

The importance of psychological first-aid



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Dignity is the key to treating mental illness

Mental health is a societal priority and needs a multi-pronged approach

“Every day, think as you wake up, today I am fortunate to be alive, I have a precious human life, I am not going to waste it...,” says the Dalia Lama. Indeed, life is precious, the most prized gift bestowed on us.

Yet, in our daily quest, somehow this precious gift gets compromised. The clutter and din of our lives, both professional and personal, take a toll of our health and well-being. Anxiety and stress compound this gift.

Slowly, depression and related mental health issues creep up. Sadly, often we don't recognise this or refuse to acknowledge the signs. We camouflage our feelings, anxiety, and emotions. The growing incidence of mental health issues is a reflection of the reality that confronts us today.

Apart from denial, stigma stalks the issue making it difficult to access help. Not surprisingly, there is a growing need for raising awareness of mental health issues to live healthier lives.

The newly released National Mental Health Survey 2015-16 data reveal that nearly 15 per cent of Indian adults need active interventions for one or more mental health issues. One in 20 Indian suffers from depression. These need professional help. At its most severe form, depression can lead to suicide.

Causation of suicide is multi-factorial and nearly half of those with suicidal tendencies have co-occurring mental illnesses. It is estimated that in 2012, India had over 258,000 suicides; with 15-49 years being the most affected.

Mental health is integral to our well-being and as important as being physically healthy. 'Psychological first-aid' was the theme of this year's World Mental Health Day (October 10) and it is a practical approach that can be provided by first-line responders.

'Psychological first-aid' covers both psychological and social support. It is not a standalone intervention and a part of the comprehensive mental health-care system. Mental illnesses, like any other physical disease, need appropriate and timely care. The approach was successfully used following the 2015 earthquake in Nepal.

The government's commitment is reflected in the National Mental Health Programme (NMHP), which encompasses life skills training and counselling in educational institutions, workplace stress management and suicide prevention services, among others.

The country has only 3,500 psychiatrists, most of them in urban areas. There is an urgent need to meet the gap of trained personnel. Under NMHP, the capacity of non-specialist medical officers to diagnose and treat common mental health disorders at the primary care level is being strengthened.

The programme also needs to reach out to the unreached, especially in the rural areas; these people are at the mercy of unregistered practitioners or faith healers. It would also be worthwhile to identify linkages with other national programmes like adolescent health, trauma care, and elderly care. The AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga, Unnani, Siddha, Homoeopathy) Ministry can play an important role in preventing stress and anxiety, particularly through yoga.

A multipronged approach of expanding access to quality mental health-care, coupled with psychological first-aid will pave the way for combating depression and anxiety, and protecting lives.

Inclusion of 'mental health' in the Sustainable Development Goals has brought new hope and enhanced visibility to mental health as a public health priority. It is imperative that we make lives around us happier and healthier – in our homes, in our neighbourhood and the workplace. Lifestyle changes are low-hanging fruits.

Equally important is to spread the message of living life to our full potential — in other words a 'state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'.

The writer is the World Health Organisation Representative in India. The views expressed are personal. (This article was published on October 14, 2016)