

Impact of Mental Health on Communication

Prof. Y. Nisha

ABSTRACT - Communication is more than articulating your thoughts into words and conversing with people. It is a key ingredient in building interpersonal relationships. Communication is not restricted to finding the right words to express, it's building a relationship with loved ones, sharing and caring and supporting one another in the personal and professional spheres of life. However, there are many challenges in communicating freely. One of the major challenges is the inability to express ones feelings, issues and problems on account of mental health disorders. Mental health issues which often go undetected leads to communication problems which in turn disrupts relationships and impacts the overall wellbeing of a person. Communication is a key to mental health recovery, however mental health problems are not often spoken about freely due to various reasons and one of the major reason is the stigma attached to it. Suppressing the pain/fear/grief often leads to long term damages and in extreme cases also leads to suicides. The non-verbal cues are also difficult to comprehend for those around the individual. A surge in mental health problems was witnessed during the lockdown due to the pandemic COVID-19. Professional and personal setbacks and the inability to cope and/or seek help led to multiple suicides during this period too. In India, there is a huge parity between awareness and services available for mental health and physical health. Medical intervention for physical health is sought; however mental health often gets ignored. The current government policies and programs are weak and inadequate for a population of more than a billion people in India.

KEY WORDS: Mental health, Depression, Suicide, Stress, Covid-19, Anxiety, Communication

I. INTRODUCTION

Every individual aspires to be in good health, both mental and physical. While physical health issues are promptly addressed, mental health issues are barely visible and spoken about despite the fact that mental health problem obstructs an individual's ability to enjoy life, face the daily challenges, take sound decisions and live freely. There are various types of mental illnesses such as anxiety disorders, panic attacks, obsessive-compulsive disorders, stress, depression, psychotic disorders including schizophrenia, dementia, bipolar etc. Depending on the extent of illness and the nature of the disease the treatment may vary for each and medical intervention and/ or counseling may be required. Neurotic disorder is a mild mental disorder which can occur from stress, depression or anxiety and can be treated through counseling and other milder form of treatments and may not require hospitalization. Psychotic disorder on the other hand is a major personality disorder which causes emotional disruptions often impairing the affected individual and therefore may need medical intervention. There is also higher rate of disability and mortality among people experiencing mental health disorders (Applegate, 2018)

Mental health issues impact not only the individual but also their family, friends and the network of people around them. It also impacts the professional life of the person affected and the nation as a whole. On the professional front mental health disorder hinders the progress and growth of the individual, their professional relationships

and the organization as a whole. As a nation, it is the loss of lives and productive hours. However, the impact is most profound on the individual experiencing the problem and the immediate family since daily life is disrupted.

Mental illness can affect anyone irrespective of age, gender, social or economical status. The reasons leading to mental health disorders are multiple. Research indicates social, environmental, cultural, biological and economic factors to be the reason (Elangovan, 2020). While adults are more aware of the problems and may have the coping mechanism, children going through mental illness often suffer in silence as in selective mutism which affects their overall personality and has long term impact on their interpersonal relationships and success and happiness in life. Over the past decade, dependence on technology and social media has resulted in interplay of positive and negative impact on everyone especially the youth, who depend on the ubiquity of health information and support groups online. While it may serve as a tool to escape negative emotions, long term dependence on the same as an emotional coping strategy may negatively influence or exacerbate mental health predispositions (Lleras, 2016). However, a healthy positive environment at home which promotes free, open, informal communication positively impacts the emotional well being, pro social behavior and life satisfaction among adolescents (Frank J.Elgar, 2013).

II. IMPACT ON COMMUNICATION

One of the foremost impacts of mental health illness is the inability to express freely and clearly the trauma/pain/grief

that one goes through. Mental health disorders not only includes an individual's ability to manage ones thoughts, emotions and behaviors but also manage oneself in the social, cultural, economic and other environmental setup that directly impacts their well-being. Mental health issues such as depression and anxiety could lead to long pauses during conversations and speech deficits which could thereby impact their social skills. This in turn obstructs the ability of the individual to lead a normal life. While stumbling over words, using incorrect sentences, disorientation and mental fog could be some of the milder problems; memory loss and suicidal tendencies could lead to irreversible damages. In patients who are bipolar, they may be active and social, but they too may face communication issues and erratic behavioral problems. At times it is also the genetic factors that impact mental well being, and the psychological issues and personality contributes to the vulnerability. Timely treatment of mental disorder is therefore critical. Being able to communicate ones feelings, emotions and pain enables others understand what one is going through and this in turn leads to timely support and intervention required to handle the problem.

