The role of cultural and social norms and their impact on the mental well-being of the youth in India.

Introduction

Enter the bustling country of India, where overpopulation, economic pressure, and constant fast-paced life all come together in one giant discordant cooking pot, but just how much more can this cooking pot take before it starts bubbling over?

As it would seem, all these factors prove to be excellent in inducing mental health issues and disorders in the impressionable youth of our country. This coupled with our trademark elitist nature makes for a truly hellish scenario where mental health issues are allowed to run rampant and unreported by the affected party over the fear of coming under public scrutiny and being estranged from society due to public stigma. In this paper, I would like to dive deeper into this very topic and analyze one of the biggest problems the youth of India are facing today, along with its primary causes and what this could spell for the future of our country.

Thesis

The youth of India is our most valuable resource for the country's development, yet their mental well-being is steeped in an aura of disdain.

Mental Health and Public Stigma

When the words "depression" or "anxiety" are mentioned in casual conversation, a variety of images are conjured in one's mind, but it is primarily a topic we all tend to steer away from. Further muddying these images are the strong negative feelings the collective Indian public hold regarding such problems, which perpetuate long-standing biases that severely stunt any initiative taken to aid those suffering from mental illnesses.

This paper deals with the topic of the public stigma and prejudice faced by the youth of India when it comes to the discussion of their mental health. Still, to effectively delve into and synthesize a conclusion to this topic, we must first understand what public stigma truly means. According to Corrigan and Penn (1999) [1], "Public stigma refers to a set of negative attitudes and beliefs that motivate individuals to fear, reject, avoid and discriminate against people with mental illness". Public stigma is the main reason preventing people who experience mental health problems from seeking counsel and treatment [2]. In India, public stigma is the prevalent cause for the underreporting of mental health problems, with only 7.3% of its 365 million youth reporting a mental disorder and fewer accessing treatment [3], this is especially disturbing as young people aged 15-24 years are at a critical period of identification and treatment of mental health disorders [4].

Preconceived Notions

Several studies were conducted to effectively deduce the extent of public knowledge when it came to mental health in an Indian context. A significant majority of the public believed that people with mental health issues could never recover [5], several others claimed that ayurvedic treatment is imperative in treating mental health issues [6], or that one could achieve control over their symptoms via prescription drugs [7].

A disturbing demographic of people also believed that mental illness was a result of genetic defects or supernatural reasons [7], with some even going as far as to say mental illness is

contagious or due to a non-vegetarian diet [8]. This goes to show the sheer lack of education that a certain population of Indian society has regarding this topic.

Study: The disturbing case of Sushant Singh Rajput

On June 14th, 2020, famous Bollywood actor Sushant Singh Rajput was found dead at his Mumbai residence. His sudden suicide shocked the world, and while the exact reasons for his suicide are not clear, it shed light on the importance of addressing mental health issues and the stigma that comes with seeking counsel for such problems. In the wake of his death, there was a surge in media coverage, debates, and public discussions regarding mental health issues and the pressure faced by those suffering from them. This sparked something in the people, who demanded better mental health support and empathy for those struggling with mental health issues. [9]

A Deadly Stigma

Social stigma isn't a virus, but it spreads like one, and in many cases, this virus can prove to be fatal.

According to a 2012 Lancet report [10], India has the highest suicide rate for youths aged 15-24 years. Conversations with counselors revealed that young people often found it hard to cope with their failures in the academic/career-oriented spheres, and neither their families nor social institutions offered adequate aid in their time of need. Professional help still remains notoriously difficult to approach, as India faces a whopping 87% shortage of mental health professionals. According to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, India needs 13,500 psychiatrists to achieve the ideal ratio of 1:8000, but shockingly, the number realistically hovers at around only 3,500. To put this information into simpler, but dread-inducing terms, this means there is only 1 psychiatrist for every 2 lakh people in the country. [11]

Here is the same information in a tabular form:

Mental healthcare professionals in India
TABLE OF REQUIREMENT AND AVAILABILITY

MANPOWER	REQUIREMENTS	AVAILABILITY
Psychiatrists	13,500	3827
Clinical Psychologists	20,250	898
Psychiatric Social Workers	37,000	850
Psychiatric Nurses	3000	1500

Source: Lok Sabha Unstarred Question Number 2709

Change and the champions of tomorrow

While the majority of India might prefer keeping this subject under drapes, there are still organizations that diligently work to address this mental health crisis of the youth. One such organization is the Centre for Mental Health Law and Policy, which had two major projects underway to effectively tackle mental illness issues in India.

The first of these projects is ATMIYATA, this project involved sending volunteers or champions out into 41 different villages with the objective of offering counsel to individuals

struggling with mental issues and introducing them to mental health services and social benefits. The second such project was SPIRIT or Suicide Prevention and Implementation Research Initiative, which operated within a timeframe of 5 years (August 2017-June 2022) and worked on implementing suicide prevention strategies in rural villages. [11]

Conclusion

This research paper deals with the role of social and cultural norms on the mental well-being of Indian youth. It states public stigma is a major cause for hindering mental health-seeking behaviour. While many obstacles lie in wait, efforts should start at an individual level to remove these hindrances, and to ensure that the youth of India gets the mental health support they deserves.

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