

IN THIS ISSUE :

- We are urged to discover what defines us, through a regular regimen of introspection
- We are taken through the experience of grief and find out it has facets we did not know existed
- We are informed that student suicides can be prevented if only we are trained to understand, sympathise, and empathise.

MESSAGE FROM OUR PRESIDENT



With the passing of the old year and the ushering in of new days of hopes and dreams, I wish all our dear members and readers a very Happy, Prosperous, Healthy and Peaceful life ahead. This will be my last message as the President of APSWP in the current tenure. I have been the Founding President and completed two terms of two years each. I wish to thank all the members who entrusted me with this enormous task and supported me throughout the two terms. Now it is time for a change of guard. A new Board of Office Bearers will be elected in February 2024 at our very first National Conference scheduled to be held at IMHANS Kozhikodu, Kerala, from 7th to 9th February 2024. In advance, I wish the new Board the very best. And while on the subject of the Conference, I urge all members to participate in it wholeheartedly and enthusiastically, and make it a success.

Once again, our Editorial Team has brought out a very informative and thought provoking issue of **Psychosocial Matters**. Congratulation on this 8th edition of the newsletter. And thank you dear members, for all your hard work and efforts to uphold to our motto of Solidarity, Standards and Ethics through your work.

Adios!!

Sobhana H

HAPPY
New Year

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE



Royina Mahanta



Malathi Swaminathan



Shalini K. Sharma



Looking back and introspecting – those are the words that largely sum up this issue of **Psychosocial Matters**. There is a branch in the study of humanities that is called Philosophy of Science. It was not a subject taught in India but of late, it has been gaining in popularity through the efforts of a few private universities. The Philosophy of Science is all about curiosity, questioning, and introspecting. It steers us towards criticality and even harshness through its emphasis on provocation – what is normal and what is not normal? What is good and what is not good? Is life governed by binaries? Do ghosts exist? How do we know how valid our theories about life and reality are? The implications of such questions for mental health are immense. To take just one example, from calling suicide a reproachable act of a responsible person ('committed' suicide) to an act that is a result of treatment-resistant depression ('died by' suicide), the same act of ending one's own life transforms from being a culpable act to a mental health consequence. So, from criminalising to de-criminalising suicide, from the burning of witches to the diagnosis of schizophrenia, from lynching homosexual persons to celebrating the rainbow, mental health sciences are replete with examples of changes happening through the relentless efforts of those who dare to question 'reality' with alternate philosophies. What starts as philosophy eventually stands up to scientific scrutiny. This, then, provides the template for the work that we do.

No surprise then, that Malathi Swaminathan urges us to introspect on a **regular** basis, Shalini Sharma compels us to **institutionalise** programmes whose results have proved time and again to be both respectful of divergence and life-saving, and Royina Mahanta delves deep into herself to understand the nature of grief and makes the discovery that there are **facets** to it she never knew existed.

On another note, it is hard to believe that this is the 8th issue of **Psychosocial Matters**. This is not an academic journal. It strives to be informative but at the same time, light-hearted and chatty. As newsletters go, we have tried to keep it interesting, diverse, inclusive, and positive. And so, it would help if more of you wrote for the newsletter, drawing from your own rich experiences. Funny or serious, informative or entertaining, looking back into the past or forward into the future, just let your fingers free on your devices and mail us the results.

Try to commit to that as we begin 2024 with the fervent hope of
Peace on Earth and Goodwill towards All.

A Happy New Year to All Our APSWP Members and Readers!

Vidya Ramachandran

I like nonsense, it wakes up the brain cells. Fantasy is a necessary ingredient in living. It's a way of looking at life through the wrong end of a telescope. Which is what I do, and that enables me to laugh at life's realities.

- Dr. Seuss, Author and Cartoonist

FROM JULY TO DECEMBER 2024...OUR SECRETARY SPEAKS

The excitement this half year came from planning the first National Conference of APSWP. Although initially thought to be held at NIMHANS, it was finally fixed to happen at IMHANS (Institute for Mental Health and Neuro Sciences), Kozhikode. A simple but attractive poster was very quickly designed and circulated online. A call for papers was sent out. Colleagues at IMHANS put all arrangements in place needed to enable participants to make travel plans, hotel bookings, sightseeing, and other logistics and set up an online system to enable smooth and problem-free registration. The dates for the Conference are February 7, 8, and 9, 2024. We will let you know how it goes in the next issue of **Psychosocial Matters**. Meanwhile, make sure you are participating in it!



Since my message to you in the previous half-year, no further progress has been made on the issue of renewal of registration, which is now pending for the years 2022-23 and 2023-24. Part of the problem is that APSWP does not have a full-time staff person to administer it, and since Office Bearers have their own full-time jobs, pursuing pending matters with the Government – in this case, the Registrar of Societies – becomes difficult, especially when it involves the need for repeated visits for the simplest of issues.

