



Seeking Answers

Good mental health may mean different things to different people. What exactly is it?

By VIJAY NAGASWAMI

As a practising psychiatrist, I have often been asked the question, "What precisely is mental health?" This has not been an easy one to answer simply because there is little general consensus on what constitutes good mental health. In fact it is easier to certify someone mentally unhealthy than healthy. I've heard it said that, if one feels the need to seek psychiatric help, one is not in sound mental health, and for many years this was considered axiomatic.

However, in the last decade and a half or so, I have seen a good number of people approaching me, not for treatment of mental ill health but for enhancement of mental health through psychotherapy. In other words, essentially normal persons without any diagnosable mental disorder, seem keen to better themselves and are willing to risk the stigmatising effects of seeking professional support to do so. I see this as an excellent development, not just because it keeps me busy, but because it is a sign that people are paying more attention to their mental growth and development than ever before.

So, this then brings us back to our original question. To many people, good mental health is the capacity to develop one's intellectual faculties. To others it represents personality development of the kind that is taught in the plethora of personality development workshops and training

programmes that have mushroomed in recent times. Still others think of it as a spiritual exercise and seek interventions from gurus and the like. To some, it represents professional success, and to others it means the ability to effectively manage stress. To the optimist, it is the capacity to be and stay happy, to the pessimist to stay mentally alive, and to the cynic to avoid unhappiness. The more one thinks about it and the more one reads about it, the more bewildering it becomes. So, what precisely is it?

Self-discovery

As I see it, mental health is not confined to any one of these things. To me, mental health means the capacity, interest and courage to always seek good mental health. To put it differently, the more answers we seek, the more we find out about ourselves, our relationships and the world around us. It is the act of seeking good mental health that keeps us in good mental health. Whether we figure out what precisely good mental health is or not, is hardly important. The process of seeking is. If we wait for the answers to drop in our laps, they are not going to come. We need to seek our answers within our own minds and our hearts, using outside assistance to navigate our minds whenever we hit a roadblock or bottleneck. The more unresolved conflicts we carry, the less mentally healthy we are. So, this is the

area we need to work on, if we are to experience good mental health. To initiate a process of self-discovery therefore, we need to understand the kind of equations our sense of self has developed to respond to the universe around us, the kind of relationships we consciously and unconsciously engage in, and what our dreams, hopes and aspirations are.

We also need to understand how precisely we are going to find all of this out. Do we meditate in the Himalayas till we get the answers? Do we read books that tell us how in seven, eight, ten or a hundred and one steps we can achieve good mental health? Do we attend workshops and retreats? Or do we flop onto our neighbourhood shrink's couch and talk about little red rubber balls that we lost when we were three?

Up until the end of the nineteenth century, until crusading mental health professionals like Emil Kraepelin, Eugen Bleuler, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and other such persons with flowing beards and severe faces destined for sepia prints in oval frames, blazed scholarly trails, psychiatrists were generally referred to as 'alienists', an appropriate term considering how much they, along with the sufferers they were attempting to heal, were alienated from the social mainstream. In later years they came to be known as headshrinkers, later fashionably abbreviated to shrink. For those not in the know, the term headshrinker owes its origins to the shamans and witch-doctors who allegedly used their fabled magical powers to shrink the heads of those who threatened them and their societies.

Today, however, the term 'shrink' has entered popular parlance and despite its unprepossessing origins need not be a pejorative reference, unless accompanied by a snigger. However, the fact still remains that psychiatrists are still considered a pretty quirky lot, necessary for others though not for

yourself. Today, not just psychiatrists, but psychologists, psychoanalysts and psychotherapists (anyone who can lay legitimate claim to a prefix of 'psycho') are referred to as shrinks (the alternative term 'mental health professional', is unfortunately too wordy and doesn't roll off the tongue quite as smoothly). What they all share in common is a professional commitment to enhance mental health, help resolve psychological conflicts and generally heal traumatised psyches.

Psychotherapy

I am not suggesting that a visit to a therapist is the only way to enhance mental health. I would recommend psychotherapy only when, in the pursuit of one's mental health, one hits a speed-breaker. Otherwise, one can use that most wonderful of inventions that has led the Universe to shrink — the Internet, provided one has figured out a way to filter out the psychobabble and toxic waste that it also unfortunately stores. Or one could visit the self-help sections of our nearest bookstore. For many years, The New York Times' bestseller list, a weekly guide to millions of readers in the United States and many other parts of the world, has listed bestselling books in two categories — fiction and non-fiction.

However, in recent times, the editors have found it expedient to create a third category called 'Advice', which lists self-help books on a variety of subjects. The truth is, we all need help and advice, whether it's on cookery, gardening, adoption, relationships or healing the soul. However, expecting people to achieve good mental health by reading books would be foolhardy. What I do expect will happen when one reads a self-help book is that, it could well be a very vital first step in moving out of the victim mode that most of us fall into when faced with a crisis, to a survivor mode that gets us out of emotional quagmires.

From where I sit, it certainly does appear that more people are seeking, and therefore experiencing, good mental health today than ever before. This column is being written in order to provide a few pointers to those intrepid people who, having initiated the pursuit of good mental health, find themselves bogged down in the quicksand of information overload.

I propose, over the coming fortnights, to explore various facets of mental health and relationships in the different social domains that we live in. I will also be reviewing some self-help books in these areas that have caught my attention. And in the process, I am hoping to understand a little better myself, what precisely good mental health is.

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