

MENTAL WELLBEING – THE 'FOUNDATION' ON WHICH OUR LIFE STANDS

but sadly, mental sickness is heading for a global disaster



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Introduction

Life is undoubtedly tough and unpredictable. Over and above, we humans are highly vulnerable. Out of 20, 19 individuals suffer from one illness or more at any given time. We don't know how to live healthy and happily. Not only physically we are mostly unhealthy, even mentally and psychologically we are not tough, to the extent required. We are prone to negative and toxic thoughts and we don't know how to manage our mind.

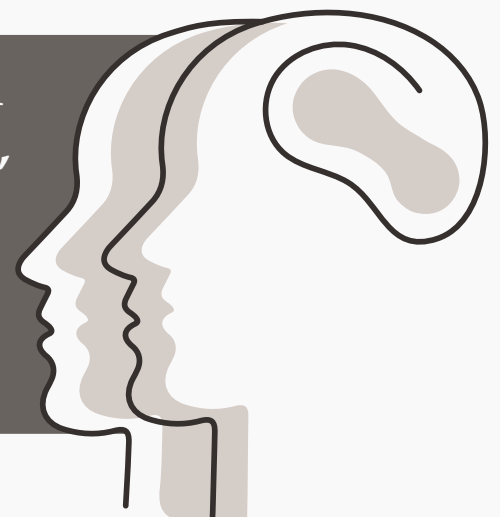
Tens of thousands of people go to the extent of taking their own lives because of their inability to control their distressing stream of thoughts. Sadly, since our childhood days, we have been told to care more about our looks, beauty and physique, rather than our mind. As a result, we are paying a heavy price for neglecting our critical part i.e., the mind, the foundation on which our life moves.

For most of us, our outer looks, physique and beauty is far more valuable than mental health

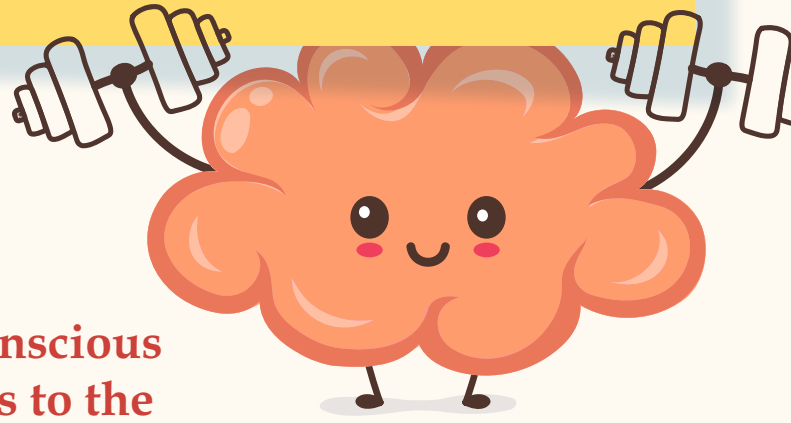
Delhi, the national capital of India has 5500 registered gyms and on average people pay around Rs 2000 plus to improve their physical health. Besides, more than 1000 beauty and spa parlours scattered in every area of the capital. According to a KPMG report, the size of India's beauty and wellness market was around Rs 80,370 crore by the end of 2018. This includes beauty product, beauty salon and spa businesses. What a craze to improve one's beauty and physical health in India!

On the other hand, we have merely 14 Vipassana centres in India. Vipassana meditation is among the popular and organised meditation practices in India. We may not be having more than 100 such centres, where qualified teachers/practitioners teach meditation. This shows how much importance we attach to our mental health. How many people practice meditation in India, we don't find an authentic data anywhere on net. However,

my guess is not more than 1% of population in India! On the other hand, in USA, in 2017, around 14 % of adult population practice meditation at least once a year. You know that India is the country where meditation was originated.



What about Gym for the mind



the time and energy we spend for physical exercise and sports activities, we don't pay attention to mental gym or mind's exercise.

We are increasingly becoming conscious about our physical health, thanks to the awareness that's spreading rapidly especially due to social media and internet.

Visit any park, sports complex, stadium and gyms, we find people busy in walking, running, doing exercises and playing games. We find these places crowded, never seen few years back. The trend is visible even in semi-urban and rural areas. What about mental exercise?

Most of us fail to appreciate the importance and value of mental exercise like meditation. Primarily because of ignorance or certain misconceptions and myths, we don't venture into mental exercise.

We don't know the power of meditation in improving the overall quality of our life. It can potentially transform our lives in many different ways.

In India, compare to USA and certain other western countries, mindfulness and meditation has yet to become popular among masses. However, in recent times, people are getting attracted to

Vipassana,
Sudarshan Kriya (Sri Si Ravi Shanker),
Raja Yoga (Brahma Kumaris),
Isha Kriya (Sadhguru)
and few other types of guided meditation.