Continuous PSW Education (CPSWE) Programme

Dr. Renjith Pillai sent in this report on the third edition of the **ACADEMIC LECTURE SERIES** organised by APSWP in collaboration with the Department of Psychiatric Social Work, Ranchi Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (RINPAS).

This is an online lecture series organised primarily for M.Phil Psychiatric Social Work trainees pursuing the course from various institutes across the country. Formal inauguration of the series was held on the Zoom Platform on 10th October, 2023. The Chief Guest Dr. S.K. Deuri, Director, Professor and Head, Department of Psychiatry, LGBRIMH, Tezpur, Assam, spoke about the relevance of psychiatric social workers in the field of mental health and appreciated the services provided by them in his institute. Guest of Honour Dr. B.P. Nirmala, Professor and Head, Department of Psychiatric Social Work, NIMHANS, Bangalore, was appreciative of this initiative of RINPAS-APSWP and pledged the support of her Department for the same. Dr. Sobhana H, President, APSWP, presided over the function, and Dr. Jayati Simlai, Director RINPAS, graced the occasion with her presence. Vote of thanks was delivered by Dr. Amaresha C, Associate Professor (PSW) at LGBRIMH, Tezpur, and a coordinator of the programme.

88 persons have registered to participate in this programme. A total of 25 lectures, two symposia, and 1 to 2 case presentations will be part of this series. Two lectures are held each week on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Symposia are planned for the month of January 2024 and will be open to members of APSWP apart from the students. The programme will be concluded by the end of January, 2024.

Dr. Manisha Kiran (RINPAS, Ranchi), Dr. Renjith R. Pillai (PGIMER, Chandigarh), Dr. Jobin Tom (IMHANS, Kozhikode), Dr. Pravin Yennawar (IHBAS, New Delhi), Dr. Amaresha C (LGBRIMH, Tezpur), Dr. Supraja (KMC, Manipal), Ms. Abhishikta Naik (NIMHANS, Bangalore), and Ms. Humaira Khan (MindWorks, Mumbai) are the coordinators of the programme. All the lectures are being recorded and will be uploaded onto the YouTube Channel of APSWP at the end of the programme, subject to permission from the resource persons.

Association Meetings

Our Core Advisory Group and our Executive Committee are both comprised of persons living and working in different parts of our country, and we have to appreciate that technology has enabled us to meet on a regular basis without the time and expenses of actual travel. In this half year, three meetings were held.

Sl. No.	Dates	Meetings	Place
1.	11.09.2023	7 th Core Group Meeting	Online
2.	22.09.2023	8 th Core Group Meeting	Online
3.	08.11.2023	16 th Executive Committee Meeting	Online

Membership

We have now reached 231 members, although the actual number of existing members is 230 because of the demise of a member who continues to remain in the count due to the system of recording. We continue to have a solitary student/associate member. The growth in membership has been admittedly slow for various reasons, and membership cards have still not been readied for distribution.

Communications to various Government Agencies

- 05.07.23 : Letter (Ref.No.09/23) to Director, AIIMS Bhubaneshwar, regarding discrepancies in the qualifications of various PSW posts
- 25.08.23 : Letter (Ref.No.10/23) to NITI Aayog requesting representation for the meeting regarding M.Phil. nomenclature
- 05.09.23 : Letter (Ref.No.11/23) to NITI Aayog regarding the recommendations for alternate nomenclatures for the M.Phil. course.
- 18.09.23 : Letter (Ref No. 12/23) to the Registrar, AIIMS Rishikesh, regarding qualifications for the post of Psychiatric Social Worker
- 06.10.23 : Letter (Ref No. 13/23) to the Director, Kidwai Institute Bengaluru, regarding qualifications for the post of Psychiatric Social Worker in the draft C & R rules.

A few other highlights

In August 2023, NIMHANS requested APSWP to give its opinions regarding insurance regulations to be sent to the insurance authority in the context of insurance coverage for mental health.

APSWP representatives were invited to a meeting held in virtual mode on 01.09.2023 under the Chairmanship of Dr. V.K Paul, Honourable Member (Health), NITI Aayog, to seek views and comments of experts on the subject of finalizing alternatives to the discontinued M. Phil. programmes in Clinical Psychology and Psychiatric Social Work.

As already mentioned, plans were made to conduct the 1st National Conference of APSWP at IMHANS, Kozhikode, Kerala, from 7 to 9 February 2024. At this time it has also been decided to hold elections to the APSWP Executive Committee for the period 2024 to 2026, since the tenure of the existing Committee will be ending.

It was decided to institute two awards to be given annually in the names of our stalwart PSWs the late Dr. Bhatti, and the late Dr. Parthasarathy. A fundraising drive was initiated but ended quickly since the required amounts were raised sooner than expected. It has been decided that the first recipients will be awarded in our February Conference.

On that note, let me end by asking all of you to take part in full strength to make it a success.

A happy New Year to all of you!

Aravind Raj

Lead Essay

By Malathi Swaminathan



What defines me?

