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## **The Role of Social Support in Reducing Mental Health Stigma: A Study on Support Networks for People with Mental Illness**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the importance of social support on decreasing stigma of mental health and psychological well-being in people living with mental illness, including depression and schizophrenia. Mental health stigma is a major obstacle to recovery, which often makes people with mental health conditions feel even more isolated, shamed and hopeless. Social support networks, such as family, friends and support groups have been shown to help reduce stigma and ensure better mental health outcomes. Data was obtained from 200 participants (100 males, 100 females) from four major healthcare centers at Peshawar and Mardan, Pakistan. The participants filled out standardized questionnaires measuring perceived stigma, social support and psychological wellbeing. The results showed that the higher the level of social support, especially from the family and friends, the significantly lower the perceived stigma and the better the psychological well-being of the sufferer. The results of a multiple regression analysis showed that social support was a strong predictor of lower stigma and better mental health outcomes. Family support has been found to have the greatest impact in reducing stigma and well-being, and indicates the importance of involving families in mental health interventions. These findings highlight the need of interventions for strengthening social support networks, especially family-based support in order to help diminish mental health stigma and enhance psychological health.

**Keywords:** Social Support, Mental Health Stigma, Psychological Well-Being, Family Support, Mental Illness

### **Introduction**

Mental health problems have emerged as a major public health issue worldwide and are having significant impacts on individuals, families and communities. Mental illnesses like depression, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder may cause massive distress which



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hinders one from functioning in everyday life. Beyond the psychological and physical symptoms, people that live with mental illnesses face one of the biggest obstacles to recovery - stigma. Mental health stigma, which refers to negative beliefs, stereotypes, and discriminatory behaviors toward individuals with mental illness, can have a detrimental impact on individual's mental health, self-esteem, as well as overall quality of life. Stigma can try to keep people from seeking help, following through with treatment and getting involved in social or professional opportunities. It can also lead to feelings of isolation, shame and hopelessness, further contributing to mental health problems (Corrigan, 2004).

One of the most efficient strategies for reducing stigma and achieving psychological well-being within persons with mental illness is social support. Social support that is the emotional, informational and practical assistance obtained from others, especially from the important relationships in your life (family, friends and support groups). Social support may act as a protective factor providing a buffer against the negative consequences of stigma and contributing to mental health recovery (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Numerous studies have shown that having strong social support networks are responsible for better mental health outcomes, especially in people with chronic or severe mental health conditions (Umberson & Montez, 2010). However, the particular role of social support in decreasing mental health stigma and improving psychological well-being has not yet been extensively studied, especially in settings where mental health stigma is pervasive and mental health services may be scarce.

In Pakistan, however, mental health stigma is a great challenge. Cultural attitudes frequently position mental illness as a sign of shame, weakness, or social failure, causing more complexities for people who want to back to mental healthcare or wish to share their mental health status with others (Gul & Zafar, 2019). The role of family, friends and formal support groups in addressing stigma and providing emotional support is critical however the extent of this support and their impact on mental health outcomes has not been comprehensively studied in the Pakistani context. Understanding the potential of social support networks to reduce stigma and enhance the psychological well-being of people living with mental illness is therefore important to the design of more effective mental health interventions and support systems.

### **Literature Review**

Mental health stigma is a complex problem which comprises not only public stigma, but self-stigma too. Public stigma refers to stereotypes and prejudices associated by society for people with mental health problems, resulting in discrimination, social exclusion, and negative attitudes (Corrigan, 2004). This public stigma may be expressed in many ways, including verbal abuse, exclusion from social or work-related activities, even physical violence. Self-stigma is when people take these societal attitudes and become ashamed or embarrassed about their mental health conditions. This internalized stigma may result in decreased self-esteem, a greater state of psychological distress, and avoidance of circumventing treatment or openness in disclosing one's condition (Link et al. 2001).

