

“Witchcraft” beliefs and mental health

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Mental wellbeing

- Successful performance of mental functions in terms of
 - Thoughts
 - Emotions
 - Perception (the way we “see” and “feel” the world)
 - Behaviour
- Such that one is able to
 - Work productively
 - Form lifelong relationships
 - Realise one’s potential
 - Participate meaningfully in the life of the community
 - Cope with the normal stresses of life
 - Face and overcome adversity

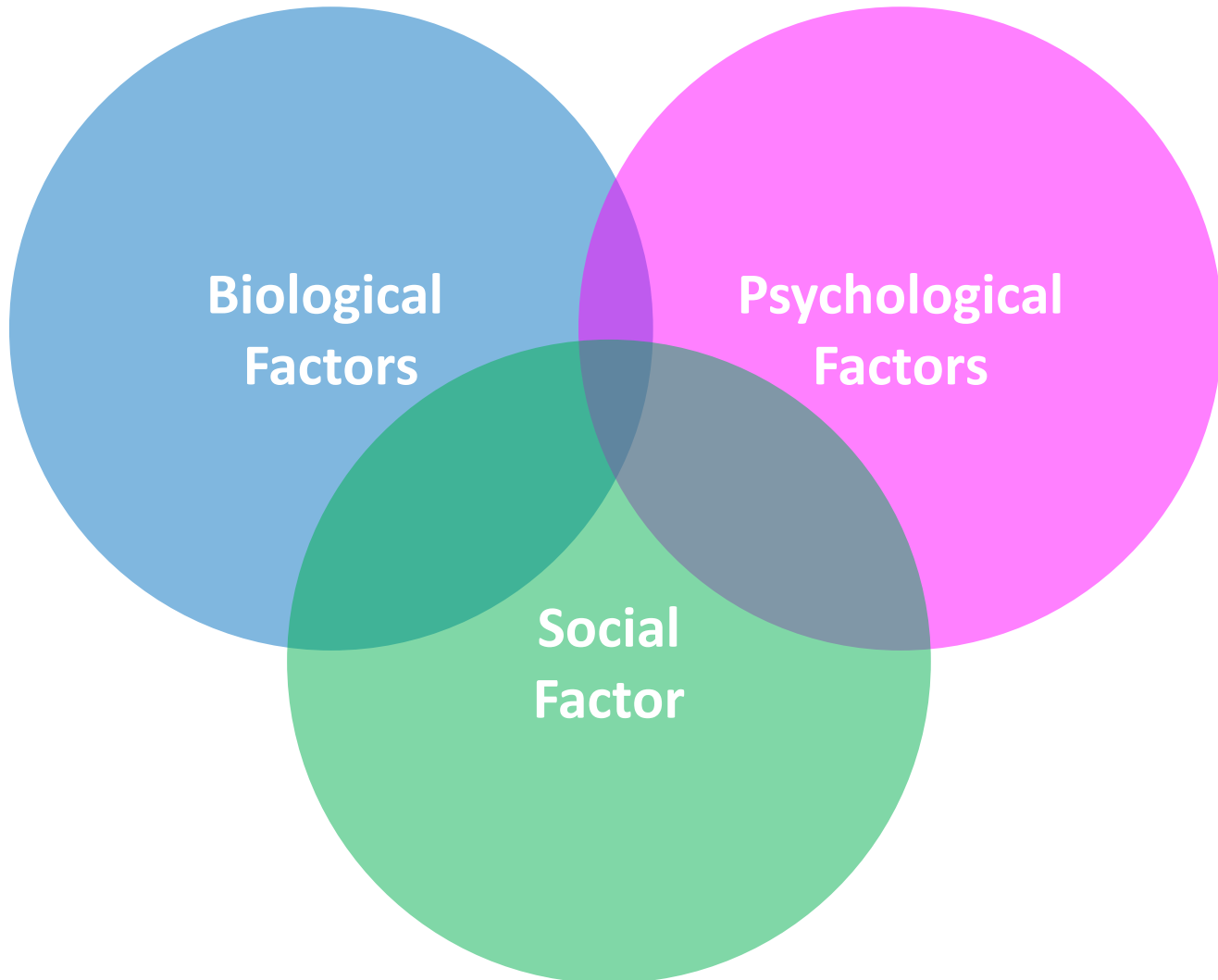
Mental disorders

- Abnormality in mental functions in terms of emotions, behaviour, thoughts, perception, cognition...
- Causing distress to the sufferer or those around him/her
- Leading to impairment in functioning in the family, at work and in the community...

Some signs and symptoms of mental disorders

- Delusion, hallucination, abnormal behaviour, abnormal speech
- Low mood, loss of energy, hopelessness, weepy spells, guilt feeling, suicidal thoughts and attempt
- Memory loss, wandering
- Conduct problems: stealing, lying
- Epileptic fits and so on...

