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THIS STORY IS FROM DECEMBER 6, 2021

How India's perception of mental health has changed

Ketaki Desai / TNN / Dec 6, 2021, 12:01 IST

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93% said that medication, therapy and counselling would be effective to manage mental illnesses.

In the last few years, the conversation around mental health has become more mainstream, with people talking more openly about their struggles. But how has this shift impacted the way in which Indians perceive and understand mental health-related issues? A nationwide survey conducted by LiveLoveLaugh sought to understand status changes regarding the knowledge, attitudes, and practices (KAPs) towards mental health. This is a follow-up to a 2018 survey, which enables an understanding of the changes in the last couple of years, particularly in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic wherein mental health challenges have only grown.

92% of those surveyed said they would seek treatment and support a person seeking treatment for a mental illness. This is a significant jump from the 54% who echoed the sentiment in 2018. 93% said that medication, therapy and counselling would be effective to manage cure/ mental illnesses.

Another change is the way the competence of those suffering from a mental illness is perceived – 65% of respondents, more than double the 32% back in 2018, believe that individuals with mental illness could hold jobs

and lead stable, healthy lives. 68% said that people with mental illnesses can have meaningful relationships with friends, family and significant others.

This research was conducted by Sattva Consulting, and 3,497 respondents from Bengaluru, Delhi, Guwahati, Hyderabad, Kanpur, Kolkata, Mumbai, Patna, and Pune participated between 5th August and 9th September 2021. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 45, and belonged to lower and middle-income groups. A limitation of the survey is that the batch of respondents in 2018 and 2021 were different.
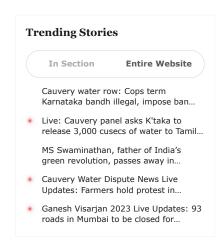
Mental health awareness has also grown, but only when it comes to specific illnesses. 96% said they were aware of at least one mental illness, up from 87% in 2018. Specifically, 77% were aware of depression, followed by generalised anxiety disorder (27%). Psychosis, substance abuse and PTSD followed. Lesser-known illnesses include eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, personality disorders and Autism spectrum disorders. This increased awareness was attributed to social media by 65%. Fifty six percent said they learnt from friends, and 48% attributed it to newspapers.

What prevents people from accessing mental healthcare, according to the respondents, is lack of access due to socio-economic conditions, the prohibitive cost of mental healthcare and stigma. Commenting on the need for better access, Dr Shyam Bhat, Chairperson of LiveLoveLaugh, said, "A reduction in the stigma surrounding mental health is very encouraging. People are becoming more knowledgeable about common mental illnesses like depression and anxiety. However, as the study shows, there continue to be major gaps in the understanding of conditions like schizophrenia, OCD, and childhood disorders such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorders (ASD), all of which are substantial public health issues. Then, there is the problem of access. Improving access to mental healthcare is a critical need and should be the focus of any planning discussions about the subject at every level of governance."

When asked about the causes of mental illnesses, 65% identified stress, followed by mood swings (48%), family neglect (40%), and traumatic events (39%). However, 24% and 19% of respondents continue to believe supernaturality and karma as key causes respectively. Only 17% of respondents acknowledged that genetic factors can also play a role.

How would respondents feel if a friend was suffering from a mental illness? 64% said it would make them sad and almost half (48%) would feel anxious. This is followed by shock (33%), fear (30%) and anger (9%). Three percent would feel shame and embarrassment respectively. These

emotions were further amplified if it were a family member suffering from a mental illness.

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