Understanding Nigeria's Mental Health Landscape; Data driven insights and solutions by

MyTherapist.ng

Insights from over 1,500 respondents spanning Nigeria's six geopolitical zones

These findings capture the challenges, stigmas, and hopes surrounding mental health in Nigeria, opening doors to fresh conversations and innovative solutions.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"You are not depressed in Jesus' name!"—a phrase all too familiar in Nigeria, where conversations about mental health are often cloaked in denial and spiritual validations. This response reflects a deep-seated cultural belief system that both comforts and stigmatizes, leaving individuals struggling with mental health challenges without the acknowledgment or support they need. This report digs into the nuances behind such sentiments, examining how religious, cultural, and societal factors intersect to shape mental health perceptions and access to care in Nigeria.

Our research survey reveals widespread stigma surrounding mental health, with a significant portion of respondents associating mental health challenges with weakness or incompetence. Despite this, there is growing acknowledgment of the importance of mental well-being, especially in professional and educational settings, where stress and burnout are prevalent. Accessibility challenges; both financial and geographical, still score high when examining key barriers to seeking care, amplified by low awareness of available services and limited access to mental health professionals.

We aim to also highlight an untapped potential for digital mental health solutions, with many of our respondents expressing interest in online therapy and apps for mental health education. Additionally, cultural beliefs and societal norms heavily influence perceptions of mental illness, indicating the need for culturally tailored interventions.

This report highlights the urgency of addressing mental health as a public health priority in Nigeria and serves as a foundational document to inspire collaborative efforts for change. It aligns with global mental health goals. This report also helps to guide our work at MyTherapist.ng and ensure we continue to provide innovative solutions to prevailing mental health struggles in Nigeria and beyond.

We aim to explore the state of mental health in Nigeria, examine the underlying factors contributing to mental health challenges, and stress on the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address this escalating crisis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our deepest gratitude to the incredible team of volunteer ambassadors who served as the backbone of this research. Their relentless efforts in ensuring the survey was disseminated and completed across all six geopolitical zones of Nigeria were instrumental in achieving the breadth and depth of our findings. Their dedication to spreading awareness and engaging diverse communities has been invaluable.

We also acknowledge the operations team at MyTherapist.ng for their exceptional work in coordinating this research project. From conceptualization to execution, their commitment, attention to detail, and passion for advancing mental health care in Nigeria made this report possible. This collective effort demonstrates the power of teamwork and shared vision in driving meaningful change.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health has emerged as a critical public health concern globally, affecting individuals across all age groups and socioeconomic backgrounds. According to the World Health Organization's *Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2030*, suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people aged 15 to 29 worldwide. This alarming statistic highlights the profound impact mental health disorders can have if left unaddressed. In Nigeria, the situation is particularly pressing due to a combination of factors such as limited mental health resources, cultural stigma, and inadequate policy implementation. Understanding the complexities of mental health within the Nigerian context is essential for developing effective interventions.

Sound Mental health is the cornerstone of overall well-being, yet it remains one of the most misunderstood and underprioritized aspects of healthcare in Nigeria. Despite its undeniable impact on physical health, productivity, and societal cohesion, mental health continues to be shrouded in stigma, misinformation, and cultural misconceptions. Statements like, "It is well with you!" epitomize the intersection of faith, denial, and cultural attitudes that often hinder meaningful discussions about mental health challenges in the country.

This report, spearheaded by MyTherapist.ng, explores the complex landscape of mental health in Nigeria, examining how cultural, religious, and societal factors influence perceptions, accessibility, and care-seeking behavior. Our aim is to unpack the nuanced barriers preventing individuals from accessing mental health support and to identify opportunities for sustainable solutions that resonate with the unique cultural and socioeconomic realities of Nigeria.

With our sample size spanning across diverse demographics, this study provides a robust dataset that reflects the realities faced by individuals across urban and rural areas. The findings are structured to offer insights into key themes, including stigma, workplace mental health, access to care, cultural influences, and the role of digital health innovations.

