

Integrating Ignatian Pedagogy into an Abnormal Psychology Course to Reduce Mental Health Stigma

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Background

Before I came to Xavier in 2018, I worked in the Department of Veterans Affairs as an organization development psychologist implementing solutions designed to improve healthcare. While there, the benefits of a common language became clear. Moving together synchronously towards new healthcare solutions, was always more successful when we had a shared understanding of how to do it. The knowledge of the benefits of a common language made me grateful to join Xavier University, where a shared understanding of our mission and values is an explicit and reinforced goal for students and employees. The IMP program is one example of that, and it gave me the structure and motivation to learn the language and apply it explicitly in the classroom.

My mentor, Lisa Jutte, has been an invaluable resource along the way. She gave me good starting points for reading about the gifts of our Ignatian heritage and the five principles of Ignatian pedagogy. We talked about how best to apply these principles and I ultimately opted to use them to help Abnormal Psychology students learn how to reduce mental health stigma. Meeting Lisa was one of the highlights of the program for me and she graciously gave time and advice on things beyond what she was asked to do as an IMP mentor. I am so thankful for her guidance and I'm sure I will be seeking it for many years to come!

The course

Abnormal Psychology is designed to introduce students to clinical mental health disorders with a focus on diagnosis, etiology and treatment. One goal of the course is to improve awareness and knowledge of psychopathology in hopes that we can reduce the suffering and stigma associated with mental disorders. Reducing stigma associated with mental health disorders was an admittedly underdeveloped aspect of this course and I was eager to make it more impactful and action oriented.

Stigma has serious consequences for people experiences mental health disorders. People with mental health symptoms experience both self and public stigma (Corrigan, 2004) and experience poorer subjective quality of life, lower self-esteem, poorer social support and worse treatment outcomes (Livingston & Boyd, 2010). Additionally, fear of stigma is an often cited barrier to seeking treatment (Kessler et al., 2001). The Spring 2020 section of this course was comprised largely of nursing majors who will have a great deal of influence over a person's willingness to share mental health symptoms during a healthcare visit and seek subsequent treatment. My hope was that beyond identifying stigma and consequences of it, students could use Jesuit values to learn how to reduce stigma in their future workplace and ultimately improve willingness to seek mental health treatment. The course was reworked using three specific values: Cura Personalis, Reflection and Service Rooted in Justice and Love.

Enhancing the course

The reduction of mental health stigma was designed as a semester-long three part assignment using Jesuit values.

Part I (Cura Personalis): Learn to respect and actively listen to the whole person. Using the language of Cura Personalis, we discussed how mental health is connected to physical health and how patients often cannot achieve their health goals without also attending to their mental health. We practiced how to ask questions about mental health symptoms in a non-stigmatizing, normalizing way and 100% of students demonstrated the ability to do this on a mid-semester exam when asked to generate a verbatim exchange between themselves and a patient with suicidal thoughts. Students also took stigma quizzes on

the website makeitok.org to learn what stigmatizing language sounds like. We then shifted to the fundamental attribution error, our tendency to assume behavior is attributable to internal factors when we do not know someone well and external factors when we do. Also encouraging, 100% of students were able to connect the fundamental attribution error to mental health stigma on an in-class assignment. Finally, to humanize people with mental health symptoms and reduce the likelihood of engaging in the fundamental attribution error, students were invited to view stories of people detailing their mental health journey when we learned about different clinical disorders across the semester. They were asked to both reflect on why it's important to learn more about people who have experienced mental health symptoms and what they learned about stigma through reflection papers submitted on Canvas and in-class discussions.

Student Responses to Part I

"One thing I learned was to not be afraid of someone's mental illness. They'd rather talk about it with you than have you act like it is a bad thing. Also, to ask questions instead of just agreeing or nodding, someone with mental illness needs you to be there for them and not just accept them."

"That society has always viewed mental illness as a sign of weakness, as if the afflicted person can help their disability. The fact that people still think this way today is honestly sad, its almost as if all that we have learned about mental illnesses do not matter to some people. I found from the quiz that at sometimes even I am capable of creating stigmas myself."