The severity of mental health disorders and its impact on communication was majorly evident when the entire world was left grappling with the pandemic COVID-19. Lockdown, social distancing, lack of work opportunities, isolation, lack of communication and social interactions led to increase in the level of anxiety, fear and emotional distress (Roy, 2020). The inability to cope with the situation or interact and communicate led to multiple suicides during the period. The grim reality about mental health is also the fact that those suffering may also be unaware of their issue and non verbal cues may be difficult for the family, friends and colleagues to comprehend. Mitigating the risks of mental health conditions and promoting awareness thus becomes critical especially at a time when the world is grappling with multiple uncertainties directly impacting the day to day life of people. While mental health disorders were considered insignificant in the past, today it is viewed as being detrimental to the society at large (Thomson, 2012).

This paper thus aims to understand the challenges in mental health communication in adults and the importance of creating awareness so as to treat it on par with physical health problems.

OBJECTIVES

1. To understand the relevance/importance of mental health communication
2. To analyze the communication challenges pertaining to mental health
3. To understand methods of creating awareness and sensitivity towards mental health issues.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Mental Health has been a major concern the world over. It is considered to be one of the priority areas of health policies and is also included in the Sustainable Development Goals. In 1954, the first Director General of the World Health Organization had stated that without mental health there can be no true physical health. (Kalpana Srivastava, 2016). According to World Health Organization (WHO) about 15% of the total disease conditions in the world are around mental health. It also states that India has one of the largest populations of people affected from mental illness and terms India as the 'most depressing country'. According to reports, between 1990-2017 one in seven people in India suffered from mental health issues ranging from depression, anxiety to severe conditions such as schizophrenia (Llamba, 2020). However, in spite of such large numbers, India does not have any central aggregation of statistics on the cases of treatment of mental disorders. Also, India has spent only about 0.05% of its healthcare budget on mental health over the last few years. In India there are only 9,000 psychiatrists, or one instead of three doctors for every 1,00,000 people. There is a shortage of about 18,000 mental health doctors in India. In 2017, India enacted the National Mental Health Care Act to provide mental healthcare services to those suffering from mental illness. However the services are lacking and there is no concrete strategy in place to suggest how India plans to tackle the mental health crises. Mental health services in India are also plagued by other issues such as lack of governance, administrative and program implementation problems, unrealistic expectations and lack of motivation among workers. Also policy implementation happens at the state level and monitoring and assessment tool differs across states and are ineffective (Cousins, 2018). According to WHO, the economic loss to India due to mental health crises from 2012-30 is estimated to be more than \$1 trillion (Rathore, 2020).

In 2015-16 a survey was conducted by the National Mental Health & Neurosciences (NIMHANS), Bengaluru, an autonomous institution under the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare across 12 states in India. The study stated that 9.8 million teenagers in the age group 13-17 years suffer from depression and other mental health disorders which needed active intervention. It also stated that out of the 150 million who needed intervention, only 30 million were getting it (Shankardass, 2018). According to a study by the Lancet, suicide deaths which are linked to mental health were the major cause of death in women in the age group of 15-29 years in 31 states and between 15-39 years in 24 states in India. According to the annual report on suicides in India published by the National Crimes Record Bureau, suicide rate increased by 3.4% from 2018 to 2019 (Gupta, 2020).

