

Mental Health in a Smaller World

Many think that the pandemic of COVID-19 that took over the world almost two years ago has given rise to mental health issues but it is important to acknowledge that mental health issues in people have existed since time without beginning. The pandemic just ended up exacerbating the problem.

Prolonged lockdowns brought life to a standstill for many and gave birth to the “world going online” phenomenon. On one hand this helped in increasing interconnectedness among people and brought everyone together and on the other hand it posed a plethora of challenges like spread of misinformation and fake news, increased screen time for both adults and children, confinement of people to their homes and social isolation due to lack of physical contact. Mental health professionals also reported that they found it difficult to connect with and understand their clients.

On these lines, PeacefulMind Foundation conducted its last session on “Mental Health in a Smaller World” with a renowned guest Hon. Hosna Jalil and set of panellists from around the globe- Dr. Adrian Low, Mr. Dave Sleet, Mr. Kudakwashe Mushonga, Ms. Harsimran Kaur Wadhwa, Dr. Prabhjeet Singh and Dr. Abdirizak Yusuf Ahmed to discuss about various aspects of mental health in the pandemic and the post pandemic world. The session was moderated by Zakria Abdalmomen.

Dr. Low stressed upon the fact that we shouldn't have required a pandemic to remind us of the gravity of the situation when it comes to mental health. Highlighting the current situation in the United States, he mentioned that almost 46.6% health workers in the US have reported to be working for more than 60 hours a week and almost 45% Americans have reported that the pandemic impacted their mental health in some or the other way. The figures, he stated, are alarming. Furthermore, he also mentioned about the mental health situation in Hong Kong where he said there is a lack of alternative treatments and people have complained of side effects of medicines, they were prescribed for mental health issues. He emphasised the need to incorporate mental health-oriented strategies into education as well as public policy by governments. He further talked about defining a healthy person on the basis of four different dimensions instead of just one and emphasised that these four dimensions should be the core of policy making. Biological, physical, psychological, sociological and spiritual- all dimensions of health are equally important and should be taken care of. Biological dimension consists of eating the right kind of food, taking in a balanced diet, exercising regularly, sleeping well and strengthening one's immunity, Psychological dimension consists of maintaining mental hygiene by disinfecting our minds and working on our automatic negative thoughts and words which trouble us and make us perceive situations negatively, Social dimension includes having clarity regarding what one wants out of life and remaining healthy connections with people around us and lastly spiritual dimension gives meaning to life, makes us self-reflect and give back to the society that we all are a part of.

Mr. Mushonga described the situation in Zimbabwe and the role his organisation is playing to help people, especially the youth to deal with mental health issues. Youth being the backbone of a nation need access to affordable and accessible mental health care services. 2021 presented specific challenges and restricted commercial activities compelling people to find alternative modes of employment. Mortality rate was at an all-time high giving rise to an extremely stress ridden environment. This had an indelible impact on the mental health of youth. He mentioned how social media played a crucial role in reaching out to the masses and removing stigma attached to mental health issues in their country. He touched upon a highly sensitive topic of men being raised in environments where they are discouraged to show their emotions. Bottling up emotions for a long period of time often leads to serious consequences. Therefore, he said it's imperative to debunk the myths regarding mental health so that people can become more open to and comfortable about approaching mental health professionals.

Mr. Sleet unravelled multiple layers that were really vital to the discussion. He firstly conversed about the meaning of stigma and how to deal with it. He elaborated that stigmatization is a result of a person not knowing how to deal with or refusing to deal with the problem being faced by the other person. Therefore, the person who is suffering should not feel embarrassed. It is crucial for one to take complete ownership of the situation. He put forward that policy should be driven by 5 key areas- education, children social care, youth engagement, justice and emotional wellbeing. If mental health becomes the core of policy, we would definitely see the systems working in favour of people. He encouraged everyone to never stop learning and described it as a life-long process and bridge gaps in the existing framework to build sustainable systems. Towards the end, he advised the people who want to enter the field of mental health as professionals to firstly take their own therapeutic journey, go through rigorous self-reflection and understand themselves so that they can carry out an unbiased practice in the future.

Dr. Abdirizak highlighted the situation in Somalia and talked about enhancing the understanding of mental health among the people. He mentioned the participation of private sector in the area of mental health in Somalia and how it is helping the field to take a leap forward. However, he also mentioned the various challenges that still exist like loss of people, healthcare workers, shortage of protective kit during the pandemic and mental health issues of healthcare workers. He mentioned they plan to bring in is a new strategy based on baseline assessment of healthcare workers, raise awareness about mental health, make people understand about the warning signs, remove stigma attached to seeking professional help and encouraging research.

Mr. Prabhjeet Singh revealed some startling figures related to the mental health situation in India. According to a 2019 survey, a whopping 70% reported to be suffering from a mental health issue. He talked in length about the great rise of mental health issues like depression and anxiety among the Indian youth especially due to the uncertainty regarding their career and future as a result of the pandemic. With unemployment already being on a rise, COVID has worsened the problem. According to the government guidelines, it is mandatory for every school in the country to appoint a school counsellor / psychologist within the premises of the school. He underscored the need to do the same in the online classes so that the students can get an outlet to talk and share how they have been feeling. Mental health professionals need to

be made more approachable and some major policy changes can only be brought about through international collaboration, he emphasised.

Ms. Harsimran from the United States gave some interesting insights by sharing her first-hand experiences with a few of her clients and made a crucial point to give the power back to the clients to make their decisions. Her clients are given the autonomy to choose the mode (online or offline) of therapy they prefer. She expressed that online therapy has both its pros and cons. Unavailability of internet, discomfort and disconnect from a few clients can be roadblocks in conducting online therapy sessions whereas online mode at times has provided with a more personalised session where the therapist is able to witness their client at their home (in their personal space) and understand them better which was not possible earlier. She mentioned how the pandemic has induced heightened anxiety and stress in children especially in areas that are conflict ridden. Though adults can talk and express themselves if they wish to but children find themselves helpless and hopeless at times, not knowing how to communicate their emotions. As mental health professionals, it is important to help children firstly accept their emotions, then assist them in expressing their emotions in different ways and lastly manage them effectively.

Through his fruitful discussion it was realised that in today's world, with an ever-increasing influence of Internet and social media platforms, people from all around the world have come closer to each other more than ever and still more and more people are feeling lonely and disconnected. This has put us all in quite a paradoxical situation. A person having a thousand friends on their social media might be in deep depression and a person posting his happiest pictures might be having suicidal ideation. Therefore, reaching out to others, talking to people about their feelings, giving them a platform to express their emotions and recognizing the worth of each person is of prime importance in the prevailing times.

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