Mental health is integral to our well-being and as important as being physically healthy. The clutter and din of our lives, both professional and personal, takes a toll of our health and well-being, and is reflected in the growing incidence of mental health issues.

The theme of World Health Day this year, Depression: Let’s Talk, brings forth an opportunity to focus attention on mental health issues, especially ‘depression’, which is the single largest contributor to global morbidity.

An excellent example of bringing the much needed attention to the issue is Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s address to the nation in his monthly radio broadcast Mann Ki Baat in which, he spoke at length on how to prevent and manage depression.

Globally, the total number of people with depression was estimated to exceed 300 million in 2015, equivalent to 4.3% of the world’s population. The consequence of this disorder in terms of lost health is huge. WHO estimates that every US$ 1 invested in scaling-up treatment for depression and anxiety leads to a return of US$ 4 in better health and ability to work.

In India, in 2015, the number of people with depressive disorders was over 56 million, translating to 4.5% of the entire population.

Depression is an illness characterized by persistent sadness and a loss of interest in activities that you normally enjoy, accompanied by an inability to carry out daily activities, for at least two weeks. In addition, people with depression may also experience loss of energy, change in appetite, sleeping more or less, anxiety, reduced concentration, indecisiveness, restlessness, feelings of worthlessness, guilt, or hopelessness, thoughts of self-harm or even suicide.

Depression results from a complex interaction of social, psychological and biological factors. People who have gone through adverse life events (loss of job, bereavement, psychological trauma) are more likely to develop depression. Depression can, in turn, lead to more stress and dysfunction and worsen the affected person’s life situation.

Untreated depression can prevent people from working and participating in family and community life, even leading to suicide. Life is not the same for suicide survivors, as well as their near and dear ones.

However, depression is preventable and treatable.

A healthy life, with adequate physical activity, healthy diet, avoiding tobacco and alcohol and taking up a hobby or activity helps prevent depression. Yoga has been used by many for mental well-being.
Stigma surrounding mental illness, including depression, is a barrier to people seeking help. Talking to people you trust, helps break down stigma and is the first step towards recovery from depression. Treatment usually involves talking to a therapist or taking medication or a combination of the two.

The slogan of this year’s World Health Day, Depression: Let’s Talk, sends a message, emphasizing the need to break the stigma and encourages people to come forward and seek appropriate help.

As the Prime Minister said in his Mann ki Baat address, “I want to tell my countrymen, that depression is not incurable. There is a need to create a psychologically conducive environment to begin with. The first mantra is the expression of depression instead of its suppression.”

We also need to reach out to people with depression (friends, family members, even one self) and impress the fact that appropriate help should be sought for effective recovery.

WHO has been providing guidance to Member States on addressing the growing burden of mental health disorders, especially with limited resources. It calls for a life-course approach, aiming to achieve equity through universal health coverage, and stresses the importance of prevention. Further, it asserts that with proper care, tens of millions could be treated for depression, schizophrenia, and epilepsy; prevented from suicide and can lead normal lives, even where resources are limited.

The need for mental well-being and suicide prevention is being advocated globally. The inclusion of these in the Sustainable Development Goals provides an even larger platform and is an opportunity to garner commitment from stakeholders from all relevant sectors.

Moving to India, the National Mental Health Policy provides the backdrop for taking forward the mental health agenda. It emphasizes the need for increased funding for this area, focuses on promotion of mental health, identifies a range of vulnerable groups for protection and seeks to decriminalize suicide. The recently passed Mental Health Care Bill also supports decriminalizing suicide, assuring adequate medical relief to those who attempt suicide, thus protecting them from the harsh aftermath.

WHO has been supporting Government of India’s initiatives to reach out to the grassroots though the National Mental Health Programme. Strengthening the capacities of the non-specialist cadres is being adopted as the solution to overcome the dearth of trained human resources.

Let us all unite and in our own ways contribute towards reaching out to friends, colleagues, family and the community, and bring back smiles. We can and must overcome depression.

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