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Hello, this is Jose Parappully, Salesian priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha Centre for Psychospiritual Wellbeing at Jeolikote, Uttarakhand, with another edition of Psyche & Soul.

I wish all of you listeners a very happy, healthy and blessed new year.

In this first weekend of 2021 we shall explore mental health and wellbeing, an essential requisite for a happy and productive life.

Covid-19 has led to millions getting sick and nearly two million dying worldwide. The pandemic has led to significant increases in stress and anxiety, especially in the context of fear of being infected and in the face of an uncertain and unpredictable future. Social isolation, economic downturn, unemployment and poverty have taken a heavy toll on people's wellbeing. A painful consequence of all this is an increase in mental illness.

Although mental illness is more visible and disconcerting during this distressing time, it is important to focus, as we move into the New year, on *mental health and wellbeing*. Understanding it and looking at measures that foster it, can help us to avoid mental illness and help us cope with it better if we suffer from it.

Mental health is not just absence of mental illness. It is a state of holistic wellbeing, in which the mind, body and spirit function harmoniously and enables a person to live joyfully and productively, finding meaning, purpose and satisfaction in life. It is a state that enables us to thrive, to flourish, to live life to the full.

This life to the full is characterized especially by healthy interpersonal relationships, undistorted cognitive processing (perception, interpretation, judgment etc.), balance between dependence and independence, feeling of competence and confidence, playfulness and joy, a sense of contentment, capacity to adapt to change, and character virtues like love, hope, altruism, compassion, sensitivity, capacity to endure adversity, loss and suffering without being unduly distressed or disturbed, and resilience, that is, the capacity to bounce back from setbacks.

Sr. Rosemary is a wonderful example of one who is enjoying mental health and wellbeing.

While I was in a neighbouring country for a Workshop I visited a nearby convent where there were a few nuns I knew. While taking tea the Superior of the community told me, “Fr. Jose, You must visit the youngest member of our community.” I was taken to an upstairs room where I met Sister Rosemary. She had a beaming smile and her entire face had a glow of joy which lit up the room. She engaged me in pleasant conversation. She was 97 years young! She had been lying in her bed for a few months now. She had to be helped on to a wheelchair for her to move anywhere. Despite her condition she appeared so happy and fulfilled and had the capacity to make others happy. She had truly grown old gracefully, enjoying a rare experience of wellbeing in the midst of adversity. There are countless others like Sister Rosemary, religious and lay, who have been able live happy, graceful lives and enjoy wellbeing even in old age despite many setbacks and limitations.

There are many elements that contribute and which are essential for someone to experience and enjoy mental health.

Sonja Lyubomirsky, University of California at Riverside psychology professor, has calculated through extensive research that 50 percent of our wellbeing is determined by genetic endowments (inborn dispositions), and 10 percent influenced by the environment. The remaining 40 percent is within our control and depends on the responses we make to our genetic endowments and our environment (*The How of Happiness, 2007*). So, there is much we can do to enhance our own wellbeing and that of those around us.

SUPPORTIVE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

In this podcast I shall focus on the role of supportive social environment in mental health and wellbeing. When environments are characterized by tension and conflict, these take a heavy toll on mental health. This is true for families and religious communities. Interpersonal conflicts and a lack of warmth and cordiality have a deleterious effect on mental health and wellbeing. The challenge here is to make sure that our families and communities are places of warmth and cordiality, where we mutually support and encourage.

It is very important to reach out and support others, especially when they are going through hard times, through empathy, active listening, sharing resources,

Sharing our Vulnerabilities

One way we create a supportive social environment is by sharing our vulnerabilities and actively listening to and responding to others' pain with empathy and sensitivity. When we share our pain and others respond to us with unconditional love, communion happens. Unfortunately, in my view and experience, this kind of disclosure and listening do not happen sufficiently in our religious communities, and may be also in our families. We talk endlessly about business matters and gossip, but we seldom share our inner

struggles. Such sharing and empathic listening and responding are needed so much and have to be encouraged and nurtured.

Religious communities can set aside specific time for this just like we do for so many meetings and discussions. Families can spend sometime over meals, or before or after family prayers, to do such sharing. This will make a lot of difference to relationships, and feelings of belonging both in communities and families.

Acceptance and Appreciation

It is essential for our mental wellbeing that our basic psychological needs for acceptance and appreciation are fulfilled. These, when fulfilled, lead to contentment, feeling good, which builds collaboration and cooperation. Contentment, psychologist Barbara Frederickson points out, enables us to “savor the moment or recent experiences,” “feel oneness” with others and the world around us. This leads to a sense of community and solidarity (*Prevention & Treatment, Volume 3, March 2000*).

Another important need related to appreciation is acknowledgement and encouragement of our giftedness and talents. One of the major reasons for depression especially among religious women, psychologist Laura Vaz who has worked with many of them, points out, is the feeling that they are not given meaningful assignments where they can utilize their giftedness, and have a sense of achievement and accomplishment.

Presence of Basic Amenities

Developing a nurturing supportive social environment requires, not only the fulfilment of our basic psychological needs. It also requires the satisfaction of our basic physical needs – for food, clothes, decent shelter. So many of our people lack basic amenities. This absence creates a social environment that triggers discontent, anxiety and insecurity – fertile grounds for development of mental illness.

We know that mental illness affects the poor disproportionately. Socio-economic disadvantage contribute significantly to cause, maintain and exasperate mental illness. We have witnessed the mentally ill homeless on our streets, their illness unrecognized, untreated, and instead, being ridiculed, ostracized and even harassed by people and the police.

This is where governments and civil bodies have to play a more proactive role. There has to be serious poverty alleviation programmes that will provide the poor and vulnerable decent living conditions. However each of us as individuals, and families and communities can also contribute to enhance the living conditions of the poor people in our neighborhoods. Too we live isolated and sheltered, quite untouched by the surrounding poverty and even misery, too focused on our individual pursuits. We need to open our hearts to these less fortunate and help them experience a more decent life, and have some sense of wellbeing.

For Our Reflection and Prayer

Jesus speaks of fullness of life. He said that he has come so that all may have life, life in its fullness (John 10, 10). Do we feel that we are experiencing this fullness of life? In what way can we contribute to create a supportive and nurturing environment in which others can experience great mental health and wellbeing, life in its fullness?

In Sacred Scripture God says “I place before you today life and death. Choose life” (Deut. 30, 19). How are we choosing and contributing to life instead of death – that is to wellbeing instead of illness and suffering? What can we do to experience the more of life?

Saint Paul exhorts us: “I want you to be happy. What is it we need to do to make 2021 a happy year for ourselves and those around us?”

We could sit with these questions for a while and attend to the answers that arise within us and spend a few minutes talking to God, who deeply loves us mind cares for us and has our wellbeing at heart, about our situations, our desires and longings. What would we want from God as we move into the New Year ? What would God want for us?

Have a healthy, happy and blessed 2021!

Thank you for listening/reading.

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