Causes of Mental Disorders



African traditional religion cosmology

- Supreme deity
 - Source of “life force”/ “mystical power” that permeates entire universe
- Other lesser deities and gods
- Spirits
- Ancestors
- Special humans: medicine men, herbalists, witches, diviners etc
- Man
- Animals
- Inanimate objects
- Phenomena

“Witchcraft” Beliefs in the context of African religious worldview

- Witches belong to a special category of humans that have the ability and knowledge to access, manipulate and use “mystical power” for either good or evil (often evil) in the community
 - Others include wizards, priests and medicine
- Can afflict others with illness (including mental illness and epilepsy)

Intersection of mental disorders and “witchcraft” beliefs

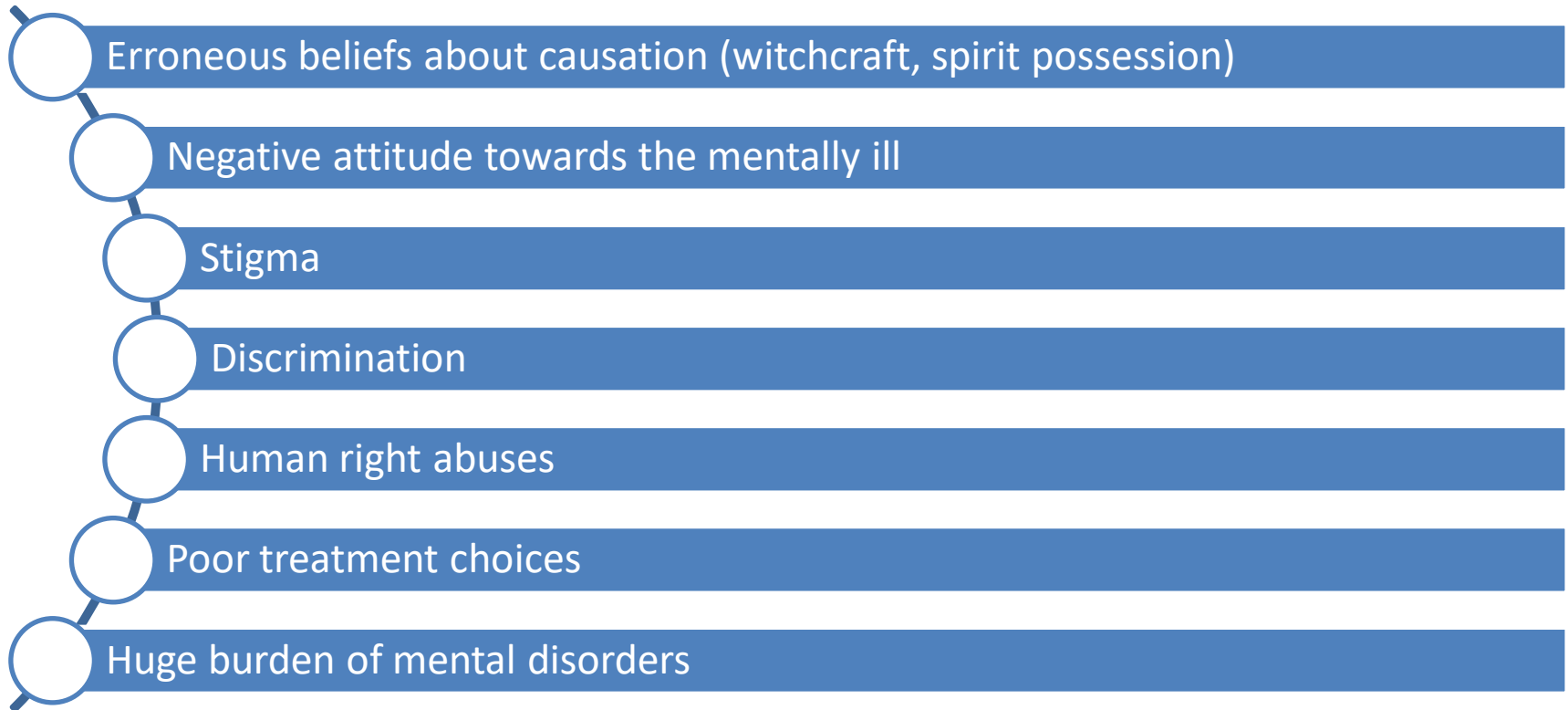
- Causal attribution of mental disorders
 - African traditional religious beliefs/syncretism with the Abrahamic religions
- Manifestation of mental illness
 - Symptoms often very strange/ mysterious
- Treatment seeking behaviour
 - Often follow perceived causal attribution
 - Often complex, featuring traditional healers

Mental disorders of importance to “witchcraft” beliefs

- Old age conditions
 - Dementia, geriatric depression
- General adult conditions
 - Psychosis, depression and suicide, anxiety, epilepsy, substance use disorders
- Child and adolescent
 - Children in exceptionally difficult situations
 - The “house help” phenomenon
 - autism, ADHD, conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, intellectual disability, bedwetting

Public mental health effects of “witchcraft” beliefs

In the community...



In treatment settings...

- 80% of persons with serious mental disorders in Nigeria do not receive any treatment in the previous 12 month...
- Across developing countries, range: **76.3% to 85.4 %**

- The few who do receive treatment do so from traditional and faith healers...



- Treatment often based on erroneous beliefs (e.g. “witchcraft” beliefs) shared by healers, patients and their relatives...

- Treatment practices therefore often harmful and inhumane....



Human rights violation in treatment settings...

| | Nigeria | Kenya | Ghana |
|----------------------|---------|-------|-------|
| Shackled /restrained | 64% | 60.6% | 48.1% |
| Beaten | 28% | 39.4% | 59.3% |

*N= 85 persons after receiving treatment for psychosis from Trad & faith healers

*Yet to be published data

Way forward...

- Awareness and advocacy
- Legislation to protect persons with mental disorders
- Other health system-wide and mental health system-wide reforms
 - Human resources, health financing, governance etc.