

Psyche & Soul 32: THE BURDEN OF MENTAL ILLNESS

Jose Parappully SDB, PHD
sumedhacentre@gmail.com

Podcast link:

2.32 Psyche & Soul # 71

<https://anchor.fm/boscom/episodes/2-32-Psyche--Soul--71-epvtoa>

The last few podcasts have been on mental health and wellbeing. This weekend I shall focus on the burden of mental illness, that is prevalence of mental illness globally and especially in India.

THE BURDEN OF MENTAL ILLNESS

Mental illness is a reality in the lives of many people and is on the increase. There has been a 13% rise in mental health conditions and substance use disorders between 1997 and 2017. Latest pre-Covid data available (*The Global Burden of Disease Study 1990–2017*, a massive collaborative work of World Health Organization, World Bank and Harvard University) showed that globally 970 million people (10.7 percent, that is a little more than 1 in 10 people) worldwide had a mental health or substance abuse disorder in 2017. Of the population affected by mental illness Anxiety is the most common mental disorder, affecting 284 million people worldwide. Next is depression affects 264 million people. Schizophrenia affects 20 million people.

Around 20% of the world's children and adolescents have a mental health condition. Globally, mental illness affects more females (11.9%) than males (9.3%). The mortality rate of those with mental disorders is significantly higher than that of the general population. It is estimated mental disorders are attributable to 14.3% of deaths worldwide, or approximately 8 million deaths each year. One emerging reality that is of some concern is that more and more young people are reporting mental illness.

The Indian Situation

According to the GBD Study cited above, a little more than one in seven Indians (7.5 per or about 197.3 million) suffer from some mental disorder, ranging from mild to severe. The study had predicted that by end of 2020 roughly 20 per cent of Indians will suffer from mental illnesses.

As at the global level, depressive and anxiety disorders are the more common form of mental illness in India. According to data collected, 47.7 million Indians suffer from depression and 44.9 million Indians suffer from anxiety disorders. The prevalence of depressive and disorders was significantly higher in females than in males. This could be related to gender discrimination, violence, sexual abuse, antenatal and postnatal stress, and adverse socio-cultural norms.

Suicide

There was also a significant, but modest correlation between the prevalence of depressive disorders and suicide. India accounts for 36.6 per cent of suicides globally. Indian women have double the global rate for death by suicide of women. Latest (2020) data released by the National Crime Record Bureau had shown that India reported an average 381 deaths by suicide daily in 2019. As many as

1,39,123 people died by suicide in India in 2019, marking a 3.4 per cent increase compared to 2018. Notably, over 90,000 of the people who died by suicide in 2019 were aged between 18 and 45.

Shortage of Mental Health Workers

A WHO Report (2018) had stated that the mental health workforce in India is not up to the mark and there is a huge shortage of psychiatrists and psychologists in the country as compared to the number of people suffering from mental health issues. WHO states that in India, per 100,000 population, there are only 0.20 psychiatrists, 0.07 psychologists, and 0.36 other mental health workers available. This means many needing psychological and psychiatric help would be deprived of it.

Increase through Corona Pandemic

The situation has been exasperated by Covid-19. An American Psychological Association survey, conducted between Aug. 28 and Oct. 5, 2020, found that nearly 3 in 10 psychologists (29%) said they are seeing more patients overall since the start of the pandemic. Of psychologists who provide treatment for anxiety disorders, nearly three-quarters (74%) reported an increase in demand for such treatment, and 60% of those providing treatment for depressive disorders saw an increase. The enforced home isolation has led to increased stress and anxiety in families. In some studies up to one third of families have reported feeling very or extremely anxious. A growing body of research is raising concerns about the impact of loneliness during the pandemic.

This is also true of India. A survey by the Indian Psychiatric Society showed a 20 percent increase in mental illness due to Covid-19. More recently Dr. Rajesh Sagar, professor of psychiatry at the All India Institute of Mental Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi, India's premier psychiatrist institute, said there is a 50% increase in cases of psychological distress, as also the number of people reporting symptoms of anxiety than before (*Times of India*, Dec 31, 2020)

Increasing demands of meeting patient needs are affecting mental health providers too. In the American Psychological Association survey mentioned above, more than four in 10 psychologists (41%) said that they felt burned out, and 30% said that they have not been able to meet the demand for treatment from their patients.

Unlike physical disorders which can be verified by objective criteria and test, as is the case with Covid-19, most mental health disorders cannot be tracked with a test or tangible sign. Hence there would be a large group of silent sufferers, whose illness would go unnoticed.

Genetic (inborn) vulnerabilities to psychiatric disorders, which have been kept in abeyance through a nurturing environment, can be activated when experiencing prolonged and high levels of stress. This is especially true of schizophrenia and major depression.

Mental health experts warn that the impact of Covid-19 on mental health would be felt for years after the virus has been brought under control. Dr. Adrian James, president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, for example, warns that Covid-19 "is going to have a profound effect on mental health. It is probably the biggest hit to mental health since the second world war. It doesn't stop when the virus is under control and there are few people in hospital... [there are] long-term consequences."

Introspection and Prayer

What is your reaction and response to the data on mental illness presented on this podcast? What does it evoke in in you?

Jesus of Nazareth was concerned about eliminating suffering from human lives. During his life ion Palestine he encountered many who were suffering from all sorts of mental illness. He showed great compassion for them of their afflictions.

May be we can recall one of his healing encounters with the ill and rest for while in his company in that scene with our heart and mind. We could then bring before him all those who suffer from mental illness, especially those we know, praying for their healing, or begin a fantasy journey of healing with him.

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Have pleasant weekend. Be safe. Be blessed.

Thank you for listening/reading.

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