

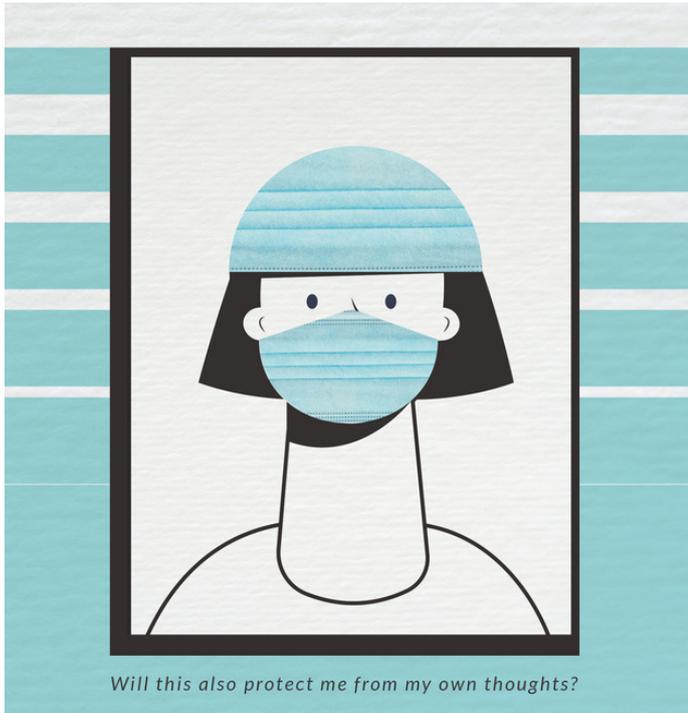


Azim Premji
Foundation

DIALOGUES

A NEWSLETTER FROM CONVERSATIONS-
CENTRE FOR POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH
AND WELLBEING

JANUARY 2021 • ISSUE 1 • VOLUME 1



Artwork by Rachita Master (MAD2020)

MENTAL HEALTH AND THE PANDEMIC

A very warm welcome to all of you from the Conversations team! We are kicking off 2021 with the inaugural issue of our quarterly newsletter 'Dialogues'. The theme for this issue is 'Mental Health and the Pandemic'. The year 2020 was dominated by COVID-19. The pandemic proved challenging for everyone. Many members of our community have shared their personal experiences and the ways in which they have coped with this unprecedented and uncertain situation. You will find articles, poetry and artwork by the students, faculty, staff, and all of us from the counselling team. Happy reading!

Wish you all A Very Happy New Year 2021!

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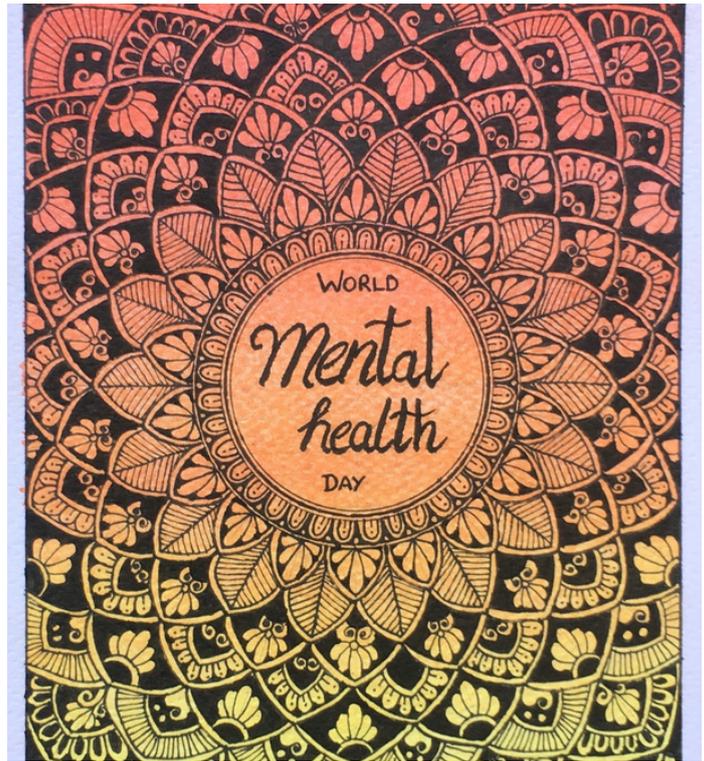
CONTRIBUTIONS FROM STUDENTS & MEMBERS OF AZIM PREMJI FOUNDATION