[I now have] "a better understanding of the right things to say when discussing mental illness. Nobody has to be worried about giving the right advice or helping to "get rid of" their mental illness, listening and asking questions is enough and saying things such as, what can I do to help? How are you feeling today? Making sure the one opening up knows you're there for them."

"I thought that I was open and understanding of people with mental illness, however, I learned that some of my actions actually contribute to the stigma surrounding mental illness. I learned that when I call someone crazy light-heartedly in conversation, can actually contribute to stigma, and have a negative impact on that person, if they are suffering from mental illness. This quiz helped me to learn that I still have things I could work on to decrease stigma surrounding mental illness."

"Learning about people who have experienced mental health symptoms gives us the opportunity to understand what it might be like to live in their shoes and treat them as they should."

"I think it puts into perspective the idea that we are all human, and it is okay to experience these types of illnesses, and sometimes it is out of our control. It also allows us to be less judgmental to people who experience these illnesses. We are all human."

Part II (Reflection): Learn to acknowledge stigma in society, reflect on the consequences and accept our responsibility. Students were asked to identify and reflect on examples of stigma in society, how those examples may impact someone with a mental health disorder and what they will each do differently as a result of the assignment. They were then asked to share the example they found with a small group of classmates and identify the most damaging example of stigma out of their group's submissions.

The majority of students identified examples of stigma in the media, at work or through conversations with friends or family members who had been diagnosed with a mental health disorder. Below are excerpts of some of the students' reflections.

Student Responses to Part II

"Xavier teaches us to treat every patient with compassion and equality regardless of their lifestyle or choices. We are taught to leave our biases at the door and treat every patient equally and provide the best care we can give. There is often a stigma surrounding drug addiction and pain. Many nurses and medical staff believe drug addicts that come into the ER for pain are just looking for pain medication. I

have personally witnessed stigma at work when women come in pregnant but also addicted to substances. They are often seen as a difficult patient and are not the type of patient that the nurse always want to deal with. Before I was more educated on the topic of addiction, I even felt a negative feeling towards these types of patients.”

“I have learned that a stigma often associated with depression is that the victims are unable to handle anything that may even be the slightest bit emotionally triggering. So, people tend to shield them from a lot of things. I have experienced my friends make comments like, “be careful with your jokes when you’re with (blank). She has depression” or things like “are we sure we should play this movie for Girls night in? It doesn’t have a happy ending and you know that (blank) has depression”. But during this interview, (blank) made me understand that depression does not mean the person is in capable of coping with situations that other people can. Rather, it can be very harmful to people that have depression when we have this prejudice about them. Nobody wants to feel like the whole world needs to compromise for them.”

“One way I believe they show stigma [in this movie] is through the use of the word “crazy” when referring to people with a mental illness. One example is the main character Pat, calls his father who has OCD, crazy because of the things that he has to do. Another time is when the main girl, Tiffany calls Pat crazy because of the way he is acting. Lastly, one of their mutual friends talks about Tiffany and says that she is a mess and to be careful because she goes to therapy. This can be hurtful for people to watch because it can’t prevent people with mental illness from seeking out the treatment and help they need because people will think they are “crazy” or “a mess” for speaking to a therapist.”

[People with mental health disorders] “may also feel upset after seeing how the director makes it seem easy to cure mental illness in this way.”

“This movie, despite being a comedy, can be severely damaging to those with mental illness...It portrays those with schizophrenia as being prone to violence. This alienates people with mental illness, and it makes people less likely to be trusting of them.”

“To reduce mental health stigma, I actively work on my usage of words such as “crazy,” and “OCD,” which are words that I feel like are entirely overused. For example, saying stuff like “omg I’m so ADHD” after drinking 6 cups of coffee...”

“One thing I will do differently is to tell people that it is not a sign of weakness to get help. It is actually a sign of strength.”

“One thing that I can do differently to decrease stigma of mental illness is to treat those with mental illness just as I would with anyone else. It is important to not alienate these individuals, and to make them feel like they belong.”