Malathi Swaminathan completed M.A. in Social Work from Stella Maris College, Chennai, M.Phil in Psychiatric Social Work from NIMHANS, Bengaluru, and M.S. in Human Development from the University of Rochester, New York. After working for a hospital, a women's organisation, a school, a special school, and a teachers' training institute attached with several schools, she went on to becoming an independent Mental Health cum Education Consultant, calling her workspace 'Vatsalya for Human Enrichment'. Malathi is a regular writer in Tamil, and this article was first published in the Healthcare-Mental Health section of Dinamani in April 2018. It has been revised and updated in December 2023 for *Psychosocial Matters*. Malathi can be contacted at malathiswami@gmail.com

We all love to dream, dare, do!
Introspection helps this.

It gives us a sense of satisfaction when we receive applause and appreciation; it creates a 'feel good' state within us. This sense of well-being drives us to do more and to do even better. If we feel our efforts have been of value to others, we want to continue to be valuable. But there are also times when this does not happen, for one reason or another. We take that in our stride too. What defines our maturity as adults is how we influence the field around us through our pro-active and responsive behaviours. Let us examine ourselves through the following concepts that can be regarded as binaries, or the somewhat opposite ends of a spectrum. It is what I do personally from time to time, and what I have recorded here is based on my own thought outputs that I am sharing with you in the hope that it will be of some use to you too. The

The dictionary defines Introspection as the examination or observation of one's own mental processes. It is about 'looking inside ourselves'. It is a process of self-monitoring, based on the understanding that what we do and how we behave impacts us as well as others, and hence, we have to be conscious that we maximise what we want to achieve and minimise what we don't want to achieve. Meditating, sitting down periodically and examining our thoughts and actions, keeping a diary and reflecting on our entries from time to time, examining others' opinions of us – these are some of the tools of introspection.

list is not exhaustive; one can choose anything and add another to it. It is also not listed in any particular order of significance. So let's get started!

Gratitude versus Entitlement

Gratitude is about us feeling deeply touched by a thoughtful word or gesture. It is about being thankful for some act of kindness shown to us. This may also arise because something we have done has been valued by another. In reciprocation to knowing that we mattered, we acknowledge those who contributed to this. Tribute can be paid openly or thanks can be expressed inside us to whoever deserves it. Gratitude can be felt towards nature, God, parents, siblings, teachers, neighbours, strangers, art that pepped us up, or that bird chirp or gentle breeze that perks us up – anything that we have experienced that is from a source outside us and that has made us feel good. Feeling grateful washes happiness into our being. The cascading effect enriches us, impacting those with us too!

On the other hand, people can feel that what has been done for them or offered to them is their due. They feel that they are entitled to any act of generosity coming from any source. This sense of entitlement makes them believe things have to be done for them as a matter of course. They expect people to do things for them. They expect to be pandered to and feel validated in this process. But the validation is short-lived and has to be reinforced again and again. The person who is being kind often clearly senses the message that their kindness is of no particular merit since it is only regarded as a settlement of dues. To remain in such a situation can become difficult, leading to exhaustion, negativity, favouritism, bribe-giving, and so on.

Learn and Learn versus I Know this Already

In every stage of life there is always something that we may not know. Learning remains a continuum

when one accepts, 'What I know is a drop, what I don't know is an ocean.' If we are open to learning, it keeps us humble, it keeps us curious, it keeps us excited, it keeps us respectful of others. Each thing we learn helps in our growth. We do not sneer when others say they do not know.



On the other hand, when we feel that we know all that we need to know, we may not be in a frame to learn because '**I know this already!**' When this has been proclaimed, doors to know are closed. We feel superior and we may look down on others who say they do not know.

What is the way to find where we lean to? There are pointers. Introspect what you have been doing these last few times to

learn something new about yourself.

Knowledge Hiding versus Knowledge Sharing

Being willing to explain is one thing, clarifying doubts sufficiently is another thing, telling others about where to find resources is yet another way. When all these happen, it is sharing information. Articulating what we know and allowing access to information reflects our willingness to share. In any form, sharing reflects a complete sense of security. Sharing means exchanging information. Exchanging adds and multiplies what we know and does not deplete us of our reserve!

As against this is hiding. This is done by being either evasive or falsely promising to give the information and not doing so, or giving it when it is redundant. One can also pretend not to have the

A very good example is when a cook who has prepared a delicious dish is asked for the recipe but does not share it at all or withholds some critical ingredient or procedure

information that is being asked. Sometimes, one can offer justification for not sharing by saying they are not allowed to share by someone in authority. While saying so, these people are well aware that they know they will neither offer nor clarify either. The non-sharer believes that sharing knowledge may jeopardise their own 'superior' status. Hiding and hoarding information is always indicative of anxiety. Overall, hiding and hoarding reflects the limited skills with which they are operating. Their worry is if they share this then they are robbed of what little they have. These are individuals who seldom learn, improve.

Blah bLaH
BLAH
Oh NO!!

tend to shun those who exclusively discuss other people, expecting that they too may become topics of conversation.