ISSUES IN MENTAL HEALTH

by *Prema Raghunath*
(Azim Premji Foundation)

It is a platitude to say that COVID has changed the world both individually and severally. The words unprecedented and unparalleled have been used ad nauseam because we do not know what else to say and there is a sense of being overwhelmed by a faceless enemy. At the outset, we all thought that it would go away- in a month, well, three months...yet here we are nine months later, as much at sea as at the start. It has been a testing experience and while some have managed to come through seemingly unscathed, some others have hit rock bottom. This applies particularly to those who have actually contracted COVID, or have seen family members getting ill, even dying, of it.

There are four aspects that that have been most disruptive in this situation: loss of livelihoods, breaks in education, changes in family dynamics and isolation. Disruption to familiar ways of life can be stressful, especially when, as in this case, they are thrust upon one. No one had planned for any of these situations and yet immediate solutions had to be found.



Artwork by Viba K S (MAE2019)

LOSS OF LIVELIHOODS

The images of people, especially children, walking back to their villages and hometowns will take a long time to be erased from our collective memory. Their trauma was palpable and the sheer unpredictability of not knowing how it was, or is, going to end has created untold distress. The one important thing for everyone who took this route was - being with family, in a place they knew and felt safe in. It was an instinctive, basic, gut reaction, like running to higher ground in a flood.

BREAKS IN EDUCATION

This has affected older children more than young ones, some of whom haven't seen so much of their parents and are actually quite happy about the situation. However, older children are in a state of great anxiety: about their future, over not meeting their friends, of not being able to talk to other distanced adults such as their teachers, about not having access to smart phones or the internet and even about getting married off early. This is particularly true of girls who are also made to do housework if their mothers go out to work. I know of girls who have been pulled out of school and made to join their mothers as home helps or vegetable and flower sellers. Even in homes where parents are supportive, children do not have the guidance they need. They have to work it out on their own.

CHANGES IN FAMILY DYNAMICS

I work with a few girls' schools and am painfully aware of the abuse they face and have to constantly stave off in their own homes. Neighbors, stepfathers, uncles, even grandfathers who, it must be admitted, are also in a bad place, are all scary predators and complicit in these arrangements are mothers who have no choice, except to get their daughters married off. I call it a change in family dynamics because when the girls had school to escape to, there were other adults who kept them safe; tests and homework, though not valued in and of themselves, were good excuses.

Being the victim is bad enough but being ever available to tease and torment is worse.

ISOLATION

There are several kinds of isolation and all of them, except self-imposed ones of the kind Pico Iyer speaks about as being cathartic and expanding, are lonely. Added to this are the several restrictions that the lockdown imposed. All reasonable and accepted forms of entertainment, amusement and relaxation being out-of-bounds has resulted in either heightened emotions or anti-social behavior. So, family fights, squabbles over petty things escalating into violent fights, suicide attempts, drunken disorderliness have increased.

Then there is the isolation of COVID itself. Persons who have tested positive have been marked out and ostracized. Zinc sheets are routinely placed to cordon off areas and homes with COVID positive cases. Then if a family member is hospitalized, the isolation on both sides is terrifying. The infected person is in ICU with almost no contact with her family and those at home are numb with worry, fearing the worst.



I have spoken about situations that are very common, ones that we could all find ourselves in. Mental health, like all other health issues, is only as strong as its weakest link. How we tackle the ongoing low-grade depression, that most of us are going through, as a result of constant surveillance against falling ill, or the depression that arises from actually being affected by one of the above aspects, is just a hit-and-miss affair. Unless we have vibrant counselling options in place, this pandemic seems set fair to leave most of us in need of help.