Part III (Service Rooted in Justice and Love): Learning to invest our lives for those who suffer injustice. Students were then assigned to work with their small group (or individually after COVID-19) and pick one action to reduce mental health stigma. Students created their own stigma quizzes and shared them on social media, wrote letters to our governor in support of telehealth services for mental health during COVID-19, raised money to reduce stigma and wrote letters to producers of television shows or movies with stigmatizing language. Below are a few examples of their efforts in their own words.

Student Efforts to Reduce Mental Health Stigma

“For my action to reduce stigma, I chose to sign up for the “End the Stigma” 5K walk or run that Xavier holds every year. Unfortunately, the event was canceled due to the current COVID-19 crisis....Because I was unable to attend the walk, I registered for an alternative “End the Stigma” race organized by the National Association on Mental Illness (NAMI) that will be held this upcoming fall. I also found that NAMI has an option for a virtual way to end the stigma! I was able to register and create a fundraising page to help raise money to provide services to those affected by mental illness in Southeast Ohio. I have posted

this fundraiser to my facebook page and hope to raise at least a small amount of money to do my part in ending the stigma.”

“I wanted to provide students in our direct community with the resources that are available to them at all times. Before taking this class, I truly did not know all of the resources that were available for us. I feel like I never saw all of the information regarding resources laid out in a simple way on a platform that was very relaxed and popular. I chose to create multiple short and simple Instagram story posts to display information to the students that use this type of social media. In these posts I included Xavier resources as well as emergency resources that can be used. My hope is that people save these stories and can use them for reference or just simply become more aware of the resources that are available. I also hope my posting it on a very public app, it will show people that it is not weird/abnormal to seek help. Hopefully this will reduce mental health stigma in our community!”

“The way we decided to reduce stigma on the film, “Where’s Molly”, was by creating a youtube video and posting it on both youtube and facebook, to help promote the issue. We created a short video to describe how children with disabilities are stigmatized and negatively portrayed.”

“I wanted to spread awareness on the effect stigma has in our world. I also wanted to drop attention to what can be done about changing this stigma. I shared this article from the national alliance on mental health about what stigma is and how we see it in our world today. There is also a quiz that can be taken to see if a person contributes to stigma. It goes on to say the three steps of being stigma free is educating yourself and others, see the person not condition, and take action.”

“My group decided that each of us would create our own instagram stories to share on our instagram page that contained all the information about mental health stigma. We decided as young adults this is the best way to reduce stigma in our generation and hope we clearly state our message to our peers.”

“I chose to combat stigma by giving awareness to what people with mental illnesses might deal with every day. I have an Instagram account so I decided to change my Instagram username (to Stop the Stigma) and posted pictures to raise awareness to mental health stigma. Some of the pictures had quotes and slogans and some had ways to prevent stigma. Some ways to prevent stigma are educating yourself and others, use supportive language, listen and not judge, and speak out to correct stereotypes.”

“We decided to write a letter to the producers of the bachelor. My partner observed the mental health stigma during the “Women Tell All” episode where the women expressed how Tammy called Kelsey emotionally unstable, an alcoholic, and a pill popper. We decided this was among one of the most damaging in our group.”

{An excerpt from the letter is below}

We write to you to express our concern with some of the content in Peter’s season of the bachelor. Tammy’s actions towards Kelsey were extremely inappropriate and we feel that this episode and these thoughts should have been excluded from the show completely...We believe that further education should have been done after the show to educate the viewers on this topic. Since the producers of the show cannot control what the contestants say during the show, we believe that it is an obligation for the producers to add information about what has been said after the episode or during the “Women Tell All” episode, where the conversation was brought up again. Also, this conversation between the two contestants can be triggering for people who actually have struggled with substance abuse. Therefore, adding a helpline number or someone to contact for these people would have been helpful for the audience.....Thank you.

Conclusion

In summary, I’m grateful for the Ignatian Mentoring Program because it created the perfect platform for enhancing a previously underdeveloped aspect of this course. Students conveyed appreciation for such explicit discussion of stigma and for providing the language needed to reduce mental health stigma. They were consistently able to identify stigma and apply knowledge gained in the context of their practicums,

class discussion and exams. I am confident these students understand the seriousness of the topic and are well prepared to make this world a better place for people experiencing mental health symptoms.

References

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