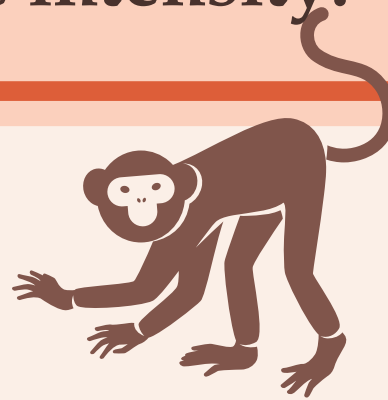
Fragile, Flickering and Monkey Mind

Just close your eyes for half a minute and observe the mind. Thoughts arise from nowhere. What kind of thoughts will appear after few seconds; we have no idea? Our mind is extremely sensitive, vulnerable and unstable – with incessant stream of thoughts. It can make our life heaven or like a hell, depending upon the thoughts we experience.



« Many a times, when we want to suppress some negative thoughts, then those very thoughts bounce back with more intensity. »

Mind is like a monkey, jumping from one set of thoughts to another in a fraction of second. Not an easy task to manage and keep the mind healthy.



Our wellbeing depends entirely on the quality of thoughts we experience.



Surprisingly, our self-awareness level is generally very low

It's unbelievable but true. Though 95% of people say that they're self-aware but only 10-15% of people actually are. This is as per the research study conducted by the organisational psychologist and researcher, Dr Tash Eurich. It means nearly 80% of people are lying to themselves. Their level of self-awareness differs from person to person, from highly ignorant to partially self-aware.

We humans in general are very arrogant about our own knowledge and awareness. Have you ever met a person saying 'he/she knows very little about himself/herself? The answer would obviously be 'no'.

What a great irony about us – knowing so little about ourselves, but feeling so confident about 'self-awareness'.

In many cases, a person knows lesser of himself / herself than what others know about them.

Such persons are so self-absorbed and self-centred in their own little world that they are least self-aware and don't really know about themselves well. Unfortunately, no one teaches about this skill to us. Majority of us are ignorant of what self-awareness is and why it's so important for us for our mental health as well as to succeed in life?



Our is the worst nation on mental sickness

Imagine over 9 crores Indians, or 7.5 percent of the country's population of 1.3 billion, suffer from some form of mental disorder, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). It's a huge number. The prevalence rate could even be much higher, as suggested by the findings of a countrywide 2015-2016 study by India's National Institute of Mental Health & Neurosciences (NIMHANS) – an autonomous institution under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. It revealed that nearly 15 crores of Indians needed active intervention while fewer than 3 crores were getting the mental care facilities.

The way the mental health conditions are increasing, the World Health Organization (WHO) has also warned that these problems will be the main cause of disability in the world in 2030. Now people, already suffering from mental health conditions are further being affected adversely by the emotional responses elicited by COVID-19 pandemic. This is resulting in further deterioration of their existing mental health condition due to chronic stress, caused by economic and psychological turmoil.

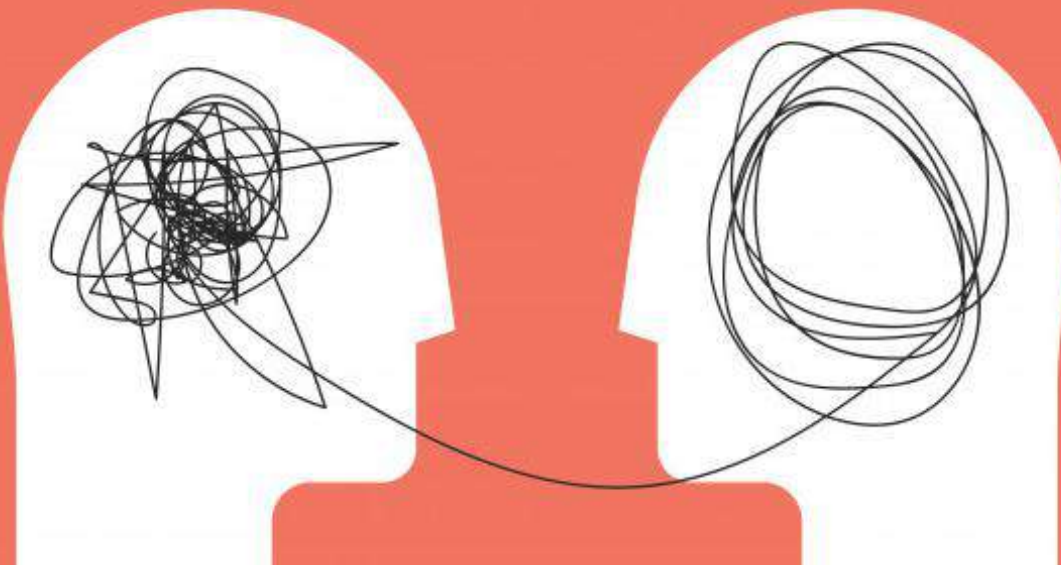
Why we are so prone to mental sickness

It's highly unfortunate that despite country's economic and technological progress, we are among the most stressed, unhappy and mentally sick nations in the world.

When mental stress becomes chronic and prolonged over a longer time, the risks for mental health problem rise. Long term stress can lead to mental illnesses like anxiety and depression. Above this, if we are unhappy with life's conditions, we become more prone to mental health issues.

Why it's so? The reason is that we are becoming more and more unhappy and mentally stressed with time. Mental health is directly related to our overall wellbeing. Over the recent years, the country has created tremendous wealth. People at large are becoming wealthier due to economic prosperity but this hasn't translated into people becoming happier, more relaxed and stress free. In fact, reverse is true. Greater percentage of population has become mentally stressed and unhappy.

