

INNOVATION LAB STUDENT PROJECT TEMPLATE

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Title	Mental Health in India
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Social Problem

"Depression drives two to end lives". "Anxiety disorders soar over 12-fold in 30 years". These are the types of headlines that make it to the news these days. This generation surely seems to be undergoing crisis. The issue in consideration here is the mental health of India. Mental Health as an issue is neglected in not only India, but the world over.

About 7.3% of our population faces mental disorders. However, a staggering 90% of these remain untreated. Mental health is one area that is afflicted most by a high treatment gap due to the social stigma attached to mental illnesses, lack of awareness and resistance to treatment by patients.

WHO predicts that around 20% of India's population will suffer from a mental illness by 2020. We are woefully under-equipped to handle mental problems on such a large scale. For the 7 crore mentally ill patients in India, there are only around 4000 trained psychiatrists and most of these are concentrated in the metros and two-tier cities. This is worse than the proverbial drop in the ocean!

NIMHANS estimates that currently about 35 lakh Indians need hospitalization on account of mental illnesses. But the country has only 40 institutions and less than 26,000 beds. Of these 40 institutions, only nine are equipped to treat children. Moreover, many of these are medieval-era, asylum-style institutions with high boundary walls, artificial barriers and patients kept in solitary confinement.

While India is affected by mental illnesses to the same extent as the rest of the world, the treatment of such people is extremely different from that given in more developed countries. This is due to the apathetic attitude of the government which is proven by the fact barely 1-2% of the health budget is dedicated to mental illnesses, while compared to 10-12% in the developed nations. The only way that we can measure our success in curbing this problem is by comparing how we are faring with respect to other nations. Thus, in the case of mental health, India can and should be compared to more developed countries.

According to ICMR survey only 10-20% mentally ill people in Delhi seek medical help. In most cases patients turn reclusive and often starve themselves to death while neighbors

prefer to look the other way. Many undiagnosed patients belonging to different social strata continue to live in self-denial and let their illness become severe when it is completely curable.

This is the crux of the problem. Almost all mental issues can be dealt with and the patient can often return to a better and more fulfilling life after treatment. Yet, all over the world and in India especially, they often reject help and support, without realizing that they are harming themselves. Only by creating awareness about how important treatment and rehabilitation is can we effectively put an end to this problem.

The doctors at IHBAS blame the stigma attached to mental illnesses for 80% patients not getting proper care and treatment. In most cases even if family senses there is something wrong they are reluctant to take the patient to a mental health professional. There is also a common misconception that once some one is mentally ill, he or she will remain so forever.

Another widely formed misconception is that patients with mental health problems are a danger to society and the people surrounding them. This is an idea that is largely reinforced by sensationalised stories in the media. However, the most common mental health problems have no significant link to violent behaviour.

The proportion of people living with a mental health problem who commit a violent crime is extremely small. There are lots of reasons someone might commit a violent crime, and factors like drug and alcohol misuse are far more likely to be the cause of violent behaviour. But many people are still worried about talking about how they're feeling, or seeking help, because of the fear and stigma of being seen as dangerous.

Treatment for mental illnesses is definitely possible. However there is a huge social stigma attached to it which has prevented several people from seeking it. The mentally ill are considered as sociopaths and are often neglected. However, such people are the ones that require company the most. Friends, family and the society can be encouraging enough and help a fellow citizen by showing support. Social prejudices need to be done away with. It's time to accept the reality. It's time to change.

Causes and Factors

Although the exact cause of most mental illnesses is not known, it is becoming clear through research that these conditions are often caused by a combination of biological, psychological, and environmental factors.

A few of the biological factors include hereditary mental illness, brain damage and injury, prenatal damage in babies and overexposure to toxic substances such as lead, mercury etc. Important psychological causes of mental illness are severe psychological trauma suffered as a child, loss of an important person in early childhood, neglect and poor ability to relate with others. Environmental reasons include the family atmosphere, constant change in surroundings (could be changes in jobs and schools), a dysfunctional family etc. Substance abuse also contributes to mental disorders.

