



Hello!

Welcome to our second newsletter. This issue focuses on the incidence of mental illness in India and the personal stories that surround this disease. This content has been provided by one of our Directors, Dr. Rita Aggarwal, a registered psychologist in India. Dr. Aggarwal makes a compelling case of the need for greater awareness and understanding of child and youth mental illness, but also for greater investment to provide more services on the ground for people who need them. Mental illness does not discriminate and can affect anyone regardless of their gender, how old they are, where they live, how educated they are, or what their socio-economic status may be.

Understanding Mental Illness – Stories from India

Priyanka had been feeling depressed since grade 9 but did not understand why. She was failing her grades, losing interest in friends, getting irritated at small things with her parents and was sleeping a lot. She was missing school more frequently and was often crying alone and constantly thought about taking her life. Priyanka failed grade 12 and was brought in for counselling. She was diagnosed with depression. Many children like Priyanka suffer from depression that is not well understood and goes undetected and untreated until the point of crisis.

Rani was in constant conflict with her husband and wanted to end her life because of the shame and humiliation she was continually being subjected to. Rani's husband often accused her of having illicit affairs with other men. He routinely scanned her mobile phone and email messages to uncover a 'secretive infidelity' which did not exist. Out of sheer disgust, frustration and an overwhelming urge to end her life, Rani entered counselling as a final attempt to end her suffering. She was informed that her husband suffered from a mental illness called 'paranoia' and could be treated. She was surprised that such a disorder existed and that her husband could receive treatment.

These are but a few examples of the different types of mental illnesses that exist. There is a vast range of mental disorders, and the incidence of mental illness within the general population is higher than many people think. In India, between 6% and 7% of the population experience either a common, or severe form of mental illness. Approximately 50% of severe mental health disorders and 90% of common mental health disorders go untreated. According to the World Health Organization, 20% of Indians will suffer from some form of mental illness by the year 2020. As is the case in many countries, India is severely understaffed in terms of the number of psychiatrists and psychologists that are needed to handle this healthcare crisis.



In addition to the shortage of mental health services, the stigma, superstition and ignorance surrounding mental illness is very high. Many parents of children who are showing signs of mental health problems are unaware of such problems and misunderstand their child's predicament. They shout, scream at children and blame them for being lazy, irresponsible and stupid whereas there could be a serious problem in the making.

Too many people believe that mental health problems are not bonafide medical illnesses. They feel that people who are experiencing these problems are simply using it as an excuse to miss school, or shirk their responsibilities. If a woman is depressed, for example, her in-laws might say "she does not want to work so she makes excuses". What is desperately needed is more awareness and education on mental health and mental illness, encouraging people to seek professional help if they suspect there may be a problem.

We need to shift our collective attitude towards mental illness and understand that mental illness is not a death sentence. With treatment provided by an accredited medical practitioner, people can move on to lead happy, healthy and productive lives. Many times, well intentioned lay persons try to intervene to help the individual experiencing these problems but their actions may have unintended consequences and do more harm than good. Sadly, in too many cases, people with mental health problems are ridiculed, treated with suspicion and even feared.

We need to continue working at reducing the stigma, educating ourselves on this illness, and supporting those around us who may be experiencing a mental health problem. We must remember that every person, every family and every community is affected by mental health issues in some way.

Shades of Grey

- *By Dr. Rita Aggarwal, Psychologist*

For too many of our young people who suffer in silence with a mental health problem, they feel the only way to end their suffering is to take their lives. Here are a few real-life examples from India that underscore this problem:

A young applicant to the Indian Institutes of Technology took her life because she did not qualify in the entrance examinations.

A boy in grade 9 ended his life because he was facing constant harassment from his class teacher who verbally abused him, saying "You are a useless soul, you will never achieve anything in life, you are a burden on this earth."



A young girl in first year college decided to ingest poison when she realised that her boyfriend was cheating on her and she was pregnant.

A love struck young couple who were being pursued by the police at the request of their parents who vehemently opposed the alliance decided to end their lives after they eloped.

The 2014 National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) in India indicates that suicide is the leading cause of death among youth aged 14 to 30 years. This means that youth in this age category die more often by suicide than by physical illness, injury or accidents. In 2008, an *India Today* survey referenced teen suicide in India as the highest in the world! They also stated that “the highest percentage of suicides occurred between the months of March and July during, and after examinations”. This message sent alarm bells ringing among the nation and throughout Indian society.

Contemporary India needs to wake up and take this healthcare crisis more seriously. The state of Maharashtra in India has the highest percentage of overall suicides in the country at 12.4%, followed by Tamil Nadu at 12.2% according to the NCRB.