World mental health day is observed on 10th October to create awareness and support and mobilize efforts on mental health. Mental health disorders need to be addressed strategically through promotion, prevention and recovery as a whole. In December 2020 the broadcast network Times Network carried out a mental health initiative called '#actnow'. The aim was to drive awareness about the rising mental health crisis in India and the importance of addressing the crises. As part of the initiative a research was conducted by Neilson India. Some of the key findings of the survey stated that Career is an important source of stress and happiness. Stigma around mental health is prominent in affluent class and that over 55% of Indians have gone through suicidal thoughts while 28% term mental health issue as 'gone mad'. In a conversation with NDTV, Anusha Tyagi, Arts based Therapist & Psychologist, Department of Mental Health and Behavioral Sciences from Fortis Healthcare, New Delhi stated that the mindset in India even in the 21st century has not changed and the term 'paagal' and 'mental' is used casually even today which makes it difficult for people to talk about their problems.

The growing numbers in mental illness in India is a concern and the pandemic has made it worse. A lot of initiatives such as setting up psychological support teams, tele-psychiatry consultations, setting up help lines and e-counseling services have been undertaken by the central and state governments, various NGO's, private hospitals and universities. However the mental health care systems in India are still ill-equipped to counter the surge in mental illness (Patel, 2020).

IV. RESEARCH DESIGN

The research is descriptive in nature. Analysis and findings for the said study is based on data collected through primary and secondary sources. Data for primary research was collected through a survey conducted in the month of November 2020. The target population for the study is

Indian residents above the age of 18 years. An open and closed ended questionnaire was used for the same. Sampling technique used is Convenience sampling. A total of 215 responses were received. To elucidate the findings, columns in numerous periodicals, web publications, journals and reports were also reviewed and analyzed extensively. Analysis of the data has been presented through the graphical model. For paucity of space, not all responses are presented through graphics but are more descriptive.

V. FINDINGS

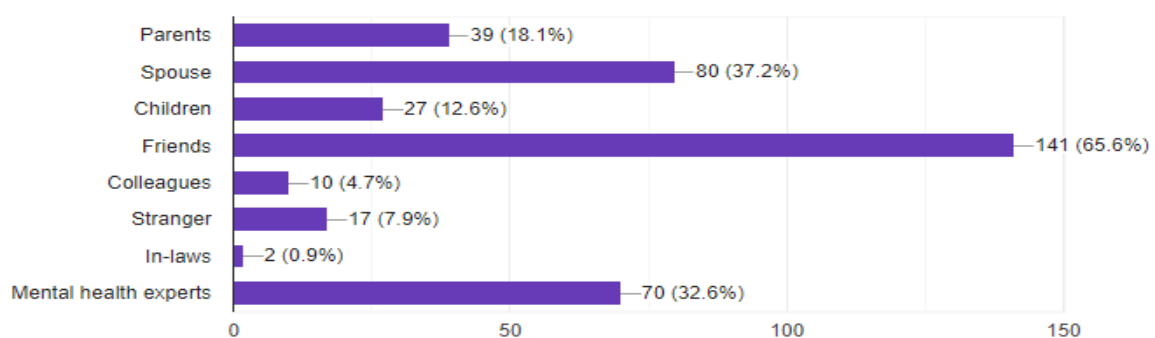
The findings for the study are based on both primary and secondary research. Through primary research 215 responses were received. Of these 75.5% were females and 24.7% males. 39.2% were in the age group of 46-59, 29.7% between 36-45, 12.9% above 55 and the rest under 35 years.

Importance of communicating and sharing about mental health issues

Sharing mental health problems not only helps one recover from the same but also encourages others to speak freely and seek timely interventions. 87.9% of the respondents of the study believed that Mental Health Communication and awareness is extremely important irrespective of gender. 31.5% of the respondents had endured bouts of depression, extreme anxiety or acute depression in life while 44% had experienced some form of mental health problems.

Also with regard to sharing their problems, 65.7% of the respondents stated that they would be most comfortable sharing their problems with friends. As seen in the chart below (Figure I), 37% stated that they would share their problems with their spouses and only 32.4% of the respondents stated that they would share it with mental health experts.