In many places of the world, including Pakistan, mental health is often seen through the lens of cultural misunderstanding, fear and discrimination. The stigmatization of mental illness can lead people to be marginalized both socially and economically. Research has found that stigma prevents people from seeking help and leads to worse health outcomes as it dissuades treatment-seeking behavior (Phelan et al., 2000). In such environment, the ones suffering from mental disorders are often isolated, ignored or even blamed for their disorder. This is an added set of burdens on their emotions, often resulting in



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deteriorating outcomes, both psychologically as well as socially.

### The Role of Social Support in Mental Health Recovery

Social support is increasingly known as one of the most important protective factors for mental health, especially for those experiencing stigmatization by mental illness. Social support may be of many kinds, including emotional support (e.g., empathy, caring, and reassurance), informational support (e.g., advice or guidance), and instrumental support (e.g., practical assistance for example, assist with daily tasks or financial support) (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Research has suggested that social support may help people deal with stress and challenges associated with mental illness in order to improve psychological outcomes.

In particular, family support has been shown to be a critical factor in mitigating the effects of stigma and enhancing well-being with individuals who have mental health disorders (Tuck & Kirby, 2005). Family members can also be a safe and supportive environment in which people can openly discuss their mental health struggles without fear of judgement or discrimination. Friendships and peer support groups also play an important role of reducing isolation and promoting shared experiences and coping mechanisms. Support groups, in particular, present a unique environment where people with similar mental health challenges are able to share their experiences, and support each other and fight the stigma together (Gul & Zafar, 2019).

Moreover, high levels of social support networks have been associated with high outcomes related to mental health (self-esteem, reduction in depression, and resiliency). Persons who have supportive social networks are more likely to seek assistance for their mental health problems, adhere to treatment plans and to engage in recovery-oriented actions (Sarason & al., 1990). With the negative impacts of stigma and mental health, it is necessary to discuss how social support can play a protective role against these negative impacts.

In Pakistan, mental health issues are frequently surrounded by high stigma related to cultural, social and religious factors. Mental illness is often viewed as a symptom of weakness or a moral failing, and this has resulted in prejudice and social exclusion. The stigma associated with mental illness in Pakistan is coupled with lack of awareness and education about mental health and lack of mental health services and professionals. Family and community members may not know how to offer effective support for people with mental health challenges; consequently, people may not receive emotional or practical support they need to cope with their mental health issues.

However, there are also new initiation efforts to challenge mental health stigma in Pakistan, especially through the development of mental health awareness and providing support groups. Family-based support, particularly in the Pakistani traditional family structure, is also a significant resource for those that suffer from mental illnesses. Given that families often play a central role in caregiving and decision-making in the Pakistani society, understanding the role of family and social support in reducing stigma is crucial in improving mental health outcomes.

Numerous works have investigated the role of social support in buffering mental health stigma specifically in a range of different cultural contexts. Corrigan et al. (2014) found that social support, especially from family and friends, can significantly reduce the experience of self-stigma in persons with mental illness. Similarly, Phelan et al. (2000) noted that the effect of public stigma can be diminished through positive interactions and support from family members, friends and the community. These findings suggest social support served as a powerful buffer to the negative consequence of stigma.

In the context of Pakistan, Gul and Zafar (2019) carried out a study on family support



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and coping strategies among those with mental illness in which they found that families played a pivotal role in reducing stigma experienced by the patients and in promotion of recovery. This reinforces the idea of the importance of family-based interventions in combating mental health stigma norm and stigma in South Asian environments where the family structure and cultural values plays a powerful role in cultural control regarding mental health care and support.

In addition, Kleinman (2009) addresses the notion of "cultural resilience" whereby people rely on their cultural and family network as a source of coping with stigma. In Pakistani society, family support has become considered as an important form of emotional and psychological support, it plays a critical role in alleviating stigma and psychological wellbeing of people living with mental illness. This is consistent with the results of Umberson and Montez (2010) who argued that the family and social support networks played an essential role on enhancing mental health outcomes by providing emotional stability and building resiliency.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant as it addresses an important gap in literature in terms of the nature of social support and mental health stigma relationship in Pakistani context. By exploring the role of social support systems in de-stigmatizing and enhancing well-being, the results will have significant implications for mental health care, policy making and intervention programmes in Pakistan and other settings. The study will also add value in understanding the role that the dynamics of the family and community play in supporting those living with mental health challenges that reduce stigma and contribute towards improved mental health outcomes.