Therefore, with increase in mental stress and unhappiness, we become more vulnerable to mental sickness. This is the reason; Indian society is getting closer to epidemic like situation on mental health issues.



We are becoming more unhappy as we economically progress

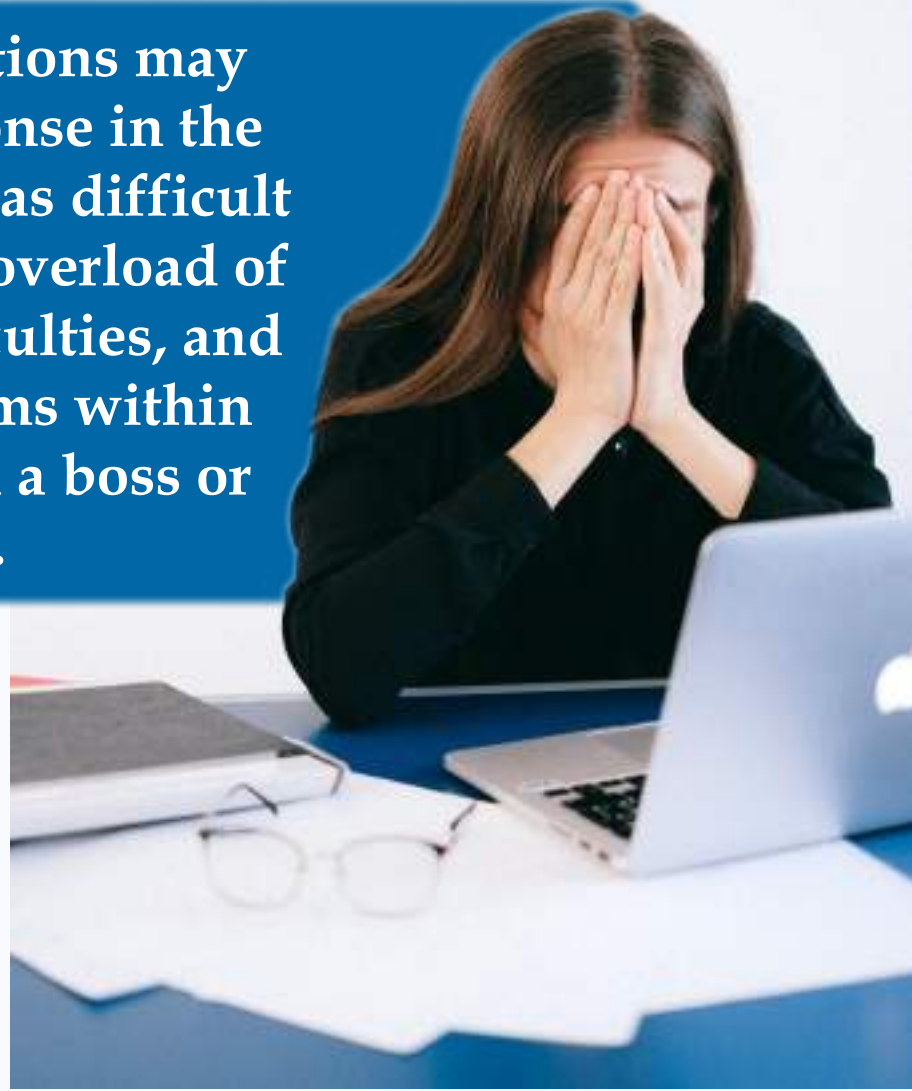
The World Happiness Report is a landmark survey of the state of global happiness that ranks 156 countries by how happy their citizens perceive themselves to be. The World Happiness Report 2020 for the first time ranks cities around the world by their subjective well-being and our overall happiness. India has been ranked at a dismal 144 as the United Nations released its World Happiness Report. A total of 156 nations were surveyed. India scored 3.57 points, ranking lower than Pakistan which secured 5.69 points, ranking 66 out of all the countries surveyed.

Indian society, at large, is extremely stressed:

Mental stress is becoming endemic in the modern world. India is supposed to be the worst, as far as mental stress is concerned. According to one study, about 89% of the population suffer from stress which is higher than the global average of 86%. In large number of such cases, stress becomes chronic and then the health issues, both physical and mental problems start.

Many of life's situations may trigger a stress response in the body, problems such as difficult working conditions, overload of work, financial difficulties, and relationship problems within one's family or with a boss or colleagues.

The majority of us do suffer from mental stress; however, its severity varies with each and every individual. Stress causes a wide range of physical changes in the body. It generally increases heart rate and may accelerate or depress breathing.



Mental stress is especially prevalent in the workplace. In today's hyper-competitive world, the working class is the worst affected, especially in India. Most people are working in a highly aggressive environment, with pressure to be more productive, efficient, and profit-generating.

Unfortunately, senior executives and leaders are far more stressed, and create stress for others. Working conditions are therefore unpleasant and uncondusive in most of the private- and public-sector enterprises in India. Though the trend is changing, it's still not encouraging.

Long working hours, tight deadlines, and overambitious targets cause an overload of work, leading to mental stress.

