

Imagine not being able to lift yourself from bed; having no interest in work, food or meeting people. What it would be like if you felt and genuinely believed that you have no future worth living for? Imagine feeling perpetually sad despite having a seemingly ‘good enough’ life.

These are some of the symptoms of an illness that people have just started taking note of: depression. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the number of depressive disorder cases recorded in 2015 was 4.5% of the Indian population. That translates to over 5.66 crore. What’s more, institutional mechanisms in India are grossly inadequate to handle these numbers: the country has only 3,800 psychiatrists.

Depression is such a common urban problem today that people discuss it on social media and at events at the same frequency as they talk about the weather.

However, mental health professionals and survivors believe it is time we move beyond just talk.

“When you are battling depression, the crucial first step is to understand and acknowledge that there is a problem. And when you do so, there is no need to beat yourself to it. Just think only about your well-being and reach out to whoever is willing to hear you out,” said Nandini Swaminathan, fashion blogger, Sartorial Secrets, who suffered from depression while pursuing a mass communication course in Puducherry in 2009.

The Delhi girl was slut-shamed for hanging out with guys and her choice of apparel. Back home, the family just asked her to “snap out of it.” “They never understood until they saw my struggle spiral out

of control. They accompanied me to a therapist. I have recovered, but still under treatment. Swaminathan observed that the IT city is filled with migrants like her who often feel a sense of loneliness arising

out of the rootlessness. According to the National Mental Health Survey 2015-16 conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (Nimhans), one in 20 people suffer from various levels of depression.

The crux of the issue, in most cases, is the absence of a listening ear. Look at the recent suicide of Bengaluru boy Arjun Bharadwaj whose last few Facebook posts were a desperate cry for help. Observing that 80% of mental health patients do not receive any care, Dr G Gururaj, HOD, Epidemiology, Nimhans, said, “There is a need to strengthen the entire health system to meet the existing demand.” He noted that schools and workplaces continue to dismiss and disregard people with depression, which is why there needs to be more open dialogue there.

Online mental health platforms are attempting to bridge this gap by offering security of anonymity. City-based mental health app YourDost clocks 1,800 counselling sessions per day, 20% of which come from Bengaluru. “Internet mental health services are not here to replace face-to-face communication but they also go to show there is a big need for counsellors. During the course of online sessions, we encourage users to stop fearing the stigma and reach out to their near and dear ones.”

Caregivers, usually family members or confidantes, do not have it easy either. “My mother had become a social recluse, she stopped communicating with her family and even tried to commit suicide. Her treatment for depression relapsed three times. We constantly lived in the fear of when she would attempt something drastic,” said Yale-educated paediatric cardiologist Sunita Maheshwari, who recalls the gruelling days when her mother suffered from severe depression. “We would never leave her alone at home. The worst was a feeling of helplessness. We did not know how to make her feel better.” Patience, support and medication

# BACK FROM THE BRINK

On World Health Day, **Divya J Shekhar, Nirupama V and Smita Balram** look at what it takes to push the narrative on depression beyond public sloganeering



## THE WAY OUT

**What you can do if you think you are depressed**

- Talk to someone you trust with your feelings
- Stick to regular eating and sleeping habits
- Accept that you might have depression and adjust your expectations in school or work
- Avoid or restrict intake of alcohol or any non-prescribed drugs
- If you feel suicidal, contact someone for help immediately
- Seek professional help – every major hospital has a psychologist or psychiatrist and there are online counselling resources
- Keep up with activities that you used to enjoy when you were well
- Keep in contact with family and friends
- Exercise regularly,

even if it is just a short walk

(SOURCE: WHO)



**What we need in our society is people with both empathy and knowledge on mental health.** We can all

contribute in a positive manner but lack of knowledge can lead to you contributing in a negative way. The role of gatekeepers (those who identify people with suicidal tendencies and reach out to them) is extremely important. You can take a workshop/training on how to identify those in trouble and how to talk to them

—**MANOJ CHANDRAN**, CEO, White Swan Foundation

has paid off and today Maheshwari’s mother leads a normal, healthy and productive life.