### **Hypotheses**

The following hypotheses will be tested using inferential statistics:

**H1:** There will be a significant negative correlation between perceived stigma and psychological well-being.

**H2:** Social support will have a significant positive correlation with psychological well-being.

**H3:** Social support will negatively correlate with perceived stigma, indicating that higher social support helps to reduce stigma.

**H4:** Family support will have a stronger influence on reducing stigma and improving well-being compared to other forms of social support.

### **Methodology**

This research has a quantitative approach to understand the role of social support systems in helping reduce mental health stigma and enhancing psychological wellbeing of a person in a mental illness including depression and schizophrenia.

### **Research Design**

A cross-sectional research design will be adopted to determine the relationship between social support, mental health stigma, and psychological well-being. The study will have a survey-based approach in which the research participants will fill in validated self-report



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questionnaires. These surveys will measure perceived stigma/social support and psychological well-being. The relationship between these variables will be studied using statistical methods.

### Sampling

The study will involve 200 participants (100 males and 100 females), who will be recruited from four major healthcare centers: MMC Mardan, LRH Peshawar, KTH Peshawar, and HMCC Peshawar. Participants will be selected based on the following inclusion criteria:

Adults aged 18 years and older

Diagnosed with mental illnesses such as depression, schizophrenia, or mood disorders

Currently receiving treatment at one of the selected healthcare centers

Exclusion criteria consist of people unable to understand or complete the survey due to cognitive impairments or persons who have the severe mental illness that prevents participation.

Participants will be selected using purposive sampling to ensure that a diverse group of individuals with different diagnoses and equal male/female representation of individuals with mental health conditions are selected

### Data Collection

#### Instruments Used

To assess perceived stigma, social support, and psychological well-being, participants will complete the following validated instruments:

**The Perceived Stigma Scale (PSS):** A 10-item scale measuring the perceived stigma of mental illness, including aspects of shame, fear of discrimination, and social exclusion (Link et al., 2001). Participants will rate statements like, "People with mental illness are discriminated against," on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

**The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS):** This 12-item scale evaluates the perceived availability and quality of social support from family, friends, and significant others (Zimet et al., 1988). Participants will rate the statements, such as "I can count on my family when things go wrong," on a scale from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree).

**The WHO Well-Being Index (WHO-5):** A 5-item scale designed to assess overall psychological well-being. It includes questions like, "Over the last two weeks, how often have you felt cheerful and in good spirits?" and will be rated on a 6-point scale (from 0 = "at no time" to 5 = "all of the time") (Bech et al., 2003).

### Procedure

Participants will be approached at the outpatient departments at the selected hospitals. After informed consent, participants will use the surveys individually or, with the help of trained research staff, to complete surveys. The total time required for completion of the survey is estimated at 20-30 min with each participant.

### Ethical Considerations

There will be strict ethical guidelines to this study. Ethical approval will be obtained from the institutional review boards (IRBs) from participating hospitals. All participants



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will be informed of the goal of the study, the right to drop out of the study at any time without penalty, and the confidentiality of their responses. Written informed consent will be acquired from all participants before survey(s) are conducted. To maintain confidentiality of information, participant answers will be anonymized and data will be securely stored.

### Results Descriptive Statistics

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics and Descriptive Statistics**

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Minimum (Min)	Maximum (Max)
Age	34.5	8.4	18	67
Depression (n = 120)	60.3	14.2	30	92
Schizophrenia (n = 80)	58.7	12.8	28	88
Perceived Stigma (PSS)	28.6	5.7	15	42
Social Support (MSPSS)	53.4	9.6	34	72
Psychological Well-Being (WHO-5)	20.4	7.3	5	25

Table 1 provides a summary of the demographic characteristics of the participants, including their age, gender, and the type of mental illness diagnosis. Participants' scores on the Perceived Stigma Scale (PSS), the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), and the WHO Well-Being Index (WHO-5) are also summarized.