भय इथले संपत नाही

- राघवेंद्र वंजारी (Azim Premji Foundation)

मानसीक ताणतणावाचा इतका भयंकर त्रास मी यापूर्वी कधीच अनुभवला नव्हता. मनाला होणाऱ्या वेदना शरीरावर कोणतेच लक्षण दाखवत नाहीत. परंतु त्यांचा परिणाम आतून बाहेरून किती खोलवर होतो याचा अनुभव याचीदेही याचीडोळा मी विलगीकरण कक्षात घेतला. लॉकडाऊनचा काळ संपल्यावर विद्यापीठाच्या कामासाठी मी पुन्हा बंगळुरुला आलो. आल्यानंतर एक महिनापर्यंत निरोगी होतो. एके दिवशी रात्री अचानक अंग तापून आले. कामावरून पीजीवर परतल्यावर खूप थकल्यासारखे वाटलं. काही करण्यात मन रमत नव्हते. दोन दिवस मी मलाच समजवू लागलो कि कामाच्या धावपळीमुळे माझी दमछाक होत आहे. तिसऱ्या दिवशी कामावरून आल्यावर मला तसच जाणवू लागले. सकाळपर्यंत माझा थकवा कमी झाला नाही. मी जवळच्या इस्पितळामध्ये धाव घेतली. डॉक्टर सौम्य लक्षणावरची औषध लिहून दिली. परंतु परिस्थितीत फारसा बदल झाला नाही. उलटपक्षी मला सर्दीने घेरलं. नाक वाहू लागल आणि घशाची खवखव नव्याने सुरु झाली. मी कासावीस होऊन पुन्हा डॉक्टरांना भेटायचं ठरवलं. यावेळेस मात्र त्यांनी “कोविडची चाचणी करून घ्या”, असा सल्ला दिला.

विद्यापीठाने कोविड व्यवस्थापनाची समिती गठीत केली होती. मी संबंधित सहकार्यांशी संपर्क करून सारी हकीकत कळवली. त्यांच्या सल्ल्याने मी वागू लागलो आणि एका नव्या धावपळीची सुरुवात केली. घश्याची व नाकाची नमुने घेण्यासाठी प्रयोगशाळेचा माणूस माझ्या राहत्या ठिकाणापर्यंत येवून नमुने घेण्याची सोय असल्याने मला दिलासा मिळाला. संबंधित प्रयोगशाळेशी तात्काळ संपर्क केला. त्यादिवशी मी ग्रंथालयातून काम करत होतो. परंतु डॉक्टरांनी मला कोविड चाचणी करून घेण्याचा सल्ला दिल्याक्षणी तिथून निघून आलो. हीच माझ्या भीतीची आणि काळजीची पहिली पायरी होती.

आज ताप उतरला होता. प्रसंगावधानाने मी शेजारच्या खोलीत जावून राहिलो होतो. जरी मला प्रादुर्भाव झाला असेल तर इतरांना लागण होऊ नये यासाठी. नमुने तपासणीसाठी प्रयोगशाळेत गेले. ४८ तासामध्ये त्यांचे निष्कर्ष कळणार होते. मी खूप अस्वस्थ होतो. काय होईल? रिपोर्ट काय येईल? पुढे काय कराव लागेल? या चिंतेत तो दिवस खूप लांबलचक होता. नाक कोंडल्यामुळे मी पाण्याची वाफ घेत होतो. कोंडलेले नाक मोकळे व्हावे यासाठी गरमपाण्यात व्हिक्स टाकले आणि वाफ घेऊ लागलो. पण मला त्याचा वास येत नव्हता. मी गोंधळलो. बाथरूममध्ये जावून साबण हुंगलो त्याचा दर्प जाणवला नाही. अंगाच्या घामाचा गंध येत नव्हता. लक्षणे मला एकामागून एक घेरत होती. रात्रीच्या जेवणाच ताट माझ्या समोर आलतर ताटातल्या पदार्थाची कसलाच खमंगपणा जाणवेना. मी सगळे पदार्थ खाल्ले पण एकाचीही चव जाणवली नाही. माझ्यासोबत खूप गंभीर काहीतरी घडतंय अस मला जाणवू लागल. एकामागून एक लक्षण मला समजू लागली आणि मी अधिकच खचू लागलो. दुसऱ्यादिवशी दुपारी एक वाजता मला इमेल आला आणि मी पूर्णतः कोसळलो. माझी कोविड चाचणी पॉझिटीव्ह होती. मनात विचारांचे काहूर माजले होते. आता काय करायचे? कुठे जायचं? काय इलाज करावा? विद्यापीठाच्या कोविड समितीने सांगितलेले दिशादर्शक मी पाळत राहिलो. दरम्यान चाचणी करणाऱ्या प्रयोगशाळेने महानगरपालिकेला याची माहिती पुरविली होती.