The significance of this research lies not only in its findings but also in its potential to catalyze change. Mental health is a growing public health concern globally, with the WHO estimating that 1 in 8 people worldwide lives with a mental health condition. In Nigeria, the

prevalence of mental health disorders, coupled with an acute shortage of mental health professionals and services, underscores the urgency of addressing this crisis.

This report aims to serve as a foundational document to inform stakeholders including policymakers, healthcare providers, and non-governmental organizations on the pressing need for a unified approach to mental health in Nigeria. Additionally, it reinforces MyTherapist.ng's commitment to providing innovative, culturally relevant solutions that address the mental health needs of Nigerians while aligning with global health priorities.

Through this report, we hope to spark a much-needed dialogue, inspire collaborative efforts, and ultimately contribute to a future where mental health care is accessible, equitable, and normalized in Nigeria.

Based on the findings, this report provides actionable recommendations for stakeholders, including the Nigerian government, healthcare providers, and corporate entities. Key proposals include increasing public education to reduce stigma, integrating mental health into primary healthcare, leveraging digital platforms to expand access, and fostering workplace wellness initiatives.

OBJECTIVES

1. Assess Public Perceptions of Mental Health: To investigate how Nigerians perceive mental health issues, identifying common misconceptions, beliefs, and the extent of stigma associated with mental illness.
2. Understand Barriers to Accessing Mental Health Services: To identify the financial, geographical, cultural, and systemic challenges that prevent individuals from seeking mental health care.
3. Evaluate the Role of Culture and Religion in Mental Health: To examine how cultural norms and religious beliefs influence attitudes toward mental health, coping mechanisms, and care-seeking behavior.
4. Explore Mental Health in the Workplace and Education: To uncover how stress, burnout, and mental health challenges are managed in professional and educational settings in Nigeria.
5. Identify Opportunities for Digital Solutions: To gauge the interest and potential for using digital tools, such as teletherapy and mental health apps, to increase accessibility and education around mental health.
6. Provide Data-Driven Recommendations: To offer actionable insights for stakeholders, including policymakers, healthcare providers, and corporations, to

improve mental health care access, reduce stigma, and foster an enabling environment for mental well-being.

OUR FINDINGS

Our survey data spans a diverse demographic, covering over 1,700+ respondents from various age groups, genders, marital, socioeconomic statuses, and all geopolitical zones across Nigeria. This broad representation ensures that the findings reflect a wide range of perspectives and experiences with mental health. The responses provide valuable insights into awareness levels, access to services, cultural influences, and technological readiness, forming the foundation for the detailed analysis and recommendations outlined below:

Awareness and Understanding of Mental Health

Mental health awareness in Nigeria is growing, especially among younger demographics and urban residents with 92.4% of people indicating that they are aware of the topic and 91% agreeing that it is a common issue in Nigeria. There is an overwhelming support for including mental health education in school curriculums highlights a recognition of its importance. This suggests that respondents are aware of the long-term benefits of mental health education, such as early detection and reducing stigma among younger generations. However, knowledge gaps persist:

- Many respondents equate mental health with severe conditions like psychosis or schizophrenia and in some cases an abnormality, overlooking common issues such as anxiety, stress, or mild depression.
- Few respondents mentioned awareness of preventive care or emotional resilience, pointing to a lack of understanding of mental health's broader spectrum.
- Misconceptions about mental health also often stem from cultural and religious narratives. For instance:
  - Some responses implied that mental health challenges arise from moral failings, laziness, or spiritual weakness, rather than as conditions requiring medical intervention.

- The reliance on informal support systems, such as family or community, without professional input, can lead to prolonged suffering or mismanagement of conditions.
- A prevalent belief was that mental health is a "luxury concern," overshadowed by more visible health priorities like malaria or maternal health.