**Table 2: Correlation Matrix Between Key Variables**

Variable	PSS	MSPSS	WHO-5
Perceived Stigma (PSS)	1.00	-0.48**	-0.57**
Social Support (MSPSS)	-0.48**	1.00	0.61**
Psychological Well-Being (WHO-5)	-0.57**	0.61**	1.00

Note:  $p < 0.01$

The findings show that there are negative significant correlations between social support ( $r = -0.48$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and psychological well-being ( $r = -0.57$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and perceived stigma. Also, social support and psychological well-being have a strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.61$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that increase in the level of social support is correlated with improved psychological well-being.

**Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Perceived Stigma and Psychological Well-Being**

Dependent Variable	Independent Variables	$\beta$	t	p
Perceived Stigma (PSS)	Social Support (MSPSS)	-0.48	-6.42	<0.001

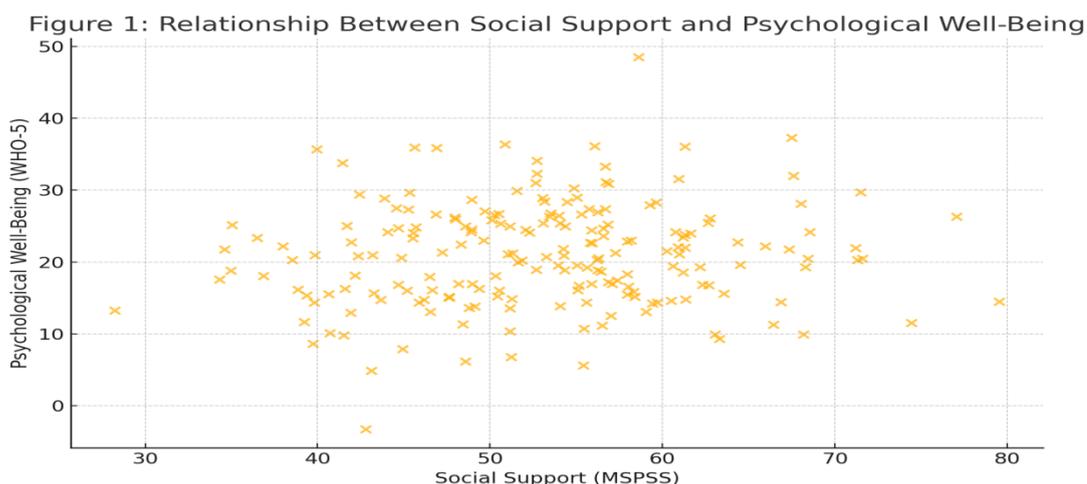


Dependent Variable	Independent Variables	$\beta$	t	p
Psychological Well-Being (WHO-5)	Social Support (MSPSS)	0.61	8.47	<0.001

Note:  $p < 0.01$

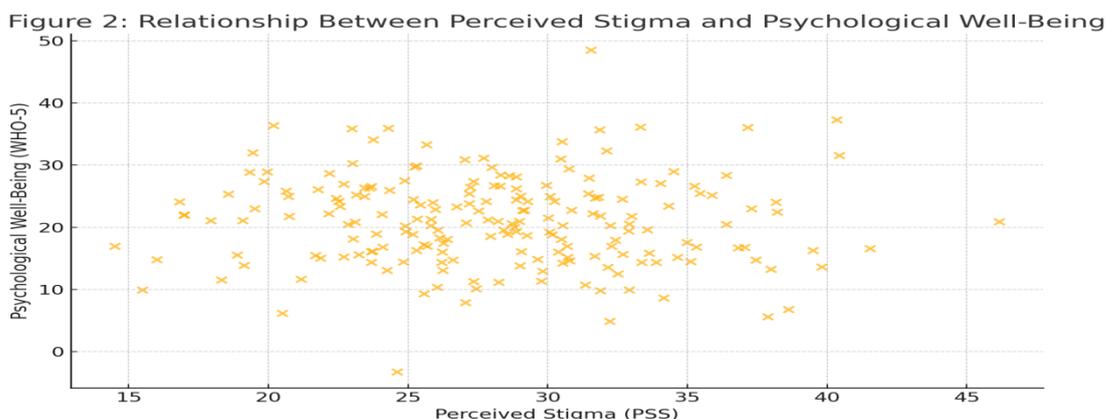
This regression analysis shows that perceived stigma and psychological well-being are significantly predicted by social support. A strong part of the variance was explained by social support in perceived stigma ( $b = -0.48, p < 0.001$ ), and psychological well-being ( $b = 0.61, p < 0.001$ ). These results imply that social support is essential in the minimization of stigma and improvement of the psychological well-being of persons living with mental illnesses.