Under stressful conditions, the mind becomes agitated and thoughts may become obsessive triggering a cascade of hormones, including stress hormone, that is, cortisol. It's secreted by the adrenal gland situated above the kidneys. Increased levels of cortisol in the blood contribute to serious diseases such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, and other illnesses, as well as mental disorders like depression and anxiety. Millions of people in India die each year from these diseases and it's all because we don't know how to cope with chronic mental stress.

Unhealthy life style, Wealth, pleasure and material things come with a heavy cost

The way we live, think and work badly affect our physical and mental wellbeing. Is material success the highest goal in life? Far too many of us are preoccupied with the material world, striving to possess more and more material goods, eager for ever more comforts in life. The measure of one's success is not happiness but wealth, status, and power one acquires. Many cases attach greater value on those attainments rather than on their inherent spiritual nature.



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Though most people will say that their first priority in life is to be happy and enjoy life, their real motives may focus on possessing material things.
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Ironically, chasing material success in pursuit of greater happiness may bring more discontentment and unhappiness in life. That's why celebrities, public figures, rich and famous are equally prone, may be more, to mental health problems. As a result, a large section of society becomes vulnerable to psychological stress, emotional distress, addictive behaviour, feeling of loneliness, attention deficit due to high distraction (owing to social media and glamour).



As we have seen from the above, success generally comes at a cost. It often leads to stress and unhappiness because of the demanding nature of successful positions. As we move up in the hierarchy, responsibilities and work pressure generally increase. We then either want to rise further on the ladder of success or we strive to maintain our present position; in both cases, the struggle creates stressful situations.

Expectation also rises as we succeed. Human nature is like that. We normally don't feel contented with our success. Mostly, there exists a gap between the level of expectation and the reality we experience.

Are you a mentally healthy person?

Judge yourself

Close your eyes and observe your thoughts. There is an unstoppable stream of thoughts. We have no control over them. Moreover, the real challenge comes when we are bombarded with negative and disturbing thoughts. When we are mentally stressed or face a challenging situation or some bad incident happens, it becomes a hell like situation. We can't control our thoughts. If we try to suppress those distressing thoughts, then the same thoughts appear with more intensity. On many occasions, the situation becomes uncontrollable.

Mental health is a state of well-being. We can easily cope with normal level of mental and psychological stress so that we continue to work productively. Even during adverse life's conditions, we are not overwhelmed. We continue to remain unperturbed. For few minutes, it's fine but for a longer time, we are able to calm our mind, under challenging conditions. It's also necessary for us, not to be over-reactive and impulsive, when we interact with others. If we are able to manage our mind and thoughts well, that means we are mentally healthy person.



What is meant by mental illness

It refers to a wide range of mental health conditions — disorders that affect our thinking, behaviour and temperament/mood. Some common illnesses are depression, anxiety disorders, attention deficit disorder, schizophrenia, and addictive behaviours. It's common that we experience some mental health concerns from time to time. However, these concerns become a mental illness when the symptoms lead to acute and frequently stress, which affect our normal working. These illnesses may cause serious problems in our daily life, like in workplace or in our relationships.

In any mental illness, we get symptoms which change our state of mind and reduces the quality of life.

What may cause mental illnesses?

? It's not simple to pinpoint the exact reasons that leads to different mental illnesses. However, thanks to latest medical research findings, it has become easier now to identify different conditions that cause these illnesses. Many of these conditions are caused by biological, psychological and environmental factors. The conditions in which we live have a major role in our mental health problems. Sometimes, mental illnesses are run in families suggesting the role of genes in triggering certain illnesses.

However, the fact is when we are mentally stressed for prolong period, unhappy with life's circumstances and facing adversities and traumatic experiences then we become highly vulnerable to different mental illnesses like depression and anxiety.

We see some people going into depression after loss of close family member due to emotional trauma.



Difficulty in knowing our own mental health problem in initial stages?

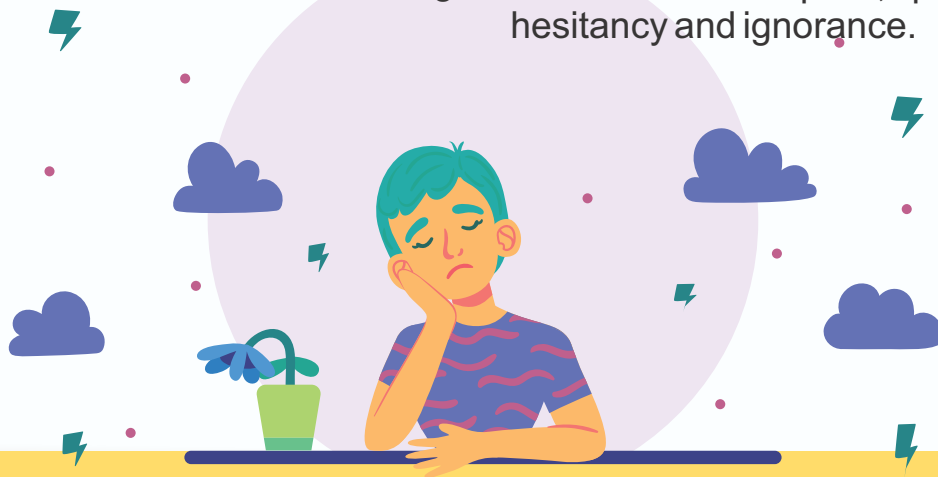


Invariably, we are completely identified with our mind.

