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Breaking the Silence: Addressing Stigma on Seeking Professional Mental Health Care in Rwanda Through Effective Communication

Anitha Dushimirimana

Abstract

Mental health stigma remains a significant barrier to usage of mental health services globally, and Rwanda is no exception.

Despite efforts to decentralize mental health services and NGOs providing services, stigma and prejudices stemming from cultural, traditional, and supernatural myths hinder their utilization (Mukamana et al., 2019).

Effective communication strategies are essential for reducing stigma and increasing utilization of available mental health services.

Introduction

- The 2018 Rwanda Ministry of Health mental health survey reports that, **one in five people between the ages of 14-65 in Rwanda has at least one mental health issue**, with depression being the most common (Rwanda Biomedical Centre, 2022)
- This research explores different communication barriers contributing to mental health stigma in Rwanda and provides solutions.

Methodology

A desk review of secondary sources of approximately eight publications and articles from the Research Gate, BMC, Devex, Rwanda Ministry of Health, and Rwanda Biomedical Centre was conducted. The period considered was from 2019 to date.

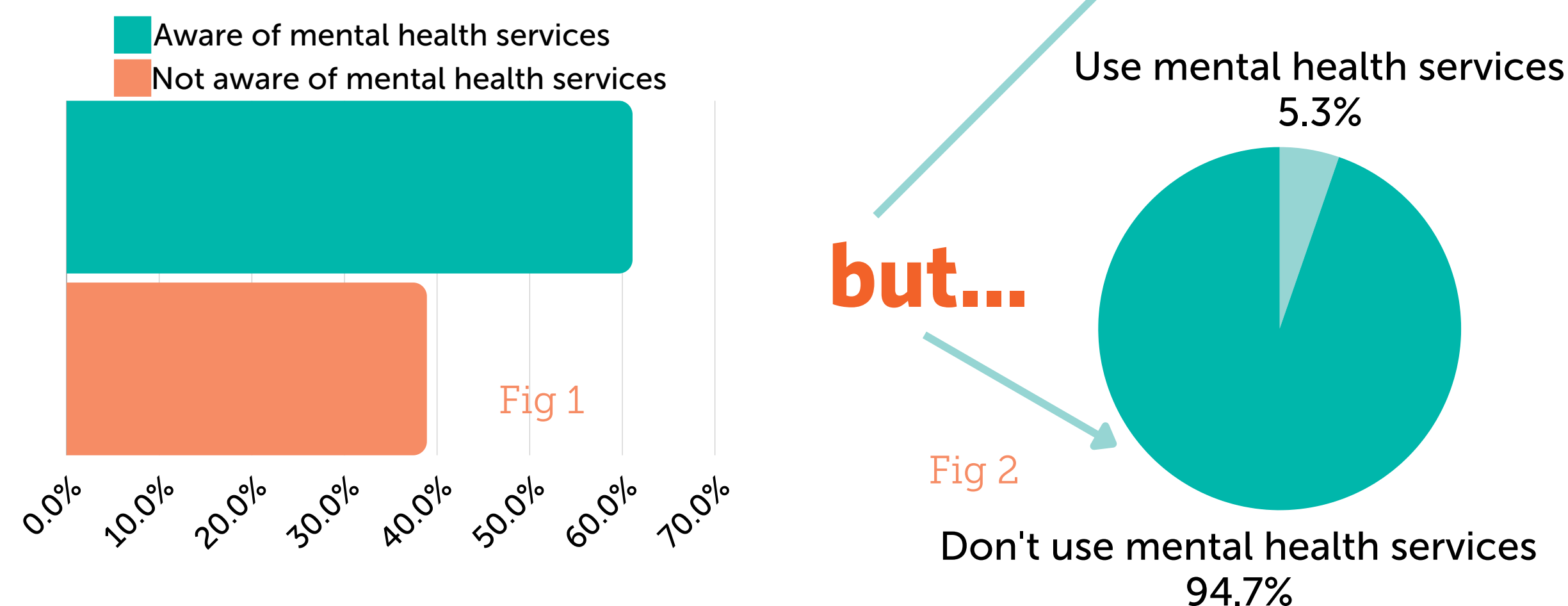
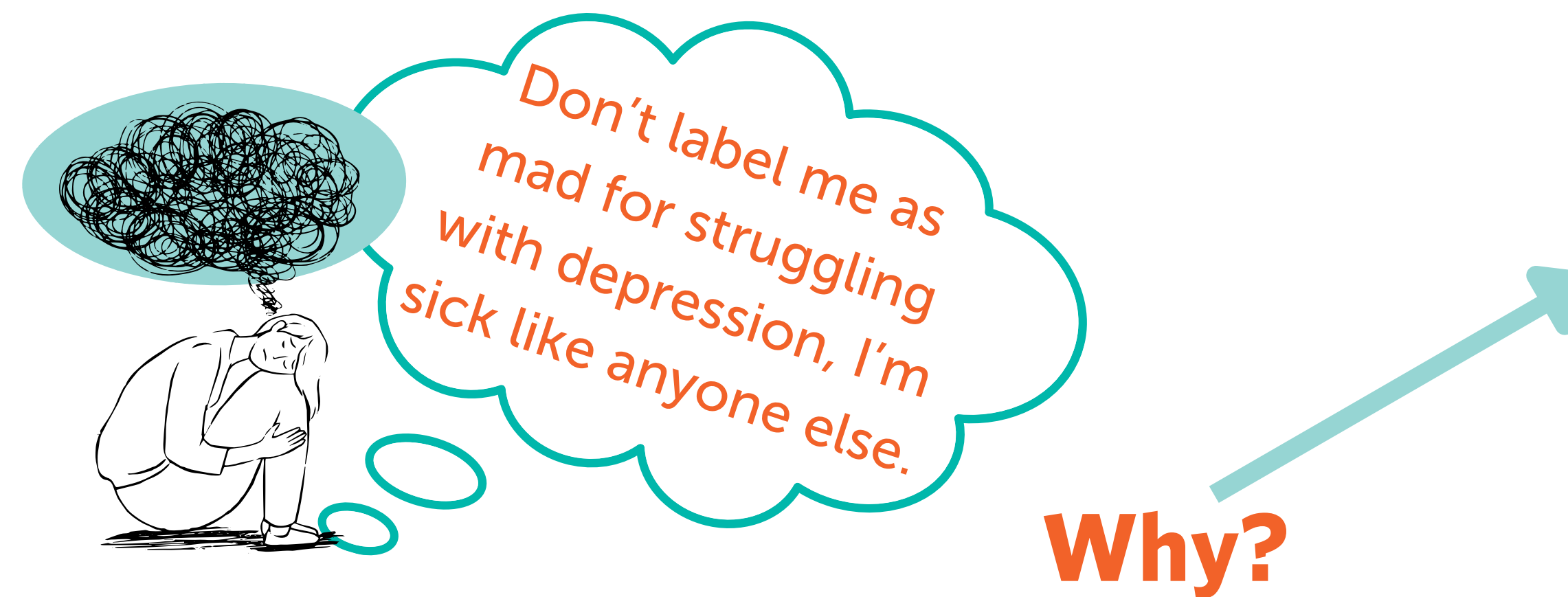