Access to Mental Health Services

Nigeria has one of the lowest mental health professional-to-patient ratios globally, with fewer than 500 practicing psychiatrists serving a population of over 200 million people. Many regions, particularly rural areas, have no access to psychologists, counselors, or psychiatric services. our data reveals that:

- There is limited awareness of available professional mental health services.
- Individuals experience difficulty accessing services due to high costs, long distances, or lack of nearby facilities.
- Many respondents rely on self-help techniques, such as prayer, exercise, and meditation. While these methods have value, they are often insufficient for more severe mental health conditions requiring clinical intervention.

We also discovered three main barriers that emerged from the data:

- Cost: Mental health services are perceived as expensive, limiting access for low-income groups.
- Geography: Rural residents face significant challenges in accessing services due to the concentration of professionals and facilities in urban areas.
- Stigma: Cultural perceptions discourage individuals from openly seeking help. Fear of being labeled as "mad" often prevents individuals from consulting professionals.

Stigma and Cultural Perceptions

We sought to investigate and also understand the attitudes of people to perceived mental health struggles and the data revealed mixed attitudes. While there is increasing empathy for individuals with mental health conditions, many respondents admitted that they would hesitate to associate with or hire someone openly dealing with mental illness. This indicates that stigma is still deeply rooted in societal attitudes.

Respondents' comments revealed:

- Hesitation to acknowledge mental health issues within their families due to fear of societal judgment.
- A tendency to hide or downplay mental health struggles in public spaces, including workplaces, due to fear of discrimination.
- Influence of Religion and Culture on Mental Health Beliefs.

Religion particularly plays a dual role in mental health perceptions. While it provides emotional support for many, it can also perpetuate harmful attitudes. Some specific details to note:

- Statements such as "Pray it away" or attributing mental illness to spiritual warfare were common among respondents.
- Traditional practices and beliefs often discourage professional intervention, relying instead on spiritual healers or community elders.
- Positive narratives emerged where religious leaders endorsed mental health awareness, suggesting a potential avenue for advocacy.

Workplace and Mental Health

The prevalence of workplace stress emerged as a significant mental health concern. We learnt that high-pressure work environments with unrealistic expectations, especially in urban sectors like banking and telecommunications and poor work-life balance are a leading contributor to burnout and anxiety with 80.5% of our respondents agreeing that mental health issues affect their productivity at work and 48.5% of them shared that they actually take time off work specifically due to mental health related issues.

Availability of Mental Health Support in Organizations: There is also the indication that workplaces lacked structured and mental health support, such as counseling services or employee assistance programs. 62.5% of individuals shared that their workplace has no such structure or support. When available, these services were often inaccessible due to:

- A lack of trust in confidentiality.

- Fear of being perceived as weak or incapable by employers and colleagues.

Mental Health and Technology

Digital platforms, like MyTherapist.ng, are gaining traction as viable options for mental health support. 50.7% of individuals now express a willingness to use online therapy services, especially among younger, tech-savvy demographics. There is an appreciation for the anonymity provided by digital platforms, which helps circumvent stigma. As we evaluated the accessibility and trust in online Mental Health Services, some challenges that were identified include:

- Limited access to internet services in rural areas.
- Concerns about the quality of care and confidentiality in digital platforms.
- Respondents indicated a preference for platforms offering culturally relevant services, including therapists who understand Nigerian contexts and languages.

Demographic Trends

Mental Health Trends by Demographics:

Age: Younger respondents (18–35) were more open to discussing mental health and using digital platforms, whereas older generations tended to favor traditional methods or dismiss mental health concerns altogether.

Gender: Women were more likely to acknowledge mental health struggles and seek help, while men were more likely to associate mental health challenges with weakness, perpetuating reluctance to seek care.

Location: Urban respondents reported higher awareness and access to services than rural respondents, highlighting geographic inequalities.

Socioeconomic Status: Wealthier individuals were more likely to access professional mental health services, while lower-income groups relied on informal methods due to cost barriers.

