpa district, Maitama District, Wuse II District, Wuse Zone 5 and Garki.

The study was carried out in Gwarinpa District which is mainly an urban residential area that provides housing

for many civil servants and privately employed individuals. Gwarinpa is divided into 7 Avenues. Gwarinpa has 33 Secondary schools (31 private schools and 2 public schools). The selected school is the Government Junior and Senior Secondary School Gwarinpa Estate. It is located in 3rd Avenue, which is in Gwarinpa District, one of the 6 districts under AMAC. The school has JSS1-3 and SS 1, SS 2 and SS3 classes. The school has facilities like; library, computer laboratory, chemistry laboratory, physics laboratory and biology laboratory. The school has a total of 97 teachers with 51 in charge of the junior secondary school section and 46 in charge of the senior secondary school section including Administrative and Non-Administrative staff.

The minimum sample size was 424, calculated using the Cochran formula as shown, QUOTE Where: N= minimum sample size required; Z=standard deviation with 95% confidence intervals (1.96 z value); P= 50% expected proportion used in a similar study.<sup>171</sup> Q= 1-p; D= acceptable error margin 5 % (0.05);  

$$N = \frac{(1.96)^2 (0.5) (1-0.5)}{(0.05)^2}$$

N=385  $\approx$  424 (With an estimated non-response rate of 10%)

Multi-stage sampling method was utilized in selecting participants. It involved the following stages.

**Stage one:** Selection of District, a list of all 6 districts in Abuja Municipal Area council was used as sample frame. One (1) District was selected using simple random sampling (SRS) by balloting. **Stage two:** Selection of school in Gwarinpa district. There are only two public schools in Gwarinpa (Government Secondary School Gwarinpa, Life-camp and Government Junior and Senior Secondary school Gwarinpa Estate, 3rd Avenue). Simple Random Sampling (SRS) technique (balloting) was utilized to select Government Junior and Senior Secondary school Gwarinpa Estate as the school. The sample frame was a list of the two schools. **Stage three:** Selection of participants (Adolescents) Systematic random sampling was carried out, a list of students in each class was obtained with the sampling interval:  $k=N/n$  where N is the population size and n is the sample

size<sup>[18][19]</sup>, there are 1,380 students in the Senior secondary and 900 students in junior secondary making a total population of 2,280 students. Thus,  $k=2,280/424=5.3$ . Every fifth student was selected to participate in the study and students who were absent or students who refused to participate were replaced by the next number on the list. This was done until the sample size was achieved.

Data was collected with a pretested self administered questionnaire. The questionnaire is close ended, and contained five (5) questions on adolescents belief about mental illness, ten (10) questions on belief about the causes of mental illness, and six (6) questions belief about symptoms of mental Illness. Data was analyzed using statistical package for social sciences (SPSS 25) version. Simple descriptive statistics like frequency, percentages, were calculated for the positive/ correct responses and negative/wrong responses gotten. Response rate was 96% as 405 participant returned the questionnaire out of 424.

Using the informed consent form, informed consent was gained from the students, their parents/guardians, and the school administration. For pupils who were not yet of legal consent age, a witness was present, and informed consent was obtained from the parents/guardians. An ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the Bingham University Ethics Committee, Secondary Education Board (SEB) and the Universal Basic Education Board (UBEB). The researcher will strictly adhere to the ethical guidelines, rules, and regulations governing the conduct of health research involving human subjects, which entails obtaining written informed consent after the participant has received an oral explanation of the study's goals and objectives, confidentiality, and benefit, and for students under the age of consent, a witness will be present. Each participant was informed of the study's purpose. Throughout the study, confidentiality and privacy were preserved. The information gathered from the respondents was only for the purposes of this study. The participation of respondents in this study was entirely voluntary. Before completing the questionnaire, each respondent was requested to complete an informed consent form.

## RESULTS

**Table 1: Adolescents Perceived belief about mental illness.**

Item No.	Perceived belief about Mental Illness	Number of Positive /correct Responses (%)	Number of Negative/wrong responses (%)
B1	A person can be born with a mental disorder	312(77.0)	64(16.0)
B2	Anyone can become mentally ill	297(73.3)	80(19.7)
B3	Mental illness is like any other illness.	76(18.8)	288(71.1)
B4	Even celebrities can have mental illness	303(74.9)	59(14.6)
B5	Mental illness can be passed on from generation to generation	181(44.7)	152(37.5)

**A) Adolescents Perceived belief about mental illness**

**Table 1** shows that majority of the adolescents 77% and 73% respectively believe that a person can be born with a mental disorder, and anyone can become mentally ill. Similarly, a majority of the adolescents (74.9%) correctly

identified that celebrities can have mental illness. A high proportion of the adolescents (44.7) knew that mental illness can be passed from one generation to another, however, only 18.8% of the adolescents correctly identified that mental illness is like any other illness.