In most of the cases, we are not aware that we are suffering from any mental health problem. Because, even during the normal course of life, we experience negative emotions like anger, sadness, fear, disgust, loneliness, guilt, despair, melancholy and when their frequency increases, we don't become aware,

we always think it's a normal negative feeling and it will go away with time. We try to divert our time and attention to different activities or entertainment. As time passes, we become use to those emotions, and then gradually we become mental ill. At a later date we then realize it's something unusual.

Inhibition to discuss mental problems with others, even with friends, is a serious problem with us. Social stigma is attached to mental illnesses. We give too much of importance to 'what will others think". Even in severe cases, many people don't go to doctors or therapists, primarily due to hesitancy and ignorance.



Very common mental illnesses in India

Depression and anxiety are the most common mental disorders in India.

Nearly 20 crores, 14.5% of total population suffer from different mental disorders in India.

Out of that, more than 5 crores from depression and another 4.5 crore from anxiety disorders suffer. During Covid-19 pandemic, these numbers have risen sharply due to high mental stress.

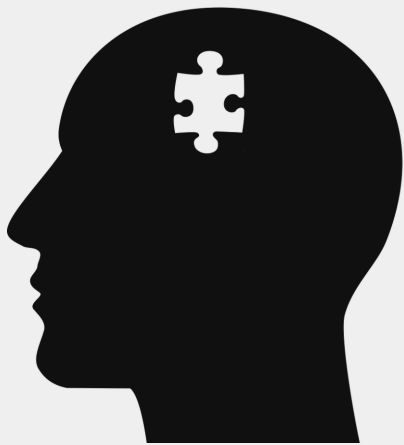
Other very common illnesses are bipolar mood disorder, eating disorder and dementia. In bipolar mood disorder, the mood swings to both the extremes, including highly elevated mood. This mood disorder ultimately impacts the ability to socialize and connect with the world. Eating disorder is a serious condition related to persistent eating behaviours which negatively impact our health. On the other hand, dementia happens in old age due to cognitive decline including forgetfulness.



What to do if we feel we may have some mental health problem?

According to the American Psychiatric Association, upwards of 50% of all mental illnesses begin by age 14 and 75% of mental illness occurs by the age of 24. Isn't it surprising? While the onset of these diseases is not typically "overnight," this still does not leave much time to identify them and make significant progress in treatment. Knowing these statistics can help parents, teachers and even individuals themselves look out for the signs of the mental health disorders; ultimately early detection allows for greater treatment options as well as more effective long-term treatment.

The most general, but also most common early sign of mental illness is, simply, unusual behaviour. This can manifest in many ways. Mood changes including wild shifts in emotions, anxious or depressive behaviour, apathy toward people and activities or withdrawal from social or sports activities can signal that something is wrong.



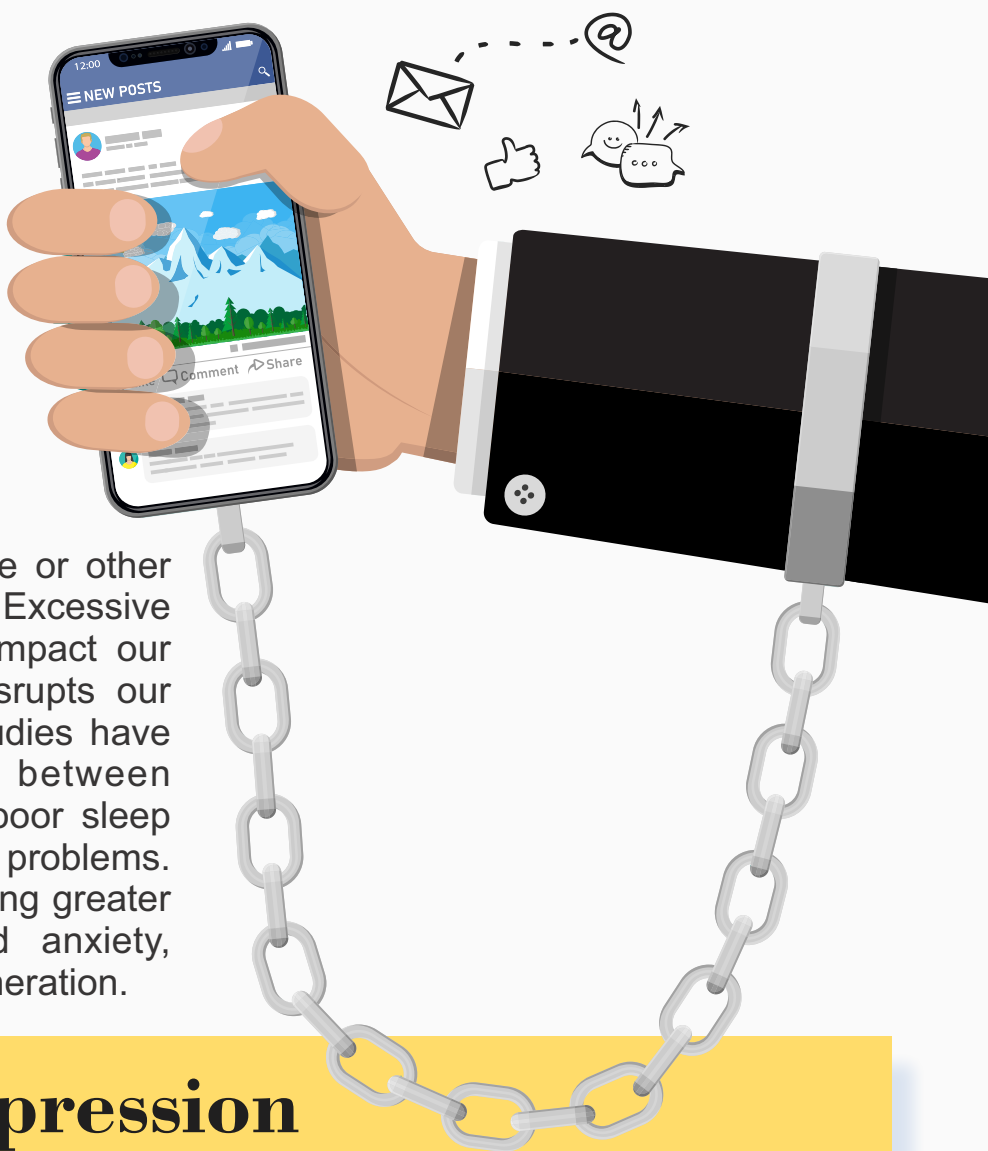
How social media is accelerating mental sickness across the world?

