

## **Mental Health Stigma: Barriers to Treatment and Participation in Mental Health Care among University Students in Kenya**

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**Abstract :** Stigma is commonly associated with mental health patients and may act as a barrier to individuals who may seek or engage in treatment services. Stigmatization among university students is common whether they know someone with a mental health problem, or have a good knowledge and experience of mental health issues. The objective of this study was to establish the various barriers that prevent university students who have mental health challenges from seeking treatment and care. The study was a descriptive in nature where 320 respondents helped to establish the barriers to treatment or participation in mental health care among university students. A questionnaire was used to help establish the barriers and attitude towards mental illness among the respondents. Results from this study revealed that mental illnesses are common among university students and they are manifested in different forms like; anxiety and panic attacks, mood and eating disorders, Impulse control leading to gambling, alcohol and drug addictions, anger and depression leading to loneliness. Mental stigma (both social and self) was the major barrier with 62% of the respondents stating that social stigma was worse than self-stigma. This is because of the social discrimination towards the victim of mental challenges. On issues of attitude, 71% of the respondents said that they can never admit that they have a mental issue and would rather secretly seek clinical or psychological help for fear of being discriminated or excluded by peers. This view is informed by the societal belief that people with mental health challenges were dangerous (associating them with criminal behavior) and hard to socialize with or help. From the findings of this study, it is concluded that mental health problems are real among university students in Kenya and it is important for the university environment to minimize or eradicate stigma within the social circles. Stigma can be minimized or eradicated by creating awareness among university students and fostering social inclusion so that the students who have mental health challenges can experience a sense of belonging and acceptance hence build their self-esteem.

**Keywords :** disorders, impulse control, mental health problems, stigma

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