

MENTAL ILLNESS: TOWARDS A STIGMA-FREE FUTURE

The concept and feeling of stigma must have been a part of humanity since its conception. It is difficult to trace its origin. Superficially speaking, it seems to have almost disappeared from the educated strata of society. Nobody utters discriminating words openly, but I recently realized that the roots of stigma are deeply ingrained.

A few days ago, I met an acquaintance, whom I've known for the past 35-40 years. While chatting, the subject of Dr. Saumitra Pathare, a psychiatrist, came up. I casually mentioned that he is a friend of mine; to which the acquaintance commented, 'Are you kidding? You must have been treated and medicated by him!' This was a sign of how deep the stigma regarding mental illness is. The acquaintance was a witness to my struggle with mental illness and so was unwilling to believe that a psychiatrist could be just a friend. I had overcome my mental illness ages ago, but he was still stuck in the past.

I have been continuously working in the field of mental health for the past 20 years. I have also publicly acknowledged that I suffered from mental illness as well and have been working on this issue at the national and international level. I found the aforementioned incident to be intensely humiliating. If I, after years of publicly recorded contributions to the field of mental health, have

to face this stigma; what about the average person suffering this trauma? People whose symptoms are still not in control or those whose day to day functioning is still to improve; how do they deal with this? What all do they and their loved ones have to face, to bear?

The stigma regarding mental illness is deep rooted in our thoughts. The parents who are part of our self-help group too have had the same experiences. Well-meaning, seemingly civil neighbors, friends won't hand out invitations to weddings or other functions, to their son/daughter who is still taking treatment for mental illness or ask them questions like, 'Are you alright now?' When I initially started working in the field of mental health, such questions would terrify me; make me break out in cold sweat. Later, after I calmed down, I started answering these questions peacefully. At times, I was tempted to be more aggressive and rude. But now, I don't even feel these questions merit a reply. I wonder about the 'who, what, why' of the conversation and am amused. These are the stages of leaving the stigma behind, but not everyone is fortunate enough to overcome it. Many will not be able to overcome stigma due to symptoms of mental illness which still prevail.

In the past, in a strictly traditionalistic society, ostracism used to be the worst punishment that could be meted out to people. The

stigma regarding mental illness is not very different from ostracism. It is this fear that prevents people from coming out about their illness, denying or delaying treatment. They live their lives with a feeling of inferiority. 'Once a mental patient; forever a mental patient', is the belief of society that they battle with. When situations change, society accepts the individual back into its fold as an exception; but their deep rooted stigma about mental illness does not change.

The success that government initiatives or the efforts of outsiders can bring about are highly questionable. To bring about a rapid change in mentality requires institutions like SAA to be in the driver's seat. It was this thought that prompted SAA to take up initiatives like 'Stitch-50 K'; which try to reconnect society with the stigmatized. The initiative tries to establish a dialogue with people, gather their experiences and through that; address the stigma that surrounds the issue. The aim of this endeavor is to enlighten the general public and to help families find ways to overcome the stigma of mental illness. Today, in Maharashtra there are 50 lakh people who need treatment for serious and common mental illnesses. This in turn implies that at least 50 lakh people and their families are facing the repercussions of this stigma, directly or indirectly. It is firmly believed that even if 1

percent of these people in Maharashtra are addressed, it will bring about substantial change.

This was the motive behind the panel discussion that is being organized by Schizophrenia Awareness association (SAA) at S. M. Joshi Hall (Navi Peth), at 5.00p.m. on Tuesday, 18th December 2018, on the occasion of the 21st anniversary of SAA. Dr. Mohan Agashe, Dr. Achyut Godbole, Dr. Sukhada Chimote and Rajesh Mehta will be participating in the panel discussion. The compering will be done by Deepa Deshmukh.

Box: Appeal to the readers. Please share your experience.

SAA has undertaken the initiative STITCH to lessen the stigma associated with mental illness. Patients, family members and society at large, are requested to contribute their experiences about stigma, either their own experience or through observation, in writing and send them to. Their contributions can be sent to Prof. Anil Vartak. C/o Schizophrenia Awareness Association. 14, Ganeshnagar, Lane No. B 30-31, Off Dhayri Rd. Pune 411041. Or email at av-

artak@yahoo.com They can also send their contributions through WhatsApp on 9503710859.

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