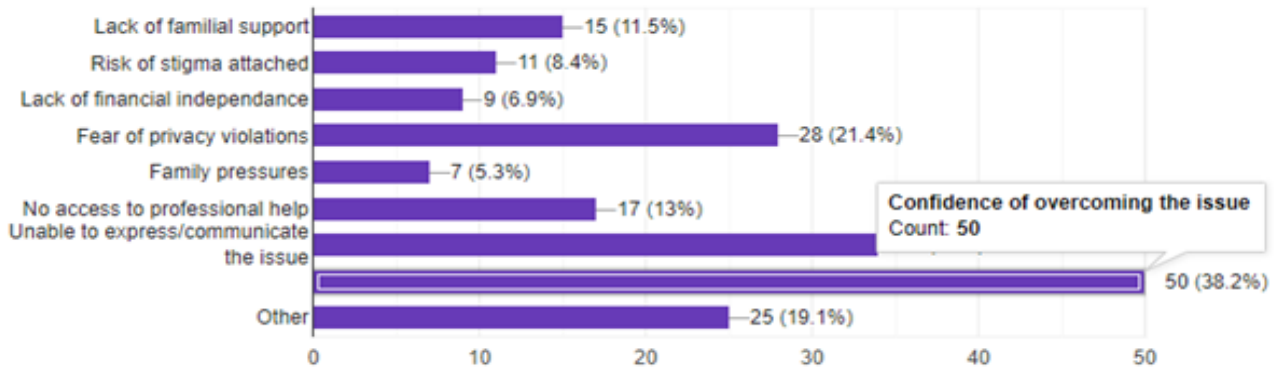
Figure I : Comfort in sharing mental health problems with



Challenges in sharing/communicating about mental health issues

There are multiple factors that lead to individuals suffering in silence rather than seeking help or sharing their issues with others. The survey aimed to understand those challenges in mental health communication. Among all the respondents who endured mental health issues 31.7% did not share their problems with anyone. The reasons stated for the same is as given below in Figure II.

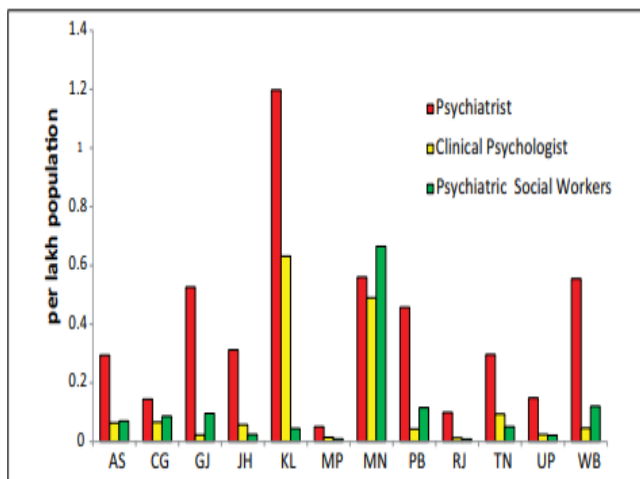
Figure II : Reasons for not sharing mental health problems



While 38.2% of the respondents stated that they were confident of overcoming the issue and hence did not seek help, 21.4% of the respondents stated that fear of privacy violations was the reason for not wanting to share their problems. 13% stated that they did not have access to professional help, while 25.8% were unable to express themselves.

In India, information and awareness about mental health is limited. The NIMHANS’s survey of 2015-16 also states that mental health activities in the states across India are not information driven. Lack of awareness and cultural dominance often leads to isolation of the individual and the stigma attached to it obstructs timely intervention. Mental health education awareness is sporadic and low mental health literacy has also led to a gap in availing the mental health services. Also, low budgetary allocation in most states combined with human resource constraints has led to a complete disarray of mental health infrastructure. As per the report there is paucity of mental health experts in India which is one of the major challenges in mental health communication and services. **Figure III** below indicates the mental health specialist human resources in the 12 states surveyed.