In this age of information and technology, social media and the Internet seem to be seeking our attention all the time. We are becoming far busier now on it. Everyone is absorbed in their mobiles, whether it's on the train, the bus, in public spaces or offices. Any available spare time is now consumed by social media. Not only are we becoming more distracted, less attentive, and less sharply focused, but there is also an adverse impact on our health and well-being.



Through social media, many of us continue to compare our lives to the lives of others. They influence our lives in many ways - internally and externally. The self-image gets devalued when we treat others life 'better' and 'superior'. In many cases, comparison leads to 'body shame' and feel bad about our body/looks.

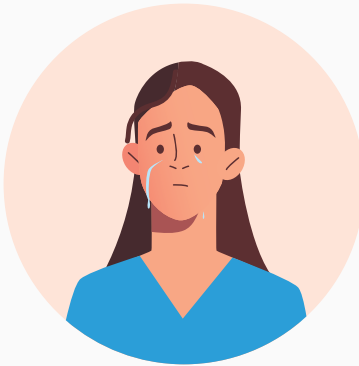
When we get addicted to mobile or other digital screens, happiness flees. Excessive use of social media can also impact our productivity and creativity. It disrupts our normal sleep rhythms. Many studies have shown a direct correlation between excessive use of mobiles and poor sleep quality, leading to mental health problems. Research studies are also showing greater incidences of depression and anxiety, especially among the younger generation.



Depression

is a common mental disorder and one of the main causes of disability worldwide. Depression is mainly characterized by sadness, loss of interest, feelings of guilt, low self-esteem, disturbed sleep and poor concentration. The worst part is that most of them are not aware that they are suffering from any mental condition. The prominent symptom of depression is a continuous feeling of sadness with the sense of absolute hopelessness. The person can't see any hope in future. Negative feelings overpower them badly. In most of the cases, during early stages, people are hesitant to seek therapy or medication due to fear, and age-old stigmas. In later stages, patients are put to medication only. Unfortunately, anti-depressant drugs have serious side effects in many cases.

Nobody has ever described it better. That's the nature of the demon. It's the absence of feeling. It's the end of hope. It's feeling like nothing will ever be good or bright or wonderful ever again. It's feeling like you'll never have anything but failure, you're not good enough for what you want in life and you'll never get it no matter what you do. The good news is, it's a lie. The bad news is, it doesn't feel that way while you're in it.



ANXIETY

Anxiety

Fear and anxiety are among the most common and destructive of emotions. They are related and often coincide. Symptoms of fear and anxiety do tend to overlap. The main difference between the two is that fear is a response to any specific threat, such as being at a great height, using an elevator, and traveling by air. The danger, whether real or imagined, is identifiable and feels definite and immediate. On the other hand, anxiety is a diffuse, unpleasant, and vague sense threat, ranging from mild apprehension to impending doom. Often anxiety follows from an unknown or poorly defined threat. Examples include everyday situations, such as having to attend some social function (“social anxiety”), addressing a large gathering, and writing a winsome resume.

Typically, those who suffer from anxiety disorder, may get panic attack and anxiety attack. A panic attack can occur anytime, all of a sudden, while anxiety attack is triggered by some specific thing/event. Like before going to some public function, we become anxious. We may feel disoriented, having difficulty in breathing and experience an increased heart rate.



Chemical basis of mental illnesses

An extremely critical factor in determining happiness is our biochemical system. All emotions and sensations have a profound effect on our biochemistry. It's a two-way communication of feelings affecting the secretion of chemicals in the brain, and vice versa.

Any imbalance is likely to lead to many kinds of mental illnesses, such as depression and anxiety. Happiness is also the outcome of four basic chemicals – namely, serotonin, dopamine, oxytocin, and endorphins.