Talking about ideas refines thought processes and enriches us by filling gaps in our knowledge and by opening pathways for more thoughts. This happens only when both the individuals are at ease with each other, feel comfortable to share their standpoints even if they are opposite to one another, and not worry about defending their views. These exchanges become feeders to motivate us.

Giving Credit versus Finding Flaws

People who feel adequate with what they have tend to appreciate and commend. Genuinely and with utmost willingness, they give credit where it is due. There is no pretence or drama in this gesture. One can see them do this unconditionally, to people they know and to strangers as well.

Whereas those who are filled with self doubt or bitterness seem quick to criticize. They are able to find shortcomings even where none may be present. They can make small lapses feel like mountainous mistakes. Gradually they tend to do this with not only what is shown to them but also with whatever their eyes see, whether connected to the situation or not. Not being able to see beauty in anything keeps them sad and morose. People hesitate being near them, and this further stokes their bitterness.

Discussions versus Gossip

When we are in the company of people we can converse with we have the option to talk about other people or about ideas. Talking about other people enriches us as long as it is in the region of analysing their experiences and learning from them. As the talk edges towards sitting on judgment about that individual, it means gossip sets in. Saying things behind their backs becomes the norm. This is not constructive to the teller, the listener, or the person being talked about. While it is true that people enjoy gossip, it is also true that over time, people

Progress for All versus Hope Others Fail

Most of us have grown up hearing the words **Sarveh janah sukhinoh bhuvanthu** which approximately translates as **May all people be well**. This holistic well-being extends to wishing that all succeed! This largesse of heart exudes the willingness to not only let live but to let everyone prosper. There is no sense of regret when someone forges ahead. This is the feature of a Collectivist Society where others' well-being matters to us as much as our own. In a way it is a loop : as all live well and succeed, it only improves our own chance of succeeding. Yet, self orientedness does not operate in this.

On the other hand, a common phenomenon that is a fallout from a strong sense of competition is **hope others fail**. Rather than improving oneself, trying to put down others takes precedence. Sadly, children tend to emulate this from adults. Such a wish is made because they do not want to try as much as they can

Raja : *I got 88% in maths.*

Parent : *That's really good. So now let's look at what you got wrong and we'll try and understand how to solve more problems correctly.*

Raja : *I got 88% in maths.*

Parent : *How much did Rani get?*

Raja : *95%*

Parent : *What? More than you? What kind of a loser are you?*

or give in their best. Instead, they hope others fail so that their own shortcomings and failures are not in the spotlight.

What are some of the popular spoilers that prevent us from bringing forth our best? Here is an indicative list that I have put together. You can add to it from your own experiences.

<p>Taking criticisms as a personal attack. When someone reacts critically to a paper or a project or an aspect of behaviour, individuals feel targeted. They sense this as personal. The way they perceive it is that the feedback is about them and not about that particular act. Therefore, they either think it is because of jealousy and brush it off, or simmer with resentment, or respond with other forms of negativity. In actual fact, critical feedback can be a very constructive tool for growth if one puts the ego aside and reflects on it objectively.</p>	<p>Making assumptions leading to self-fulfilling prophecies. Assumptions are derived without seeking information or clarification. Assumptions are conclusions arrived at without objective proof. Gaps in knowledge are attempted to be filled with the limited facts one may have, bolstered by 'imagined facts'. We draw up our own stories and begin to believe that as the truth. Sometimes we may be helped along by our friends who might add additional embellishments. Assumptions are made when one does not seek information or clarification. Some assumptions may be right but often, assumptions can be counter-productive by strengthening false conclusions.</p>
<p>Blaming others, never questioning ourselves. We make ourselves least successful when we blame. By blaming we do not take onus of our responsibility. We point our fingers to external factors. We are not prepared to see how much our own behaviour has contributed to the situation. Accepting responsibility requires inner courage to face issues, and it is only when issues are faced fairly and squarely that remedies can be designed.</p>	<p>Constantly seeking approval; affected the most by those we know the least With social media in the forefront, taking things to heart about what is mentioned by contacts who know the least about us happens when we are always looking for approval from people. Constantly seeking validation and approval indicates the depth of low self image that we carry of ourselves. It may also show that we are not clear regarding our own aspirations and goals, allowing ourselves to be buffeted by public opinion that is increasingly uncaring in its expression.</p>
<p>Avoiding risk because of fear of failure. Wanting to be seen only as winners, we set ourselves up to let go of opportunities that come our way just in case we fail at them. If the task seems to have even a small level of difficulty it is not pursued. This will naturally keep us in a status quo position. Because of this we may not use our competencies or even know that they exist within us.</p>	<p>Jealousy as a consequence of constant comparison. Constant comparison with others combined with our own sense of inadequacy can lead to feelings of envy. We then tend to be overly critical of the other person. Feeling envious handicaps us from pursuing our own tasks. It escalates our sense of insecurity and sense of shame. It paralyzes us with our own self critical thoughts that lead to suspicion. Overall, once envy sets in we do not set out to do what needs to be done from our side. Witnessing the other person grow keeps our envy fertile and our growth in limbo</p>

Postponing can be ruinous.

