



# Address by the Hon'ble President of India Shri Ram Nath Kovind on the occasion of inauguration of the 21st World Congress of mental health

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- Union Minister of Science & Technology and Earth Sciences, Dr Harsh Vardhan
- Secretary, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Ms Preeti Sudan
- President, World Federation for Mental Health, Dr Gabriel Ivbijaro
- Chairpersons of the World Congress Dr Sunil Mittal and Dr N.K. Bohra
- Distinguished Guests
- Ladies and Gentlemen

1. I am happy to be here to inaugurate the World Congress of Mental Health, being organised by the World Federation for Mental Health in partnership with Caring Foundation and other institutions. Before me are one thousand delegates participating in this conference. I would particularly like to welcome the 300 odd international delegates who are representing about 50 countries.

2. I understand the World Congress is taking place in India and in fact in South Asia for the first time. This is a matter of pride for all of us. Frankly, it has come here at an appropriate moment. Mental health issues are acquiring a serious magnitude in our country.

3. The World Health Organisation reports that India has among the highest prevalence of mental illnesses globally. Our National Mental Health Survey 2016 found that close to 14 per cent of India's population required active mental health interventions. About two per cent suffered from severe mental disorders. Nearly two hundred thousand Indians take their own lives each year. If one includes attempted suicides, the number goes up substantially.

4. These are worrying statistics. It is also a fact that those living in metropolitan cities and those who are young – whether in the productive age group, or children and teenagers – are most vulnerable to mental illnesses. In India, both these factors are cause for concern. We have a young population, with 65 per cent of our people below the age of 35. And our society is rapidly urbanising. This leaves us staring at a possible mental health epidemic.

## Friends

5. Given the figures I have just outlined, it is an irony that 90 per cent of Indians in need simply don't receive mental health care. There are several reasons for this, and I hope they will be addressed in this conference.

6. The biggest obstacle that mental health patients have to encounter is stigma and denial. This leads to the issue being ignored or simply not discussed. In some cases it leads to self-diagnosis that is unsuitable or could worsen the situation. It may even lead to other extreme steps. As a society we have to fight this culture of stigma. We need to talk about mental health issues and treat ailments such as depression and stress as diseases that can be cured – not as guilty secrets that must be pushed under the carpet.

7. In this context, I am glad that advocacy and awareness are important components of the Government of India's National Mental Health Programme. This Programme is building 22 **centres of excellence** in the field of mental health. In parallel, the District Mental Health Programme has already covered 517 of the approximately 650 districts in India. It is taking the conversation about mental health to the grassroots of our society.

8. To spread awareness, it is important to build partnerships between the public and private sectors and between the government and civil society organisations. It would also be valuable to stitch together community support networks. In some measure, these can fill the gap being created by the gradual breakdown of the traditional joint family system – especially in our big cities. Sometimes this results in young people being left with the impression that they have no one to speak to, no sounding board and no informal counsellor. This could then become the first step towards depression.

9. A second major gap in combating the mental health challenge is that of human resources. India is a country with 1.25 billion people but just seven hundred thousand doctors – less than one million. In the field of mental health, the scarcity is even more acute. There are only about five thousand psychiatrists and less than two thousand clinical psychologists in our country.

10. This number is extremely inadequate and we need to act. Especially for the purpose of diagnosis of mental illnesses, it would be advisable to use physicians, psychologists who teach in colleges and educational institutions as well as Auxiliary Nurses and Midwives – who are at the frontline of our public health system across the country.

11. I am told Information Technology and telemedicine are also coming of aid. Such technologies are linking doctors and counsellors in cities to mental health patients in rural areas. As Internet penetration expands in our country, this holds much potential.

## Friends

12. I am glad to learn that in addition to advances in neuro-sciences – as well as our understanding of the clinical causes and treatment of mental disorders – the World Congress will also have sessions on yoga, meditation and traditional approaches to mental health. It is vital to tap into our wealth of traditional knowledge and link its learning to modern research on mental health. This will promote a holistic approach to mental health-care and can combine the best of different fields of practice.

13. The example of yoga is very instructive. When people talk about yoga, they generally refer to its physiological benefits. However, the mental, psychological, and cognitive benefits of yoga are equally worthy of our study. I look forward to receiving feedback on the deliberations of the special session planned on the role of yoga in battling anxiety and depression – and in preventing the onset of mental health problems.

14. In conclusion, I would like to re-emphasise that India's mental health challenge is capturing a society in multiple transitions. From traditional diseases, it is gradually non-communicable diseases that are emerging as a major threat to our people and their well-being. This is part of a worldwide trend. And many non-communicable diseases are either rooted in or associated with mental health issues.

15. All of that invests this World Congress with urgency. At the end of this conference, we should be closer to a time-bound programme that will ensure the quickest possible access to mental health diagnosis and treatment services for every person in need. All of you in this hall, and I include international delegates here, are stakeholders in this effort. You will be performing a genuine nation building and humanitarian task.

I wish you and wish the conference all success.

Thank you

Jai Hind!

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