These chemicals are known as neurotransmitters, chemical messengers that transmit signals between neurons (nerve cells). Around 100 billion in number, neurons are the building blocks of our nervous system.

The sensations and feelings that underlie happiness are a result of the intricate interplay between these neurotransmitters. Some call it “chemical happiness,” as it's a by-product of bio-molecules.



There are innumerable factors that influence their secretion and delicate balance. If there is any disruption, consequences can be disastrous for our mental health and well-being. The first such biochemical is serotonin, which is also known as the 'happy chemical.' It brings a feeling of well-being, peace, and relaxation. When there is deficiency in its secretion, it may lead to depression and anxiety. It also regulates our sleep, mood, and positive emotions.

Why do people go to the extent of taking their own lives?



people committing suicides, nearly 800,000 people die by suicide worldwide every year, of these 135,000 (17%) belong to India, actual people who attempt to commit suicide are nearly 10 times higher, rest 90% survive, the nation is under economic turmoil, distressed environment, uncertainty prevails, we still have no idea when the pandemic will be over, the way we think, feel, behave and work is changing fast, life is getting transformed in many ways,

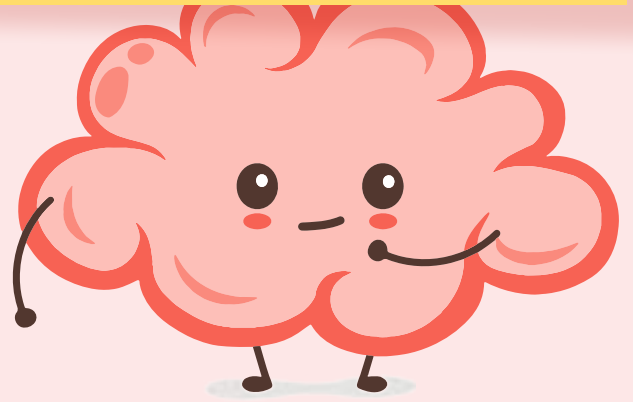
Shocking statistics show similar problems playing out across the world. According to a large-scale 2018 survey of US colleges by the American College Health Association, more than 12% of students say they've "seriously considered suicide", 87% are "overwhelmed" and 42% are so depressed they find it "difficult to function".

Globally, one person dies from suicide every 40 seconds, according to the World Health Organisation, the increase of 60% in the past 45 years. As Myers puts it in his book *The American Paradox*: "Our becoming much better off over the last four decades has not been accompanied by one iota of increased subjective wellbeing."



Why gut bacteria are so important to our mental health ? ? ?

Till recently we never thought that our gut bacteria are so critical to our health and wellbeing. Each one of us has a unique blend of microbes. No two individuals will have a same mix of bacteria. Our gut microbes are determined partly by our mother's microbes and partly by our eating habits and lifestyle. A large part of our microbes stays in the gut throughout life. They line our entire digestive system. Most live in the intestines and colon.



More and more studies are establishing the role of gut microbes in our mental and physical health as well as our overall wellbeing.



The connection between brain and gut is far more intimate and deeper than previously understood. Recent research has showed that they can not only elevate our moods but also relieve the symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress.

Way forward for becoming mentally fit, tough and smart?

Now a days, when it comes to physical health, we all are very conscious and aware. We know everything what superfoods to eat, what are latest diet fads, what are the most cutting-edge workouts to say fit are, and how to monitor every aspect of our health with state-of-the-art fitness bands, Fit bits, apple watches, etc.

Mental health can be strengthened by any strenuous physical exercise such as sports, aerobics, dance and following one's passion.

For mental exercises, the most important intervention is meditation preferably along with besides yoga and pranayama/breathing exercise.

Through this exercise we can manage our thoughts especially during challenging moments of life.

In the recent past, thousands of research papers have confirmed the transformational changes that can come with mindfulness-based meditation. In a recent meta-analysis, researchers from the U.K. found that mindfulness programs led to significant reductions in depression, anxiety, stress, and improved wellbeing. Even aging can be slowed to some extent by the stress-reducing practice of meditation. People become happier and more peaceful when they meditate. An important part of keeping fit and healthy is to take care of our own mental health. There are plenty of things we can do to help make sure we keep ourselves mentally healthy.



Get plenty of sleep: it's really important for our physical and mental health. Sleep helps to regulate the chemicals in our brain that transmit information.

Eat well: Eating well isn't just important for our bodies, but it's also important for our minds. Certain mineral deficiencies, such as iron and vitamin B12 deficiencies, can give us a low mood. Try to eat a balanced diet.

Avoid excessive alcohol, smoking and drugs: Drinking and smoking aren't things which we always associate with withdrawal symptoms, but they can cause some which impact on our mental health.

Activity and exercise: Activity and exercise are essential in maintaining good mental health.



Manage stress: Stress is often unavoidable, but knowing what triggers your stress and knowing how to cope is key in maintaining good mental health. Try to manage our responsibilities and worries by making a list or a schedule of when we can resolve each issue.

Do something you enjoy: Try to make time for doing the fun things we enjoy. If we like going for a walk, painting or a specific TV show, try to set aside time to enjoy ourselves.

