Stigma alone does not explain non-disclosure of psychological symptoms in general practice


QUESTION: Do people fail to disclose psychological symptoms to general practitioners for fear of stigma, or for other reasons?

Design
Qualitative focus group study.

Setting
Primary care practices, Wales.

Participants
127 people aged 18–70 from rural, urban and valley practices. Participants were selected from 3 age groups (15 women, 17 men aged 18–25; 18 women, 16 men aged 35–45 and 32 women, 29 men aged 50–70).

Data collection and analysis
Data were generated from 4 focus group exercises: discussion of fictional situations and emotional states; ranking of importance of physical and emotional symptoms; ranking of importance of sources of help for common mental disorders and finally, suitability of different questionnaires for ascertaining cases in primary care.

Main Results
Concerns about stigma were not the only reasons given for non-disclosure. Other reasons for non-disclosure may include a perception that psychological symptoms are less worrisome than physical symptoms; that psychological symptoms should be dealt with by the individual, rather than a health professional, or that psychological symptoms are not a “health problem” but a “part of life”.

Conclusions
Health professionals need to be aware that, as well as fear of stigma, psychological symptoms may not be reported due to differences in importance lay people and professionals ascribe to these symptoms when describing illness.
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