Journal of the Postgraduate Institute of Medicine 2025; 12(2): E282 1-5

https://doi.org/10.4038/jpgim.8566

# Review

# The Rise of 'Self-Diagnosis' in Mental Health

**Lahiru Senarathne[1], Tharindu Basnayaka[1], Layani Ratnayake[2], Miyuru Chandradasa[1,3]**

[1]University of Kelaniya, [2]MediHelp Hospitals Group, Colombo, [3]Colombo North Teaching Hospital

**Key words**: **self-diagnosis; mental health; internet; social media; health literacy**

The rise of self-diagnosis of mental health conditions via online communities has become a prominent phenomenon in recent years. This article aims to explore the opportunities and dangers associated with self-diagnosis through digital platforms, focusing on the ethical, clinical, and psychosocial implications for individuals and mental health professionals.

Corresponding Author: Miyuru Chandradasa, E-mail<miyuruc@kln.ac.lk >

http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1873-8228

Received: 05 Apr 2025, Accepted: 22 Dec 2025, Published: 07 Jan 2026

Competing Interests: Authors have declared that no competing interests exist



## Background

In recent years, self-diagnosis has gained prominence, particularly within online communities. Fueled by the increasing availability of health information on the internet, individuals often turn to online platforms to assess and diagnose their mental health conditions [1]. While this trend is partly a response to the rising demand for mental health care and the stigma surrounding psychiatric treatment, it raises significant concerns about accuracy, ethics, and potential harms associated with self-diagnosis.

### The Role of Online Communities in Self-Diagnosis

The internet has transformed the way people access information, including mental health. Social media platforms, online forums, and mental health websites have become popular spaces where individuals discuss personal experiences with mental health, share symptoms, and seek support. Websites like Reddit, Tumblr, Web MD and various mental health blogs and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube often host communities where users openly discuss their struggles with anxiety, depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and other conditions. These discussions frequently lead to self-diagnosis, with individuals identifying with the symptoms or traits discussed in these spaces [1,2].

Research indicates that the rise of digital health information has profoundly impacted how people perceive their mental health. According to a study by McManus & King, over

70% of internet users seeking mental health information reported using symptom checklists found online, with 43% concluding they had a disorder based solely on these symptoms [3]. This growing trend of self-diagnosis can be attributed to the increasing availability of diagnostic tools, online forums, and health-related discussions that encourage individuals to self-identify with conditions.

While online communities can provide a sense of solidarity, particularly for individuals who feel isolated or misunderstood in their real-life environments, they also have the potential to distort perceptions of mental health. These communities can sometimes foster an environment where members self-diagnose based on limited or unreliable information rather than clinical expertise [4]. The rise of these forums has made mental health discussions more accessible, but it also blurs the line between personal narratives and professional diagnoses.

## The Dangers of Self-Diagnosis

While self-diagnosis might provide individuals with clarity, it comes with its risks. First, there is the issue of accuracy. Mental health disorders are complex and multifaceted, often involving a combination of genetic, biological, environmental, and psychological factors. Self-diagnosis typically overlooks this complexity, leading to misdiagnosis or oversimplification of mental health conditions [5].

Furthermore, online communities often lack the expertise required to assess and diagnose mental health disorders properly. An individual may be influenced by misinformation or unreliable accounts, which can exacerbate feelings of anxiety or confusion. User who believes they have a particular disorder might start to "fit" their behaviours to match the symptoms they read about online, a phenomenon known as confirmation bias. This can reinforce the individual's belief in their self-diagnosis, even if the symptoms do not reflect the condition [3,6].

Another significant concern is the delay in seeking professional help. Some individuals, after self-diagnosing, may feel discouraged from pursuing a formal diagnosis from a mental health professional. They may be led to believe that they already know about their condition or that their symptoms are not severe enough to warrant professional intervention. This can delay proper treatment, leading to worsening conditions or unnecessary distress [7].

Moreover, self-diagnosis without professional guidance can sometimes result in the use of inappropriate self-treatment strategies, such as relying on over-the-counter supplements, avoiding medication, or engaging in unproven therapies based on online advice. These practices may fail to alleviate symptoms and cause harm [8].

## Ethical Concerns and Professional Responsibility

The rise of self-diagnosis and the influence of online communities raise several ethical concerns. Mental health professionals are responsible for engaging with the growing role of online information while ensuring that patients receive accurate, evidence-based care.

Psychiatrists and psychologists must recognise the increasing role of the internet in shaping perceptions of mental health and should be prepared to address these influences in clinical settings [9].

One challenge is the need for psychoeducation that helps patients navigate online resources critically. Health professionals can educate patients on the limitations of online self-diagnosis, emphasising the importance of a comprehensive assessment conducted by trained professionals. Furthermore, there is a need for digital literacy in mental health, where patients learn to evaluate the credibility of online sources and the potential risks of self-diagnosis [6].

Additionally, there is an ethical responsibility for online platforms and mental health communities to provide accurate, well-researched information. Social media platforms should take steps to moderate content that promotes harmful or inaccurate health advice, particularly when it comes to mental health diagnoses. While these communities can be valuable for support and information-sharing, they must not encourage individuals to bypass professional help or self-diagnose with incomplete knowledge [4].