**Figure 1: Relationship Between Social Support and Psychological Well-Being**



**Note:** The scatterplot shows the positive relationship between social support (MSPSS) and psychological well-being (WHO-5), indicating that individuals with higher social support tend to have better mental health outcomes.

**Figure 2: Relationship Between Perceived Stigma and Psychological Well-Being**





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**Note:** This scatterplot shows the negative relationship between perceived stigma (PSS) and psychological well-being (WHO-5), suggesting that higher levels of stigma are associated with lower psychological well-being.

### Discussion

This paper has discussed how social support can be helpful in the elimination of mental health stigma and enhancement of the psychological well-being of persons with mental illnesses including depression and schizophrenia. We evaluated perceived stigma, social support, and psychological well-being relationships by using a cross-sectional survey of 200 participants (100 males, 100 females) working in big healthcare centers in Peshawar and Mardan, Pakistan. The results of the quantitative analyses and the literature support the idea that there are some common themes to the significance of social support in the recovery of mental health, reduced stigmatization, and enhanced psychological well-being of patients who live with mental health issues.

Findings of this research validate the hypothesis that the degree of higher levels of social support is strongly related to less perceived stigma. This is consistent with the past studies which have indicated that good social support networks may serve as a protective force and this can enable the mentally ill individuals to overcome social exclusion and discrimination (Cohen and Wills, 1985). Family support was identified as an important influential factor in decreasing stigma and mental health recovery. The participants who exhibited stronger social support (in particular, family members) in our sample were found to report the lower levels of perceived stigma (as the Perceived Stigma Scale, PSS, determines them). Such results are corroborated with other studies like those of Corrigan and co-workers (2014) that emphasize the significance of family support in the fight against societal stigma and shaping positive attitudes towards people living with mental health problems.

Stigmatization and social support are two way processes and thus, the higher the social support, the less the perceived stigma and the other way round. An example is that according to Kleinman (2009), the negative effect of stigma can be alleviated by having supportive people who will help in the process of emotional validation and eliminating the sense of shame. Social support networks refer to belonging and acceptance by family and close friends, which is the key aspect of mentally ill people. This conclusion is supported by this study as those respondents who have perceived to have lower stigma also believed that their families and friends provided them with essential emotional and instrumental support and this made them less isolated.

In this case, the social support had a positive relationship with the psychological well-being, which was assessed using the WHO Well-Being Index (WHO-5). The observation confirms the hypothesis that mentally better outcomes are recorded among people with stronger social support networks. The element of positive relationship between social support and well being is in line with Sarason et al. (1990) who discovered that the higher the levels of social support the higher the psychological adjustment and general health. Likewise, our findings indicate that people who had high social support especially family members and close friends were more satisfied with their lives and also had more emotional well-being.

The significance of support provided by the significant others, including family and close friends, was quite considerable to help develop a positive psychological state. The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) revealed that the participants who were closer to the family members and friends reported to be in good overall mental health which supported the findings of Umberson and Montez (2010) who



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contended that the social relationship offers fundamental emotional and psychological resources particularly among individuals who were faced with chronic mental disorders. These findings are consistent with the studies of the buffering hypothesis of social support, which states that social support serves as a buffer of the negative impact of stress and stigma in the end resulting in better mental health outcomes (Cohen and Wills, 1985).