Single parent Yasmin Sait saw her 10-year-old daughter — who is now successful in her high-strung acting career — undergo depression at a time when the term was not a part of mainstream vocabulary. “As a caregiver, you must not make the patient feel that she has any illness. Be their friend and keep communication open. Be the calmer one and give constant reassurance and instill confidence.”

At the macro level, the way forward would be setting up of peer support groups where patients, caregivers and anyone interested can talk, listen to and understand depression. Alternative Law Forum’s Deeptha Rao, who is part of one such support group here, said, “Discussing mental health is personal. Unless there is an audience that listens without judging or discriminating, these conversations will not happen. Along with systemic hierarchical medical settings, informal support spaces are the need of the hour.”



## Mental Health Statistics

### WHO DATA

According to the World Health Organisation's 2015 figures, the total number of people living with depression in the world is 322 million – 18% more than it was a decade ago. The total cases of depressive disorders in India were **5,66,75,969 (4.5% of population)**

### NATIONAL MENTAL HEALTH SURVEY

Nimhans released the findings of the the first National Mental Health Survey last year. It found that



• **Nearly 1 in 20 people** suffer from depression and that 1 in 40 had suffered in the past

• **Depression** was reported to be higher among those residing in urban areas

• **Found to be** more in females

• **Depression and cancer** are known to coexist

• **Nearly 80% people** have not received any care

• **At its worst**, depression can lead to suicide, which is the second leading cause of death among 15-29-year-olds worldwide

• **Every year**, close to 1 lakh people commit suicide in India

### HOW TO TALK TO PEOPLE WITH DEPRESSION

**Don't trivialise** what they are feeling. Instead of asking them to cheer up and move on, empathise

**Don't joke or be sarcastic**

**Don't push them to talk. Let them know that you are willing to listen when they are ready**

(SOURCE: WHITE SWAN FOUNDATION)

**Don't blame them or be critical of their behaviour. Instead of statements like “I'm tired of you behaving like this” or “You'll never change”, give positive assurances. Basically, don't judge**



## ‘I was a Different Animal’

ET

By Invite



DANISH SAIT

2011 was a year of lows. As a 24-year-old radio jockey in Bahrain and Dubai, I hosted a show with a star presenter and constantly needed assurance and appreciation. Impatience and desperation to be successful drained me drop by drop into a state of depression.

I put on an insane amount of weight. Picking up a ringing phone next to me was a herculean task. Trashing a restaurant bill in the wallet was burdensome. Even taking off my shoes when I returned

home was laborious. The boarding school boy, who was adept at making his own bed, was now living in a pile of garbage. Taking the Metro ride was like climbing a mountain. I preferred the long taxi ride. At work I did nothing, literally. Deviation from my normal life was evident. In anger, I would break things. I was a different animal.

My sister, who was visiting me from India, sensed the dark waters I was wading in. She informed my mother: Our telephone conversations were marked with crying spells. My mother is a single parent. I wondered if she could support me if I quit my job and returned to India. I was lucky. Everything fell in place when I returned to Bengaluru.

I met a psychiatrist in Koramangala. I wrote affirmations on my bedroom walls. Battling depression is a double-edged sword. Knowing that I had a problem was half the battle won. Family support, on

the other hand, pulled me out of it.

I am happy to see people in the pop culture speaking openly about their depression battles, over social media. On the other hand, the Arjun Bharadwaj suicide case has compelled me to think how the basic essence of living is lost due to social media. There is so much angst on social platforms. Our children are exposed to negativity all day long. Parents need to communicate openly with their children. Schools and colleges must create a compassionate environment rather than drive students to excel.

Life is like a Youtube video. It may go viral or it may just have a limited audience. It is okay to have downtime. Optimise what you have. Value relationships. Family, that seemed uncool during the teenage years, is my all. You can commit a crime but you will definitely get a hug from your mother before you go to jail. Life is like a boxing game. You are going to get punched. The thing is to hit back, hard, and return with a bang.

(Sait is a radio jockey)  
(As told to Smita Balram)