## The Client Empowerment

While the risks of self-diagnosis are significant, it is essential to consider the potential benefits online communities offer. At times, online forums can empower individuals by giving them the tools and knowledge to understand their mental health better, reducing stigma and promoting self-awareness [2]. This empowerment may be valuable in regions with limited mental health services, such as South Asia, where individuals may not otherwise seek help.

On the other hand, concerns exist about the accuracy of self-diagnosis and the consequences of bypassing formal assessment. These online platforms can encourage a culture of armchair psychiatry, where individuals misinterpret complex symptoms and apply labels that are not clinically appropriate [7]. These contrasting opinions highlight the need for a balanced approach to the role of online communities in mental health care.

The rise of self-diagnosis cannot be dismissed entirely as a trend to be discouraged. Sometimes, online communities can provide valuable support and insights for individuals, helping them realise they are not alone in their struggles. For some, these communities might serve as a steppingstone to seeking professional help. However, the potential harms of self-diagnosis, including misdiagnosis, delayed treatment, and reliance on unproven self-management strategies, cannot be ignored. Mental health professionals must remain vigilant in guiding patients away from self-diagnosis and toward proper, professional care. While online communities can offer support, they should not replace the role of trained psychiatrists and psychologists in diagnosing and treating mental health conditions [7,9].

## Relevance to Sri Lanka

Mental health stigma in Sri Lanka is a significant barrier to addressing the country's mental health challenges. Deeply rooted in cultural, social, and historical factors, this stigma often prevents individuals in low- and middle-income nations from seeking help [10]. It contributes to the marginalisation of those experiencing mental health issues and leads to substantial delays in seeking professional opinion [11]. In Sri Lankan society, mental illness is frequently viewed as a sign of personal weakness or a source of shame, not only for the individual but also for their family. Traditional beliefs play a major role, with some attributing mental health problems to supernatural causes, such as possession by spirits or karmic retribution, rather than recognising them as medical conditions [12]. This perspective is compounded by a strong reliance on traditional healers or religious practices over professional mental health services, particularly in rural areas where access to trained professionals is limited. With many seeking self-diagnoses through online sites and social media in Sri Lanka, it is likely to add to further treatment delays and underdiagnosis of significant mental health conditions. Sri Lanka is estimated to have only 0.52 consultant psychiatrists per 100,000 population and only seven child psychiatrists. Late presentation of psychiatric disorders to services with multiple complications would be an unbearable burden on the already compromised human resource-limited services [13].

## Conclusion

The rise of self-diagnosis, fueled by online communities, presents a complex challenge for both patients and mental health professionals. While these communities offer valuable peer support and help reduce the stigma surrounding mental health, they also pose risks due to the inaccuracy of self-diagnoses and the delay in seeking professional care. Mental health professionals have an ethical obligation to guide patients through online information. It helps them make informed decisions and emphasises the importance of professional assessment and treatment. While self-diagnosis may empower some individuals to seek help, it should never replace the comprehensive evaluation and care that only trained professionals can provide.

## References

1. Phelps JL. The role of the internet in the self-diagnosis of mental health disorders. J Psychol Disord. 2020;34(2):112-8.
2. Zajac K, Hayward C. The rise of self-diagnosis in the digital age. Psychiatr Times. 2018;35(7):22-7.
3. McManus D, King D. Impact of online health information on patients' mental health decisions. J Health Commun. 2017;22(9):673-83.
4. Smith A, Wright C. Online mental health communities: benefits and risks. Psychiatry Online. 2019;42(6):57-65.
5. Brown L, O'Brien R. The limits of lay diagnosis: complexities in mental health understanding. Ment Health Rev J. 2019;24(4):232-9.
6. Zhang Y, Wei H. Confirmation bias in digital mental health diagnosis. J Behav Sci. 2021;13(1):75-84.

7. Williams LR. Ethical considerations of online mental health forums. Int J Soc Psychiatry. 2020;67(8):598-605.
8. Kumar S, Patel N. The ethics of online mental health support groups: a review. Psychiatr Ethics J. 2022;10(1):44-50.
9. Roberts TA, Dunne M. Misinformation and self-diagnosis in mental health. Psychiatr Res. 2020;44(3):217-25.
10. Shoib S, Chandradasa M, Saeed F, Armiya'u AY, Roza TH, Ori D, Jakhar J, Rodrigues-Silva N, Banerjee D. Suicide, stigma and COVID-19: a call for action from low and middle-income countries. Front Psychiatry. 2022; 13:894524. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2022.894524
11. Chandradasa M, Champika L, Gunathillaka K, Mendis J. Association of the duration of untreated psychosis and functional level, in the first episode of schizophrenia attending an outpatient clinic in Sri Lanka. J Postgrad Inst Med. 2016; 3:E33. https://doi.org/10.4038/jpgim.8112
12. Chandradasa M, Kuruppuarachchi KA. Confluence of Western psychotherapy and religious teachings in mental healthcare of an Asian Buddhist community: Sri Lanka. J Relig Health. 2019;58(5):1471-6. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-018-0674-3
13. Chandradasa M, Kuruppuarachchi KA. Brain drain among Sri Lankan psychiatrists. Sri Lanka J Psychiatry. 2024 Apr 19;14(2):1-3. https://doi.org/10.4038/sljpsyc.v14i2.8529