Not now, tomorrow, later, pushing things to a future can be a great deterrent! Procrastinating simply means that we do not know how to strategize, or feel overwhelmed, or take things for granted and feel complacent. Whatever the reason, putting things off only ever results in a pile up. Things don't go away, they just accumulate. Even when this is because one has run into a blind end, there is often a strong sentiment against asking for help. A series of such postponements only leads to a mountainous pile!

Consistent baby steps can help, as James Clear says in his best selling book, **Atomic Habits**. Making small changes in behaviour can yield amazing results. Breaking up a task to smaller portions or seeking help can also sort out this problem of postponement.

Please, not now, no time.

This is somewhat different from postponing or procrastination although it is also a reflection of an inability to strategize and prioritize. Here it is not a question of 'I'll do it tomorrow' but a matter of 'I can't take it up because I don't have the time'. This could create a feeling in us that we are overly busy, thus, side-stepping any issue of guilt. But the truth is, it could be because we are so wrapped up in social media that every time we tap into our phones, it may well be an hour before we put it down and take up something else. It could also be because of caring for the children and the elderly, doing routine chores to manage daily life, and taking on community responsibilities but if it amounts to having to 'keep running in order to stay in the same place', then we are not on any path to progress.

Can you see the nature of the patterns we are surrounded with and submerged in? I have listed a few from my experience. You can come up with many more. Where do you fit? Becoming aware is the first step toward change. Now, as needed, rewire and reset your approach and methods!

Know Your Concepts

Sharenting

The term Sharenting was apparently first used by the Wall Street Journal in 2010. The word is a combination of parenting and sharing, and refers to parenting that engages in the extensive sharing of the activities of their children on social media. Capturing 'cute' moments of children is not a new development. Some of our older members may remember the 'Kodak Moment' advertisements motivating us to record baby's first step, first day at school, and so on. But the sharing then was limited to family, friends, and the occasional baby show. Now this sharing is crossing ominous scales. Social media is provoking tremendous levels of oversharing targeting friends and strangers alike.

The risks are many and include

- *neglecting real parenting in favour of 'playing to the gallery' in pursuit of virality*
- *violating the child's privacy that can potentially vitiate adult relationships*
- *leaving permanent digital footprints that can impact the child's future*
- *enabling 'digital kidnapping' where a child can be passed off as theirs by adults who have no connection to the child*
- *stealing and morphing the child's image to portray behaviours not intended by the parents.*

When The Heart Feels It's Breaking

By Royina Mahanta

After completing her M.Phil. in Psychiatric Social Work **Royina Mahanta** is currently a Ph.D. scholar at the Department of Psychiatric Social Work, LGBRIMH, Tezpur, Assam.

Grief is a cruel kind of education. Grief doesn't begin the day a person dies. We begin to experience the loss even while the person is alive, and because our energy is focused on doctor appointments and tests and treatments, and because the person is still with us, we might not be aware that we've already begun grieving the loss of someone



we love. However, once the person truly leaves you, you learn how ungentle mourning can be, how full of anger. You learn how glib condolences can feel. You learn how much grief is about language, the failure of language and the grasping for language. You learn how nothing can ever fill the void that has been left by a loved one. The stronger your love for the person, the bigger the void is. Why are my sides so sore and achy? It's from crying, I'm told. I did not know that we cry with our muscles. The pain is not surprising, but its physicality is, my tongue unbearably bitter, as though I ate a loathed meal and forgot to clean my teeth, on my chest a heavy, awful weight, and inside my body a sensation of eternal dissolving. My heart – my actual physical heart, nothing figurative here – is running away from me, has become its own separate thing, beating too fast, its rhythms at odds with mine. This is an affliction not merely of the spirit but of the body. Flesh, muscles, organs are all compromised. No physical position is comfortable. For weeks, my stomach is in turmoil, tense and tight with foreboding, the ever-present certainty that somebody else will die, that more will be lost.

It is impossible to imagine what losing your father will feel like until the day you're forced to face your worst nightmare and the day you desperately prayed would never come, is here. When I was younger and I saw others in difficult situations where a loved one was very ill, I would earnestly pray and hope that I