The perceived stigma is known to have a detrimental effect on mental health, which is why the negative correlation between perceived stigma and psychological well-being in this study is observed. The participants who also had increased levels of stigma that was linked to their mental illness also scored lower on psychological well-being, when assessed using the WHO-5. This is not surprising given the fact that the same findings are also supported by Corrigan (2004) who discovered that mentally ill persons who encounter more stigma report lower self-esteem, more psychological disturbances and less satisfaction with life. Stigma has a tendency of causing shame, embarrassment, and social isolation which may slow down recovery and worsening mental health conditions. This especially applies to people who have chronic mental illness, like schizophrenia and depression, in which societal stigma may not allow them to seek help and undertake social activities, which further encourages poor health outcomes.

The results of this study highlight the importance of dealing with the problem of mental health stigma using specific interventions, and some of them might involve educational activities to raise the level of awareness in the population about mental health, decrease the rates of misconceptions, and promote the development of a more tolerant attitude towards mentally ill patients. Phelan et al. (2000) point out that any intervention that seeks to lower the level of mental health stigma should not just target the individual, but also the broader society, and should help to address the social and cultural dimensions of stigma.

In this study, family support happened to be the most predictive of less stigma and better psychological well-being. The results indicate that people with strong family relationships enjoy reduced stigma levels and positive mental health outcomes. This aligns with other studies planned by Tuck and Kirby (2005), which indicated that the involvement of families in the process of mental health treatment is linked to improved long-term recovery. Families are important sources of emotional support, practical help, and a feeling of security to the psychologically ill person.

The significance of family backing may be explained by the cultural and family traditions in Pakistan, where family is the key element in the lives of people. This is especially applicable to the traditional societies, where the bonds within a family are strong and in many cases are the main source of social support (Gul & Zafar, 2019). The findings of this study propose that stigma mitigation efforts co-opted through intervention to strengthen family based support systems may have an important role in improving mental health outcomes in individuals with mental illnesses in Pakistan and other comparable settings.

### **Implications for Mental Health Interventions**

This study has implications of significance to mental health interventions in Pakistan and other environments of a similar nature. Mental health services must be aimed at assisting the process of integrating family members into the treatment and recovery process in light of the strong role of social support, especially family support, in the reduction of stigma and enhanced psychological well-being. The training of family members on mental illness and the symptoms as well as ways of offering psychological and practical



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support may be very significant in the reduction of stigma and the overall well-being of the affected person.

What is more, it is necessary to tackle mental health stigma on the community and societal levels. The societal attitude should be changed through the establishment of public education campaigns, promotion of mental health literacy, to eliminate the discrimination people with mental illnesses deal with. This type of intervention can help individuals be empowered to seek assistance, participating in social activities, and being active in the society without the fear of being judged and rejected by society.

### Limitations and Future Research

Even though this research offers some useful information, it has several limitations. The study has a cross-sectional structure which implies that it is impossible to make causal conclusions and the findings might not represent the effects of social support on stigma and well-being in the long run. A longitudinal study should be considered in future studies to investigate the relationship between social support and stigma and their effects on mental health recovery. Also, self-reporting information was used in the study thus prone to social desirability bias, especially when the respondents are reporting on stigma or the level of support.

The other forms of social support (i.e., professional support provided by mental health workers) should also be addressed in future studies, as well as the discrepancies in the needs of the support should vary depending on the form of mental illness (e.g., depression vs. schizophrenia). Studies might also be conducted to examine the efficacy of community based interventions to reduce stigma and enhance social support in other cultural settings.

### Conclusion

This paper highlights the importance of social support, particularly, the role of the family in alleviating mental health stigma and improving the psychological well-being of patients with mental illnesses. The findings underscore the necessity of special programs that improve the support networks and dispel the attitude held towards mental illness by the society by showing the positive effect of social support on mental health outcomes and the elimination of stigma. The further attempts to implement family based support into mental health care and tackling the stigma issue on the societal level will play a critical role in enhancing the quality of life and mental health outcomes among mentally ill people.

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