Figure III: . Mental health specialist human resources in NMHS States (per lakh population)



Source :National Mental Health Survey of India, 2015-16

Need for awareness on mental health

It is important to sensitize people and create awareness about mental health problems to drive the change in mindset. Scaling up efforts to strengthen the mental health services and implementing strong public health policies will reduce the burden of mental health. Creating awareness is critical so that mental health is treated like any other illness and timely intervention is sought. Forming cohesive groups where problems can be shared without any stigma attached, sensitizing people about being compassionate and not judgmental, creating awareness among families to look for red flags, build trust and an atmosphere of open dialogue and communication is vital to manage the mental health issues. Indoctrination of mental health programs in school would help increase resilience to stress and encourage healthy growth among children. Schools, Colleges and Organizations could also conduct seminars by mental health experts and ensure counseling services are available to all. It is vital to burst the various myths around mental health and build a culture of acceptance. Advocating attitudinal shift towards mental health through various social media platforms, forums and discussion at city, state and national level are other ways to promote awareness on the issue.

VI. CONCLUSION

The issue of mental health and its implications on the quality of life of an individual is often overlooked. Most people who undergo some form of mental health problems often deal with it for months before seeking help. The stigma attached to mental health is one of the foremost reasons for lack of communication. From a cultural perspective, societal discrimination leads to marginalization and lack of opportunities which further hampers free speech. Then there are issues of familial support, lack of financial independence, and the confidence of overcoming the problem that stops an individual from seeking help. However, not always is one able to overcome the trauma and the inability to speak and seek help has catastrophic impact on an individual. The health infrastructure in India has focused on physical health but mental health infrastructure has been very fragmented and lacks a

comprehensive approach resulting in poor mental health services. Also there is no co-ordination and implementation mechanism nor structured monitoring and assessment tools for the various programs implemented across the states. An under-resourced mental health service does not cater to the magnitude of the mental health burden in India. India needs to scale up and strengthen its mental health services and make it more accessible to its citizens. A collaborative integration of policy makers, health experts, media and conscious citizen groups could help scale up mental health services which could work towards not just awareness, promotion and prevention but also towards rehabilitation. Mental health literacy, a concept which involves development of assessment and intervention goals and impact policy decisions need to be strongly promoted and implemented to strategically manage the mental health conditions prevalent in India in the current turbulent times.

REFERENCES

- [1]Applegate, R. S. (2018). Mental health stigma and communication and their intersections with education. *Communication Education* , 382-408.
- [2]Cousins, S. (2018). *In India, struggles to address mental health*. Retrieved from www.devex.com: <https://www.devex.com/news/in-india-struggles-to-address-mental-health-92466>
- [3]Frank J.Elgar, W. C. (2013). Family Dinners, Communication, and Mental Health in Canadian Adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health* , 433-438.
- [4]Gupta, S. (2020). India's progress on mental health is a depressing tale. *ETHealthWorld* .
- [5]Kalpana Srivastava, K. C. (2016). Mental health awareness: The Indian scenario. *Industrial Psychiatry Journal* , 131-134.
- [6]Llamba, D. R. (2020). What India must do to solve its mental health crisis? *ETHealthWorld* .
- [7]Lleras, T. P. (2016). Avoidance or boredom: Negative mental health outcomes associated with use of Information and Communication Technologies depend on users' motivations. *Computers in Human Behaviour* , 249-258.
- [8]Rathore, H. (2020). hHow Committed Is India to Mental Health? *The Diplomat* , pp. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/how-committed-is-india-to-mental-health/>.
- [9]Roy, L. D. (2020). *Is Mental Health India's Next Pandemic?* Retrieved from <https://www.outlookindia.com>: <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-is-mental-health-indias-next-pandemic/363308>
- [10]Thomson, R. (2012). Looking healthy: visualizing mental health and illness online. *SAGE Journals* , 395-420.
- [11]Cousins, S. (2018). *In India, struggles to address mental health*. Retrieved from www.devex.com: <https://www.devex.com/news/in-india-struggles-to-address-mental-health-92466>
- [12]Elangovan, D. (2020). *The Importance of Mental Healthcare for All*. Retrieved from <https://science.thewire.in>: <https://science.thewire.in/health/the-importance-of-mental-healthcare-for-all/>
- [13]Patel, M. B. (2020). *Mental Health and COVID-19 in India*. Retrieved from <http://www.ipsnews.net>: <http://www.ipsnews.net/2020/08/mental-health-covid-19-india/>
- [14]Shankardass, M. K. (2018). Mental Health Issues in India: Concerns and Response. *Indian Journal of Psychiatric Nursing* , 58-60.