However, most mental illnesses are not caused by such factors. On the contrary, they are a by-product of our rapidly changing lifestyle, which often sacrifices health and wellbeing for the sake of fame and wealth. Thus, social factors such as occupation, lifestyle and societal pressures constitute the most important cause of mental health problems.

Stress is the foremost contender. Be it academic, work-related or other personal problems, people have become increasingly prone to stress. Coupled with external, societal, parental and one's own internal pressures, an urban Indian leads a turbulent life.

Financial insecurity also increases stress levels and so does pressure at the workplace. If seen objectively, almost all activities of a normal Indian today cause an increase in stress

levels. Thus, it is necessary to reduce stress if we are to better the mental health of the average Indian.

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Proposed Solution

Our studies are based upon various surveys conducted by several agencies, both government and private. They are based on certified sources and hence, the validity of the conclusions is beyond question.

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As mentioned earlier, stress is the main factor behind mental illness. Thus, our main objective is to reduce stress levels among Indian adults. Hence, we should educate people about the importance of rest and relaxation as well as the necessity of physical exercise and mental rejuvenation. Also, the importance of maintaining a good work-life balance must be stressed upon.

Another reason why mental health problems are so prevalent is the lack of awareness about them. The public should be educated about the causes and the types of mental illnesses and their symptoms so that the problem can be treated before it becomes acute and dangerous.

Primary education must start from school. Doctors and others who are well versed with the subject should take classes on mental health. These classes could include lessons on how to recognise a person with issues,

Counselling centres must be set up so that patients have a well-organized support system to fall back upon. Also, since such illnesses are harder for the family, the counselling centres must also have facilities to help the family members to cope with the patient's problem.

There is a severe dearth of qualified psychiatrists for the treatment of the immense number of mentally affected people in India. The government need to provide added incentives to attract more students to the profession of psychiatry. Without qualified doctors, we cannot treat the mentally ill properly and hence, the presence of psychiatrists is essential.

Since a major factor of stress is work related, corporates must be involved in the process of bettering mental health. It would be an excellent idea if corporates accepted this problem as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiative.

The earlier the problem is diagnosed, the better. Therefore, teachers and parents must be educated on recognising a child with mental health problems and thereby, helping the child to be treated at a young age and possibly, helping him regain a normal life.

Though such ideas have been tried before, they were incorporated into a single project and were not well organised. Hence, we believe that with proper organization and leadership, these ideas can help bring about a change in society.

Tasks & Timelines

While brainstorming, a common problem that we encountered was the reaction of the general public to treatment of mental patients. Society has got used to keeping these patients away from the public eye and was unlikely to accept such sudden changes favourably. Hence, we decided that the first step would be educate the public before trying to bring about changes.

Our solution is a rather lengthy process and results will take quite some time to be visible. However, we are sure that satisfactory results will be achieved. Since mental illness cannot be prevented, it is not possible to measure the results by means of measuring a decrease the cases of mental illness. Thus, results could be measured by the number of cases which actually reach the stage of treatment. If we are able to convince the public that it is necessary for a mental patient to receive help, then that would be a huge step towards creating a healthier India. This yardstick would be extremely helpful in the initial stages of our solution, but as we move on, a slightly different benchmark would be required. As time passes, we should adopt a new measure of success which would gauge results by the number of successfully treated patients who could return to a normal life.

The immediate concerns of our solution is creating awareness and educating the public. If we work in cooperation with the government and the NGOs, this task should be complete in around 3 years. A short term goal is to garner maximum support for the cause of treating mentally ill people. This could be done by intensive media coverage, tying-up with corporates etc. At the same time, the government should focus on creating incentives to become psychiatrists and on setting up counselling centres. Another long-term goal would be to set up new mental institutions and better the facilities and hygiene at existing ones. This should be completed in around 7 -8 years.

Thus, our solution ought to be completed in a maximum of 10 years. While this might seem to be a large duration, it is actually quite reasonable, considering the scale of the project. We also believe that this model can be adopted anywhere around the globe, because the ideas proposed are quite simple and only require cooperation between the government, the media, a few corporates and the public.

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