would never have to be in such a situation. Truthfully, I wasn't sure I would be able to withstand the pain of seeing a loved one suffer. So, the evening that I got a call from my brother saying a tumour has been found in my dad's brain, it was the most brutal shock of my life. However, we tried to stay strong as a family and firmly believed that 'this too shall pass' and my father would come out stronger and better. It looked that way for a while, as my father bravely underwent a major surgery and went through several months of radiation and chemotherapy. Of course, it wasn't easy and he was in immense pain and had many horrible side effects and very little energy during that time. I felt so very helpless and powerless at the time because there was nothing we could do to ease his pain but just shower him with love and hold his hand through this ordeal. At the end of 6 long months, we went back from Guwahati to Delhi to get an MRI of his brain, all the while praying that the chemotherapy and radiation had worked and his condition had improved. Little did we know that the monster that had invaded his brain had only grown bigger and stronger all this while. When I saw the report, I was devastated. I had gone with my brother to collect the report and my father wasn't there, luckily. I knew the news would shatter him and I didn't know how to break it to him. When we met his neurosurgeon after collecting the report, his words stunned me into a state of complete silence. He said my father may have only 3-4 months left to live. I decided to not break the news to my father and mother immediately and thought we would let them know after a day or two. I was trying to delay the bad news in a desperate attempt to let him have a few more moments of ignorance about his current state so that he could enjoy these few days in Delhi with his family. Since my brother and I couldn't



bear to break the news to him ourselves, we took him to an oncologist who had promised that he would break the news to my father in as sensitive a way as possible. We regretted the decision the moment he started talking to my father. In all medical situations, a doctor is the person upon whom hope hinges and primary faith is placed. Never had I ever seen such an insensitive person who utterly lacked the compassion that is a core and non-negotiable quality for anyone in the healing professions, more so a doctor. He broke my father's spirit that day when he told him that if he did not take chemotherapy again, he would suffer irreparable neurological damage and would become bed ridden within weeks. It broke my heart to see my father having to hear those things and I don't think I can ever forgive the doctor for that day. We somehow made it home and eventually decided to start some treatment because we knew there was no other choice. However, since my father was already immunocompromised, he was in no position to withstand chemotherapy and became extremely weak and bedridden after that. Thus, began our grieving process as this was the time we slowly started losing my father as he gradually started losing his ability to walk and carry himself with the confidence that had come so naturally to him before this monster invaded his body. His beautiful radiating smile slowly disappeared and with it, all my happiness also vanished. The following months were filled with immense anxiety and fear as he had to undergo multiple hospitalizations. The first time that he was admitted to ICU was because he was in a coma. I nearly fainted in shock when the doctor said he may not get better, and kept crying the whole day. However, the next day, the doctor said he had improved and was also responding. It felt like a great weight was being lifted off my chest. Of course, he

slowly kept improving, being the fighter that he was, and within 2 weeks we brought him back home. Over time, getting dad admitted to ICU was something that became normal for us and no longer induced the extent of fear or anxiety that it did initially. This became possible only because I became hopeful and optimistic about my father's recovery and believed he could defeat this monster, the dreaded glioblastoma multiforme, being so very brave and resilient mentally and having a never-say-die attitude. I also had immense faith in my own prayers, continuous and intense. However, my faith in God was shattered when the doctor finally told us that my father was no longer responding to treatment and there were no further treatment options left. Things kept



getting harder after that and we knew that after stopping treatment, it was only a matter of time before his suffering and pain from this miserable illness would increase to an intolerable extent. The anxiety and the helplessness that we experienced is indescribable. My beautiful, angelic father in the two years, never once complained or cried out in pain, and suffered silently because he knew we would not be able to see him in pain and he didn't want us to suffer knowing he was in pain. I am writing about my father in the past tense, and I cannot believe I am writing about my father in the past tense. I still sometimes have the urge to tell people when they begin saying things like, 'He was so humble and kind and gentle', 'He was incredibly brave and he was a wonderful husband and a father and a teacher'.... I want to say 'Oh please, he **is...**, not he **was...**'.

Grief, I've learnt, comes in waves. When the ship is first wrecked, you're drowning, with wreckage all around you. Everything floating around you reminds you of the beauty and the magnificence of the ship that was, and is no more. And all you can do is be buffeted around in the choppy, dark, wreckage-filled

waters. You find some piece of the wreckage and you hang on for a while. Maybe it is some physical object. Maybe it is a happy memory or a photograph. Maybe it is a person who is also floating alongside you. For a while, all you can do is try to stay afloat; stay alive. In the beginning, the waves are a hundred feet tall and crash over you without mercy. They come ten seconds apart and don't even give you time to catch your breath. After a while, maybe weeks, maybe

months, you'll find the waves are still a hundred feet tall, but they come further apart. When they come, they still crash all over you and wipe you out. But in between, you can breathe, you can function. You never know what's going to trigger the grief. It might be a song, a picture, a street

intersection, the smell of a cup of coffee. It can be just about anything...and the wave comes crashing. But in between waves, there is life.

However, I am hopeful or at least trying to be, that somewhere down the line, I'll find that the waves are only 80 feet tall. And then 50 feet tall. And while they may still come, they will come further apart. I'll be able to see them coming. A birthday, a walk, or places, his favourite food, nature...there will be always be such triggers. But, hopefully I'll be able to see them coming, for the most part, and prepare myself. And when it washes over me, I'll know that somehow, I will, again, come out the other side. Soaking wet, sputtering, still hanging on to some tiny piece of the wreckage, but I'll come out.