DISCUSSION.

The findings of this study highlight the urgent need to address mental health challenges in Nigeria. To understand these issues in greater context, this section explores how Nigeria's situation compares to global trends and identifies critical gaps that stakeholders must address.

Research Context

Globally, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that mental health conditions affect 1 in 8 people, yet less than half receive the care they need. In low- and middle-income countries, including Nigeria, this care gap is even wider due to systemic challenges. According to the WHO Mental Health Atlas:

- Over 80% of countries report insufficient funding for mental health services.
- There is an average of 9 mental health workers per 100,000 people worldwide, but in Nigeria, this ratio is less than 1 per 100,000.
- Stigma remains one of the most significant barriers to care, affecting not just individuals but also the willingness of governments and organizations to invest in mental health.

Comparison with Global Trends

While many nations have begun integrating mental health into primary healthcare systems, Nigeria lags in several areas:

- Infrastructure: Countries with similar economic challenges, like South Africa, have made strides in creating accessible mental health services, yet Nigeria still relies heavily on a handful of tertiary facilities concentrated in urban centers.
- Legislation and Policy: Nations such as Kenya and Ghana have implemented mental health acts to ensure funding and protection for individuals with mental health conditions. Nigeria's existing policies lack enforcement and adequate funding.
- Public Awareness Campaigns: In contrast to global trends where campaigns normalize mental health discussions (e.g., Time to Change in the UK), Nigeria's efforts remain sporadic and underfunded.

Some critical gaps that exist in the Nigerian landscape:

- Shortage of Professionals: With fewer than 300 registered psychiatrists and a lack of clinical psychologists, the mental health workforce in Nigeria is grossly inadequate to meet the needs of over 200 million citizens.
- Funding and Resources: Mental health receives less than 1% of the national health budget, limiting the availability of services and awareness campaigns.
- Stigma and Cultural Resistance: Despite growing awareness, deep-seated stigma and misconceptions hinder care-seeking behavior. Religion and culture often frame mental health conditions in ways that discourage professional intervention.
- Geographic Disparities: Rural areas, home to a significant portion of the population, remain underserved, with little to no access to professional care.
- Technology Infrastructure: While digital platforms hold promise, uneven internet access and low digital literacy in rural areas create accessibility challenges.

Taking a deep dive into understanding Nigeria's Unique Challenges on the mental health landscape, there is a clear interplay between culture, religion, and socioeconomic realities which creates a unique environment for addressing mental health in Nigeria. For instance:

- Religion often serves as both a support system and a barrier, providing comfort to some 12.2% of individuals who have received mental health care confirming that

they did so through a religious leader while perpetuating harmful narratives for others.

- Urbanization and economic pressures contribute to rising mental health challenges, such as workplace stress and substance abuse, yet these issues are rarely prioritized in national discussions.

Addressing these gaps requires a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach that takes into account Nigeria's diverse cultural and socioeconomic landscape.

RECCOMENDATIONS.

Addressing the mental health challenges in Nigeria requires a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach. These recommendations are grounded in the survey findings, global best practices, and the unique cultural and socioeconomic realities of Nigeria.

For Government

1. Policy Development and Enforcement

- Enact and enforce a comprehensive mental health policy, prioritizing integration into the primary healthcare system.
- Mandate the inclusion of mental health education in school curriculums to promote early awareness and reduce stigma.

2. Increased Funding

- Allocate a higher percentage of the national healthcare budget to mental health.

- Establish funding mechanisms for mental health infrastructure, including subsidies for care in underserved regions.

3. Expanding Rural Access

- Develop outreach programs to bring mental health services to rural and underserved areas, using mobile clinics and community health workers.
- Incentivize mental health professionals to work in rural areas through financial benefits or service-oriented scholarships.

4. Mental Health Awareness Campaigns

- Collaborate with religious and community leaders to create culturally sensitive awareness campaigns.
- Promote public education programs that normalize conversations about mental health and counteract misconceptions.