Connect with others and be sociable: Make an effort to maintain good relationships and talk to people whenever we get the chance. Having friends is important not just for our self-esteem, but also for providing support when we're not feeling too great.

Do things for others Helping others isn't just good for the people we're helping; it's good for you too.

Take away

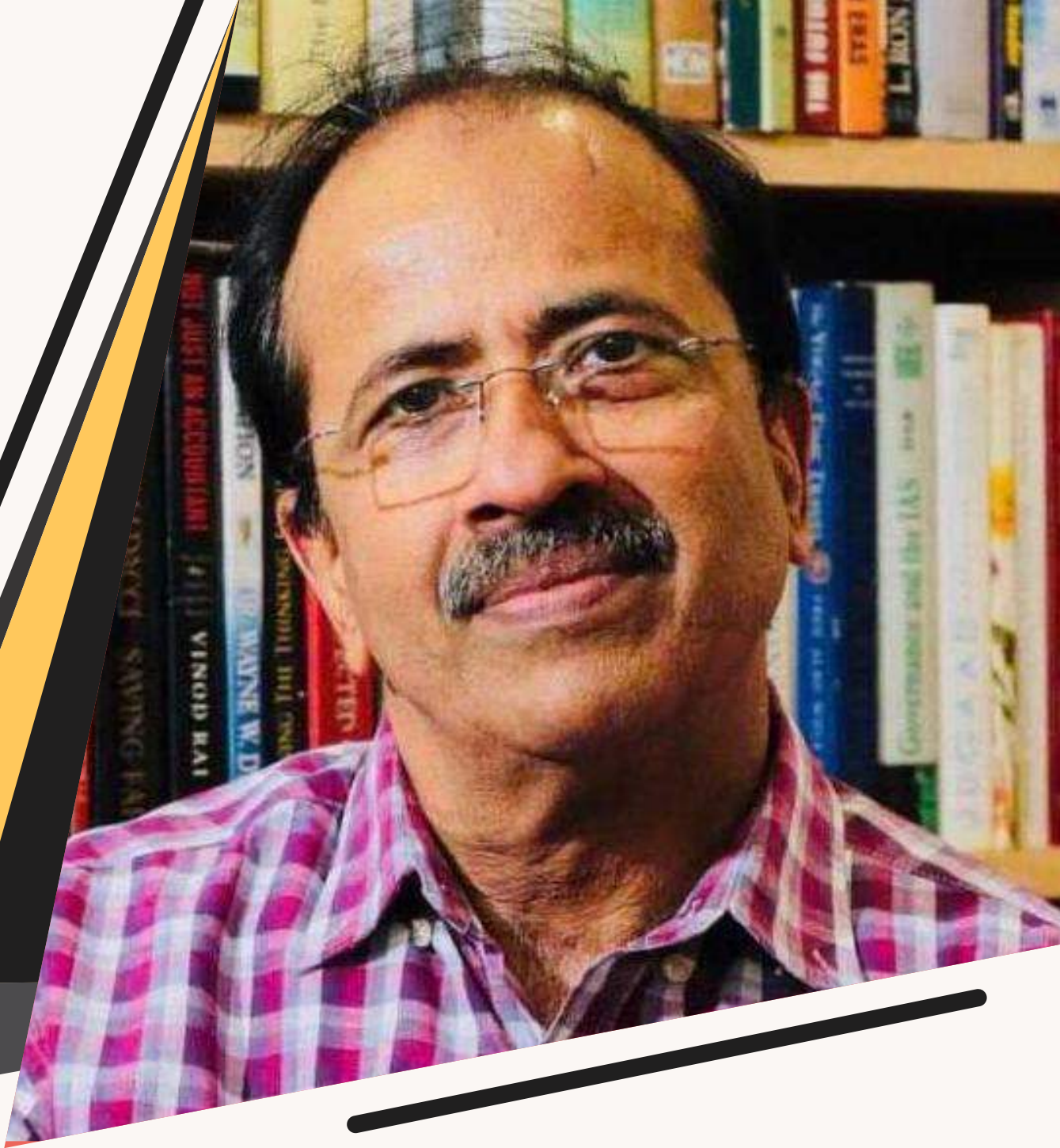
The world around us is merely a reflection of our inner mind.

With a sick mind, only that person knows what the 'hell' really is.

Many of those people are compelled to take their lives because they are unable to tolerate the perceived reality around them. They don't see any hope from the world and the people around them. It's not possible for others to imagine what agony those people undergo with ailing mind. For them the world is like that.



Since we people are completely identified with our mind, we become oblivious of any abnormality we may face when we become mentally ill. That's why, mental illness is extremely challenging for the persons who suffer and those who live with them. We need a paradigm shift to understand and appreciate the feelings and agony the people who suffer from mental illnesses. We also need to value the importance of mindfulness and self-awareness in handling the menace of increasing incidents of mental sickness across the world.



ABOUT AUTHOR

Quite late in his life, the author ventured into spiritual writings. After *Man's Spiritual Journey*, *Awakening the Thinking Mind*, *Redesign Your Life in Modern Age*, *Explore Your Life Journey* is the last book. The author is a retired bureaucrat, amateur painter (made about 100 paintings on canvas) and regular practitioner of mindfulness-based meditation. Currently working in a regulatory authority of UP State.