I know this already. The waves will never stop coming, and I don't think I would want them to. But I hope that I have the strength to survive them. And other waves will come too. And I'll have to survive them too, because I am my father's daughter and he wouldn't want it any other way.

How can I change ?

By Shalini K Sharma

Working with Adolescents and Young Adults to prevent suicide

– a Psychiatric Social Worker's perspectives

Shalini k. Sharma, an alumna of St. Agnes and Roshni Nilaya, Mangalore, and NIMHANS, Bangalore, is an active learner of newer forms of therapeutic techniques, a trainer, invited speaker and a practising counsellor. She has headed counselling, welfare, training and placement at NMAMIT, Nitte, for three decades. Shalini loves working with late adolescents and young adults and has the reputation of creating a happy campus by designing and institutionalising several primary preventative programmes to ensure robust mental health of youngsters. This article was first published online in Daiji World on the occasion of Mental Health Day, October 10, 2023.

Every now and then we come upon the unfortunate reality of yet another student dying by suicide. Testimonies are given and taken, various people are blamed and trolled long before the police can carry out any investigation, and in no time at all, the tragedy of a family results in traumatizing a number of others who have often not borne the student any ill-will. As someone who has spent three happy decades in a professional capacity in academic institutions – with managements, teachers, adolescents and young adults – I know that it is well within reach for every adult to ensure that students feel safe and make progress in any given academic set up. In this article I have tried to distil from my own experiences how

this is possible, but before going into it, I would like to start with a few statements that I want all readers to ponder over.

- Every staff in any academic institution genuinely cares about the students placed in their care, and no staff ever wishes to see anyone dead, least of all through taking their own lives.
- Students who are disturbed do show signs and symptoms of disquiet even if they mostly come across as well-adjusted and cheerful. Although appearances can be deceptive, hindsight generally reveals a trail of signs that were missed or ignored.
- When disturbance is sensed, the most common reactions are to
 - (i) keep quiet
 - (ii) believe that there is nothing unusual because 'all people have ups and downs'
 - (iii) think of it as a phase that will pass
 - (iv) try to engage in other such avoidance behaviour.
- 'Never speak ill of the dead' is the axiom that kicks into action when tragedy strikes, which



is why almost all testimonies paint glorious pictures rather than realistic pictures of the person who is gone. This is what enables someone else – teacher, parent, partner, friend, employer – to be painted as the 'evil' person(s) responsible for the act of suicide.

I would like my article to be understood in the background of the above statements. It certainly is an honour to be a teacher, to be involved in the care of young people who look up to us for guidance and appreciation, to make their lives as students and our lives as teachers, worthwhile. The ways in which we can give it our best shot are what I have learned through my own experiences and those of my close colleagues.

More than 50% of our students are enrolled into courses not of their interest but because of circumstances. Despite this, many of them would be able to do better if encouraged. It would be unfair and inaccurate to assume and label students as dumb and unintelligent because they may not be equipped with math-logical intelligence as desired in an engineering school. Understanding that they are talented, if they are given the needed encouragement to deal with the demands of their course work through a multi-pronged support system of guidance, individual attention, and supervised peer-senior help, it would pave way for enhanced learning.

Our students come from diverse backgrounds and experiences and it is necessary to acknowledge that we do not know what they have been through before they reach our portals. We have observed that at any given point of time, over 50% of them experience some problem or other that affects their academic and social functioning. Our caring attitude may enable them to speak of their trials and challenges, and provide us with opportunities to help them or refer them suitably.

Adolescence and young adulthood are stages in life where a lot of the behaviour is dictated by what is generally referred to as 'the raging hormones' – wanting to break rules, wanting to assert, wanting to explore the physicality of relationships, and so on.

Looking out of her window the Warden saw just by chance two of her hostelers climbing up the steps of the water tank. Were they going to jump off from that height? She quietly went up behind them and saw that on the walled terrace on top, the girls were tangled with each other on the floor, hugging and kissing. They were shocked and distraught to see her. She just said, let's pretend none of this happened. Go down one after the other and we will never talk about this with anyone else. I am always available to you in my office. You are not doing anything bad but in general, there are always people who like to publicize, moralize, humiliate, and so on, so just let's make sure you are safe.

Besides that, children who have faced abuse, neglect and family dysfunction go through physical and mental health problems that plague them for life if not identified and sensitively dealt with. The reasons as to why a student behaves in what appears to be an irresponsible way is because of several factors that even they themselves may not understand. Professional counselling services need to be utilised at such times. As mentors, it is necessary to be both objective and compassionate to do our best for every student in our care.