कोविड चिकित्सा केंद्र मोठ्या गजबजलेल्या शहराच्या मध्यभागी असले तरीही ते एक वेगळेच विश्व होते.

सोबत असणाऱ्या सगळ्यांनाच कोरोनाचा प्रादुर्भाव झालेला होता. सगळ्या वयांची लोक इथे होती.

महिला व पुरुषांची वेगळी व्यवस्था असली तरीही प्रत्येकाच्या चेहऱ्यावर एक निराशा आणि तणावपूर्ण भाव पाहायला मिळाला. माझ्या मनाची बेचैनी घालविण्याचा प्रयत्न करण्यासाठी मी शेजारच्या बेडवर असणाऱ्या माणसांशी संभाषण प्रस्थापित केला. त्यांनी सांगितलेल्या माहितीने मी खूपच आश्चर्यचकित झालो. ते म्हणाले, “इथे कुणीही आमच्याकडे लक्ष देत नाहीत. जेवण कमी दर्जाचे दिल जात. आरोग्याची फेर तपासणी केली जात नाही. खूप लोकांची तबियत कालांतराने खालावते. घरी थांबलो असतो तर फार उत्तम झाल असत. पैसे असणारे लोक खाजगी दवाखान्यात उपचार घेतात पण गोरगरीब कुठे जाणार ?”

मी असे नकारात्मक अभिप्राय ऐकल्यावर नाराज झालो. चिंतेने पुन्हा पुन्हा झोपी जात होतो.

आरोग्याची योग्य निगा राखली जाते म्हणून याजागी आलो तर तसं होत नाही का? मी सुद्धा बरा होवून घरी जाणार नाही ! या भीतीने माझ्या मनात घर करत होत. मनातच मी रडत होतो. मी या अवस्थेत आहे हे माझ्या आई - वडिलांना समजले तर ते किती चिंताक्रांत होतील. त्यांना माझ्या हालतबद्दल फार दुःख होईल. तशा अवस्थेत कुणाला भेटायलाही परवानही मिळत नसे. या विचित्र परिस्थितीत केवळ मी माझ्या सोबत होतो.

माझा एकांत मी स्वतः घालवावा याचा निश्चय केला. परंतु दररोज तिथले लोक मला अधिकच भीती घालवत होते. कोरोना बाबतीतचा जनमानसातला गैरसमज चुकीची माहिती यामुळे संबंध परिसर दुषित होता. कुणीच सकारात्मक बोलत नव्हत. चार दिवसानंतर थकवा कमी झाला होता. वेळच्यावेळी भूक लागत होती. झोप येत होती परंतु चव आणि गंध मिळत नव्हता. त्याहून अधिक मानसिक तणाव मला छळत होता. विलगीकरण कक्षात येताना कपड्यासोबत एक पुस्तक, माझी डायरी आणि कोऱ्या कागदांचा दस्त आणला होता.

पुढील उपचारासाठी माझ्याकडे दोन पर्याय होते. एक म्हणजे मी माझ्या खोलीतच राहून यावर मात करावी. दुसरी म्हणजे महानगरपालिकेने निर्दिष्ट केलेल्या कोविड केंद्रात उपचारासाठी दहा दिवस मुक्कामी राहणे. एकामागून एक दिसणाऱ्या लक्षणांना लक्षातघेता मला आरोग्य खालावताना जाणवू लागले. पीजीमध्ये जेवणासाठी, पाण्यासाठी एकाच ठिकाणी जावं लागत. तेथे संसर्गाचा धोका दाट होता.