Fig 1 shows the awareness of mental health services and Fig 2 shows how many of those aware use the services (Kayiteshonga et al., 2022).



Hategekimana Bashar (left) of the patients treated by Partners In Health mental health team, and members of his family chat outside Bashar's home in Rwanda in July 2016. Photos by Bob Muhumuza / Partners In Health



Anitha (right) and Theogene (left) facilitating a discussion with mental health practitioners as Rwandan alums during a Global Health Corps-hosted mental health symposium with the Rwanda Ministry of Health.

Results

- People still hold traditional beliefs about mental illness, such as supernatural causes or demonic possession, leading to stigmatization and reluctance to seek help (Balthazar, 2021).
- Communication barriers include limited access to accurate information, cultural beliefs, myths, and fear of discrimination (Devex, 2020).
- Gap: Available campaigns done are mostly in English and last not longer than three months.

Recommendations

- Launch a nationwide locally driven campaign addressing specific myths and misconceptions. Learning from HIV/AIDS prevention campaign.
- Use USSD code to send text messages in Kinyarwanda on mental health stigma, free testing, mental health services at the health centers and toll free number for mental health support.
- Introduce mental health related app where people can seek mental health support remotely.

Conclusion

Effective communication is a powerful tool in combating mental health stigma and raising awareness of mental health services in Rwanda while creating a supportive environment for individuals experiencing mental health issues.

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