**Table 2: Adolescents perceived belief about the cause of mental illness.**

Item No	Perceived causes of mental illness	Number of Positive /correct Responses (%)	Number of Negative/wrong responses (%)
C1	Stress can cause mental	175(43.2)	153(37.8)
C2	Brain injury can cause mental illness	319(78.7)	54(13.3)
C3	Studying too much mathematics can cause mental illness	150(36.6)	192(47.4) (agree)
C4	Being too smart can cause mental illness	222(54.8)	138(34.0)
C5	Diseases can cause mental illness	235(58.1)	91(22.5)
C6	Drug abuse can cause mental illness	370(91.3)	20(5.0)
C7	Poverty can cause mental illness.	218(53.8)	117(28.9)
C8	Mental illness is a punishment from God	291(71.9)	74(18.2)
C9	Evil spirits can cause mental illness	70(17.3)	296(73.1)
C10	Being bullied can cause mental illness	107(26.6)	215(53.4)

**B) Adolescents perceived belief about the cause of mental illness**

Table 2 shows that the most commonly endorsed cause of mental illness among the adolescents were; drug abuse (91.3%), followed by brain injury (78.7%), evil spirit (73.1), diseases (58.1%), and poverty (53.1%).

Punishment from God was not a common response as 71.9% disagreed with this item. 54.8% and 36.6% of the adolescents respectively disagreed that being too smart and studying too much mathematics can cause mental illness and only 26.6% of the adolescents knew that being bullied can cause mental illness.

**Table 3: Adolescents Perceived Belief about Symptoms of Mental Illness.**

Item No	Perceived Belief about Symptoms of Mental Illness	Number of Positive /correct Responses (%)	Number of Negative/wrong responses (%)
S1	Excessive fear is a symptom of mental illness	113(27.9)	224(55.3)
S2	Sadness is a symptom of mental illness	77(18.5)	277(68.4)
S3	Restlessness is a symptom of mental illness	104(25.7)	226(55.8)
S4	Not being able to sleep is a symptom of mental illness	100(24.7)	240(59.2)
S5	People who see things that are not there are mentally ill	212(52.3)	117(28.9)
S6	People that talk to themselves are mentally ill	161(39.7)	146(36.1)

**C) Adolescents Perceived Belief about Symptoms of Mental Illness**

Table 3 shows a breakdown of adolescent's belief about symptoms of mental illness. Only a few adolescents were able to correctly identify symptoms of mental illness as only 18.5% and 27.9% respectively were able to correctly identify that sadness and excessive fear are symptoms of mental illness followed by restlessness (25.7%) and insomnia (24.7%). The majority of adolescents (52.3%) identified seeing things that are not there as a symptom of mental illness and less than half (39.7%) knew that people that talk to themselves are mentally ill.

of the adolescents (44.7) knew that mental illness can be passed from one generation to another, however, only 18.8% of the adolescents correctly identified that mental illness is like any other illness. This is similar to finding from study done in Iraq,<sup>[21]</sup> where half of the respondents (50%) believed mental illnesses are caused by genetic inheritance, while two-thirds believed that mental illness is caused by something bad happening to you,<sup>[21]</sup> This beliefs can form the fulcrum of future public health interventions to change beliefs and behaviour of adolescent concerning mental health and mental disorders towards the correct and scientifically acceptable ones.

**DISCUSSION**

This study showed that three - quarter of the adolescents believe that a person can be born with a mental disorder, and anyone can become mentally ill. A high proportion

The most commonly believed cause of mental illness among the adolescents were; drug abuse (91.3%), followed by brain injury (78.7%). This is much higher than proportions found in a study done in in Iraq.<sup>[21]</sup>

where 60% believed that mental illness is caused by brain disease, nearly half (49%) believed that mental disorders are caused by substance abuse. Much lower results were obtained in a study carried out in Karfi Village, Northern Nigeria,<sup>[22]</sup> where the most common perceived causes of mental illness was drug abuse (34.3%). Similarly, a majority of the adolescents (74.9%) correctly identified that celebrities can have mental illness. This correct belief demonstrates that mental health problems can affect anybody, anywhere. Mental disorders can affect all races, social class, ethnic groups, religions and creeds.