One would generally assume that young people are full of energy, ‘with stars in their eyes and fire in their belly’ as the saying goes. That is certainly how we perceive them and we admire them for their enthusiasm and drive. But what goes wrong with a percentage of youth who decide that life is not worth it or they are not worth living life and snuff it out voluntarily? This is a major question and every parent needs to educate themselves on this subject seriously.

All of us would agree that life is precious and beautiful – a gift. But at what point does life, for some people, become an unbearable burden that isn’t worth pursuing any further?

The stigma surrounding mental illness weighs heavily on Indian society. Mental illness does not mean being ‘stark mad’ as is shown in Bollywood movies. The movie industry and mainstream media has contributed to the stigma by promoting or reinforcing many myths that surround mental illness.

At our clinic, it can be challenging explaining depression and other forms of mental illness to people and in many cases, our face stiff resistance from families who simply refuse to accept these as real medical illnesses. In rural areas, mental illness is still attributed to ghosts, evil spirits and other superstitious beliefs.

For many people in India, when they notice something is amiss with their children, they are likely to blame the moral character or personality of the child. They are likely to attribute it to perceived laziness, carelessness, disrespect, indiscipline, learned bad behaviour, peer group influence, etc. Most people are simply unaware of the vast range of human psychological conditions that exist.

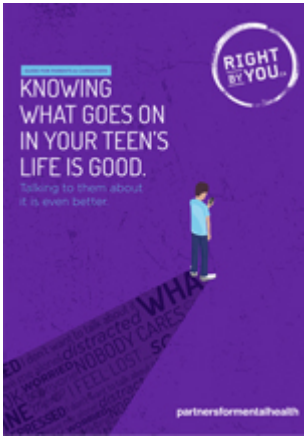


A distraught mother came to me to understand the reasons why her high school aged daughter died by suicide. The mother said her daughter behaved normally at home and nothing seemed out of the ordinary. When I probed further, we realised that there were subtle changes in her daughter's behaviour for some time, such as withdrawing from her family, no longer sharing information, and locking herself in her room. And yet she would always put on a smile with her parents. The more we can learn about the signs and symptoms of mental illness, the more lives we can save.

Another mother went into severe depression and guilt because she felt she could have saved her daughter as she had noticed some signs of distress but had not sought timely professional help. She had realised that her daughter was involved with a guy, was in trouble and was losing interest in her studies. She could never forgive herself for this oversight in not seeking help sooner for her daughter. She blamed her husband for his lack of support with whom she had shared her concerns but who ultimately chose to ignore it. When a family loses a child to suicide, the remaining family members suffer

The signs of mental illness can be quite subtle, or in some cases, can be overt. Any change in your child's behaviour over a period of time should be noted and taken seriously. Aggressive outbursts, fighting, stealing, lying, falling grades, truancy, withdrawal from friends and family could be signs that the individual may be dealing with a mental health problem. Families with histories of mental illness must be especially observant with their children as mental illness can be inherited.

If parents realize that their traditional methods of discipline are not showing results, they should seek professional help. Building strong and trusting bonds with their children is critical in taking a proactive approach in supporting a young person's mental health. Parents should express genuine interest in their youth's activities, schoolwork, and relationships. Keeping a non-judgemental, open line of communication on all issues is critical in establishing trust.



The image shows the cover of a purple guide titled "KNOWING WHAT GOES ON IN YOUR TEEN'S LIFE IS GOOD." with the subtitle "Talking to them about it is even better." The cover features a person standing on a path that leads into a dark, shadowy area. A circular logo in the top right corner says "RIGHT BY YOU." and the website "partnersformentalhealth" is at the bottom.

Want to learn more about your youth's mental health? Download a free guide for parents and caregivers at <http://www.rightbyyou.ca/en/resources>



Rotary  Rotarian Action Group on Mental Health Initiatives

In far too many cases, suicide is a final, irreversible outcome of untreated mental illness and as such, represents the darkest shade of grey – black. But each of us can play a vital role in changing this. It starts with becoming better educated on this issue and the illness, tackling the stigma that surrounds this disease, and supporting those around us who may be experiencing a problem.

See you in Atlanta



ATLANTA 2017
ROTARY INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION



If you are planning on attending Rotary's International Convention in Atlanta this June, please stop by booth 2922 and meet members of RAGMHI's Board of Directors. You may also be interested in attending our Annual General Meeting on Monday, June 12th from 2:30pm to 3:30pm in Room A406. We look forward to seeing you!