The crux of the matter is this : Teachers in higher education institutes do possess academic qualifications to teach their subjects, but have not had an exposure to and understanding of normal and unusual adolescent behaviour, common problems faced by them and ways of addressing them, effective methods of teaching-learning in classrooms,

The teacher caught Shaiza and Tuffy kissing in the bathroom. She said what they were doing was absolutely bad. She asked that both go home right then, and both bring their parents to the office the next day. She talked and laughed about it in class. By the next morning Shaiza had hanged herself. Tuffy dropped out of school and went into a state of shock and depression, needing long-term counselling.

awareness of their expectations and what enables them to function at their best to be productive-useful citizens of this universe. This lack of understanding on the one side and unresolved personal problems on the other, is perhaps at the root of treating young people in our care with callousness by some of the teachers and administrators and their insensitivity when they break a rule or exhibit behaviours that seem challenging to us.

Effective criticism involves careful listening without judgement or evaluation. In place of exaggeration and generalisation, it would help to use descriptive communication to find acceptance as a fair and rational teacher. If a behaviour is found unpleasant, describe the behaviour and how that behaviour affects functioning. You may also indicate to students the consequences of that behaviour in a firm but gentle manner. One of the most important things to communicate to students is that you will not gossip about them with other teachers and students, and that you will not involve their parents and guardians without their permission and involvement.



We are however, required to break the principle of confidentiality employing wisdom, if the counsellee is suicidal or homicidal or is being sexually abused. It would do well for all of us to remember that the main cause of student suicide is public humiliation of the student, and so, committing to confidentiality and building trust are important to keep the student safe and on the path to progress.

Students expect that their teachers are friendly, knowledgeable, competent to deliver the subject matter inductively, ensuring two-way communication. The comprehension process is effective if the teachers cater to the learning styles of students by adopting teaching styles that have auditory, visual and kinaesthetic experiences for the student. There is nothing more valuable than 'learning by doing' thereby linking it to theory.

While we may not be able to help all students in need, it would help immensely, if we do all we can to help those we can. The truth is that we are constantly learning along with our students, from them, through them. Would we exist without them??

According to the 2020 figures, India has around 9,000 psychiatrists, 2,000 psychiatric nurses, 1,000 each psychiatric social workers and clinical psychologists while it is believed that for our population, we need 30,000 psychiatrists, 37,000 psychiatric nurses, 38,000 each psychiatric social workers and clinical psychologists.

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB)'s Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India (ADSI)

Report shows that over 13,000 students died at the rate of 35 + every day in 2021 with a rise by 4.5 % from the previous year. It was noted that 8+% were due to failure in examinations, which means that more than 91% student suicides are from causes other than failing. In 2019, the 18-30 age group accounted for 35.1% of suicides in India. This speaks to us of a

dire need for sensitivity towards youth. We have to remember that youth is the time of hormonal rush, of heightened emotions, of feeling the need to take risks and challenges, of being critical and questioning, and of chafing at all forms of restrictions and control.

While it is not possible to have full-fledged mental health professionals in schools and colleges, we can certainly invest in training the teachers in understanding adolescents and what pushes them to the brink of suicide, and introduce them to the basics of useful counselling skills and techniques and appropriate referrals, so that the loss of precious lives prematurely in professional colleges can be drastically brought down. Simultaneously it may be necessary to ensure that all teachers are equipped at the time of induction into a professional college with a minimum three month' orientation to adolescent

psychology, effective teaching-learning styles, life skills training and stress management.

The World Health Organisation has mandated that school children should be equipped with life skills of self-awareness, effective communication, empathy, healthy interpersonal relationships, creative thinking, critical thinking, decision making, problem solving, coping with emotion and coping with stress, that is, the full gamut of what is called **Social Emotional Learning (SEL)**. Surprisingly, when the students are questioned about it during their orientation in institutions of higher education, we have seen that over 95% of them at the post 10+2 level, have not had any exposure to it. It is necessary that school teachers learn and impart these skills effectively to students because any student who is exposed to life skills would not engage in self-harming behaviour unless perhaps impacted by a serious mental illness or severe pressures.

As a qualified Psychiatric Social Work professional, I worked at the NMAM Institute of Technology from 1990 and began the training of teachers and administrators in higher education at the State-

National levels through four-day learning and development intervention modules, having perceived the need to improve the lives of the students by empowering the teachers with basic knowledge, skills and attitudes to help the young people under their care. It was called '*Understanding our Adolescents, Prevention of Suicide and Introduction to Therapeutic Counselling for Teachers and Administrators in Higher Education*'. Nine such programmes were effectively conducted with a maximum of 50 teachers each time till July 2019 with the help of like-minded professionals who included Psychiatric Social Workers, Clinical Psychologists and Psychiatrists. After a gap of three years, this exercise with suitable modifications was shared with 53 faculty members/administrators and practising counsellors from 12 higher education institutes from the 18th of July to 21st of July, 2023 in NMAMIT and was again found to be useful by the very encouraging feedback that we have received. We feel gratified that we have influenced yet another batch of professionals who will carry it forward. The challenge is to ensure that all our teachers in engineering and medical schools have the advantage of such training programmes so that the students under their care flourish.



*Dying to say something relevant to psychosocial care?
Say it here! Write for the APSWP Newsletter!*