In non-western and developing countries, mental illness is often associated with religious or supernatural forces like witchcraft, and possession by evil spirit.<sup>[23]</sup> This belief was also found in this survey as 73.1% believed that, evil spirits were responsible for mental illness. In a study carried out in Ethiopia (20.0%),<sup>[24]</sup> and Northern Nigeria (18%),<sup>[22]</sup> much lesser proportions believed that evil spirits cause mental illness. Half (58.1%) of adolescents believed that poverty was the cause of mental illness, This is in consonance with a study done in Ethiopia,<sup>[24]</sup> where the most commonly perceived cause of mental ill-health was poverty (>50%). There is also a need to break the viscous cycle of mental ill health and poverty.<sup>[25][26]</sup>

Just above a quarter (28.1%) of respondents believed that mental disorders were a punishment from God, similar finding in East Africa.<sup>[24]</sup> where mental illness was attributed to the will of God. Similar results were obtained in a study carried out in Karfi Village, northern Nigeria where the most common revealed perceived causes of mental illness were, divine punishment and God's will (18.8%).<sup>[22]</sup> This was also found in Bangladesh.<sup>[27]</sup> Malaysia.<sup>[28]</sup> This belief could lead to adolescents believing that treatment can be gotten from churches, mosques and shrines. This practice is common in communities. Adolescents are also affected by their relationships with peers and classmates. Only 26.6% of the adolescents believed that being bullied can cause mental illness. Bullying can create mental health issues for young people. Victims of bully can develop fear and avoid school and peer activities.

In this study, only 24.7% of adolescents believed that insomnia is a symptom of mental illness, this is similar to findings from a Nigerian study where only 14.5% of the respondents knew that change in sleeping habits could be a symptom of mental illness.<sup>[29]</sup> This is consistent with findings from another study carried out in south-east Nigeria where only 17.1% of the adolescents recognized that insomnia was a symptom of depression along with fatigue (9.8%).<sup>[30]</sup>

In addition, in this study, more than half 52.3% of the adolescents believe that seeing things that are not there are a symptom of mental illness. This is similar to a study carried out in south west Nigeria where 30.2% of

the respondents believed seeing and hearing strange things were a symptom of mental illness.<sup>[30]</sup> Only a few adolescents were able to correctly identify symptoms of mental illness like sadness (18.5%), excessive fear (27.9%), restlessness (25.7%). A third (39.7%) correctly believe people talk to themselves, was a symptom of mental illness. Correct identification of symptoms of mental illness is a critical to correct belief and response towards mental illness among adolescents.

## CONCLUSION

Only 18.8% of the adolescents correctly stated that mental illness is like any other illness. Three-quarters believe that anyone can become mentally ill even celebrities. A high proportion of the adolescents (44.7%) knew that mental illness can be passed from one generation to another.

The most commonly endorsed cause of mental illness as believed by the adolescents were; drug abuse (91.3%), brain injury (78.7%), evil spirit (73.1%), diseases (58.1%), and poverty (53.1%). Punishment from God was not a common response as 71.9% disagreed with this item. Only 26.6% of the adolescents knew that being bullied can cause mental illness.

Adolescent's belief about symptoms of mental illness showed that only a few adolescents were able to correctly identify symptoms of mental illness as sadness (18.5%), and excessive fear (27.9%), restlessness (25.7%), insomnia (24.7%). Half of adolescents (52.3%) identified seeing things that are not there as a symptom of mental illness and less than half (39.7%) knew that people that talk to themselves are mentally ill.

## RECOMMENDATION

To mental health specialists, physicians and health care workers, there is need to engage the cultural and social institution in communities to enlighten them about the features, causes, risk factors and management of mental illness in order to entrench the correct belief about mental illness among adolescents and young people. Health workers should also reorient and engage religious leaders on supporting the proper beliefs on causes, features and management of mental disorders.

The religious leaders, traditional practitioners and communities should accept the orthodox and scientific causes of mental illness and send suspected patients back to hospitals for treatment and rehabilitation by trained health care workers and psychiatrists.

There is need to consolidate the existing belief by adolescents that drug abuse, bullying, brain injury can cause mental illness. This can be done through health education and peer support for adolescents and young people.

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