For Healthcare Providers

1. Training and Capacity Building

- Expand training programs for mental health professionals, including psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, and psychiatric nurses.
- Integrate mental health modules into general medical training for doctors and nurses to ensure early detection and treatment.

2. Improving Access and Quality of Care

- Develop telemedicine services for mental health, especially for areas with limited physical access to professionals.
- Standardize care protocols to ensure quality and consistency across mental health services.

3. Community-Based Care

- Train community health workers to provide basic mental health support and refer complex cases to professionals.
- Establish support groups and peer-led initiatives to create safe spaces for individuals with mental health challenges.

For Non-Governmental Organizations and Advocacy Groups

1. Reducing Stigma

- Launch community-based campaigns to address misconceptions, using relatable stories and testimonials to humanize mental health issues.
- Partner with influencers, religious leaders, and local organizations to amplify messages that challenge stigma.

2. Supporting Vulnerable Groups

- Focus on high-risk populations, such as children, adolescents, and individuals in conflict-affected regions.
- Provide targeted programs addressing workplace stress, substance abuse, and gender-specific mental health challenges.

3. Leveraging Technology

- Collaborate with tech innovators to create affordable and user-friendly digital tools for mental health awareness, assessment, and therapy.
- Ensure these platforms are accessible in local languages and provide culturally relevant content.

For Employers and Workplace Initiatives

1. Workplace Mental Health Policies

- Require organizations to adopt mental health policies that promote well-being and address stressors.
- Encourage the establishment of Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) offering counseling and crisis support.

2. Flexible Work Arrangements

- Promote work-life balance through flexible hours, remote work options, and stress management programs.
- Provide training for managers to identify and support employees experiencing mental health challenges.

3. Incentivizing Mental Health Programs

- Offer tax benefits or subsidies to companies that invest in mental health initiatives for employees.
- Recognize and reward workplaces with exemplary mental health programs through national or industry awards.

For Leveraging Technology

1. Expanding Digital Access

- Partner with internet providers and tech platforms to improve digital connectivity in rural areas, ensuring access to online mental health resources.
- Develop mobile-friendly platforms to accommodate users with limited internet access or low-end devices.

2. Enhancing Trust and Privacy

- Build trust in digital mental health services by ensuring robust data protection measures and transparent communication about confidentiality.
- Incorporate live support features, such as chat or video consultations, to enhance the credibility of online platforms.

3. Gamification and Engagement

- Use gamification and interactive features to engage younger demographics and make mental health education more appealing.
- Develop mental health apps that integrate culturally relevant content and local languages to improve adoption.

For Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

1. Cross-Sector Partnerships

- Foster collaborations between government, NGOs, private healthcare providers, and tech companies to pool resources and expertise.
- Engage traditional and religious leaders to bridge the gap between modern mental health practices and cultural acceptance.

2. Data-Driven Strategies

- Establish a national mental health database to track prevalence, treatment outcomes, and service gaps.
- Use data insights to allocate resources efficiently and identify high-priority regions or groups.

3. Advocacy for Sustainable Solutions

- Advocate for long-term investments in mental health, positioning it as essential to Nigeria's overall development goals.

- Ensure that all strategies align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 3.4), which emphasize mental health as a critical component of global health priorities.

CONCLUSION.

At MyTherapist.ng, we are deeply passionate about improving mental health in Nigeria. This research is a testament to our commitment to understanding the unique challenges people face and finding solutions that make mental wellness accessible to all. By addressing local needs while contributing to global conversations about mental health, our mission transcends service delivery; we aim to bridge the gap between awareness, care, and action.

We believe that collaboration is key to achieving lasting change. That's why we're excited to partner with individuals, organizations, and stakeholders who share our vision of a world where everyone has the support they need to thrive mentally and emotionally. Together, we can break down barriers, fight stigma, and make mental wellness a reality for all. Please email partnerships@mytherapist.ng to get connected!