रात्री-अपरात्री त्रास वाढला तर कोणाला बोलावं? काय कराव? या भीतीने मी सरकारी इस्पितळात जाण्याचा निर्णय घेतला. पीजी मालकाचा निरोप आला कि “तुम्ही रुग्णवाहिका पिजीपर्यंत आणवू नका. तुम्हीच रस्त्यावर जा आणि तिथून बसून जा.” कारण इतर लोकांच्या संशयित चाचण्या आणि विलगीकरण कक्षात राहण्याच्या भीतीने मला हि सूचना आली होती. मलाही काहीअंशी योग्य वाटले. रुग्णवाहिकेच्या चालकाशी विनंती करून मी हे साध्य केले. आयुष्यात पहिली वेळ मी रुग्णवाहिकेत बसलो. चालक सौरक्षित परिवेशात होता. मी मात्र पाठीवर दप्तर, हातात कपड्याची पिशवी आणि तोंडावर मास्क लावून मुकाट्याने गाडीत बसलो. गाडीचा सायरन सुरु झाला. कोणत्याही सिग्नलची व नियमांची तमा न करता वाहिनी सुसाट वेगाने दवाखान्याकडे रवाना झाली. मला रडू फुटले. मी खूप घाबरलो होतो.

गाडीतला स्ट्रेचर, ऑक्सिजन टाकी, तुफान वेगात धावणाऱ्या अॅंब्युलन्सला आसपासचे लोक अशा विलक्षण नजरेने पाहतात कि बसस ! त्याचं वर्णन करणच खूप कठीण. ते सगळे माझ्याकडे बघत आहेत असे मला दिसत होते. केवळ तीस मिनिटात स्टेशनच्या आवारात असलेल्या सरकारी आयुर्वेदिक महाविद्यालय तथा चिकित्सा केंद्रात पोहोचलो.

एकांतवास आणि मानसिक दुर्बलता घालवण्यासाठी वाचन करू लागलो, व्यंगचित्रे काढू लागलो, लेखन करू लागलो. इतकेच काय तर कोविडच्या मानसिक तणावातून बाहेर यायला अंकगणित सोडवू लागलो होतो. तो काळ माझ्यासाठी अतिशय कठीण होता.

अखेर विलगीकरणाचे दहा दिवस संपले. ज्या दिवसाची मी आतुरतेने वाट पाहत होतो तो दिवस उगवला. अक्षरशः मी दिवस मोजत होतो. माझ मन आतून म्हणत होत कि धावत धावत बाहेर जाईन आणि जगाला सांगेन कि “कोविड पेक्षा जनमानसात पसरलेल्या चुकीच्या माहितीमुळे या आजाराचा जास्त त्रास होतो.” रोग्याने कोणाच्या म्हणण्यावर विश्वास ठेवावा? सरकारच्या? सोबतच्या रोग्याच्या? डॉक्टरच्या? WHO च्या? कि ICMR च्या? कोरोना विषाणूपेक्षा अधिक गंभीर परिणाम याच्याशी संबंधित गैरसमजीमुळे अनेकजण या आजारातून लवकर बाहेर येत नाहीत. मी तरुण असल्याने कसा बसा बाहेर पडलो. पण जे वृद्ध आहेत, गरीब आहेत पूर्व आजाराने पिडीत आहेत त्यांनामात्र कोविडच्या आजारापेक्षा मानसिक आजारातून सावरणे या काळाची गरज आहे.

English translation

FEAR DOES NOT END HERE

by Raghvendra Vanjari (Azim Premji Foundation)

translated by Swati Jadhav (MAD2019)

I had never before experienced such trouble due to mental stress. The pain caused to my mind did not show any physical symptoms. But I experienced its deep effect inside out in the isolation room.

After the lockdown, I returned to Bangalore for university work and was healthy for a month. One night, suddenly, I had a fever and felt very tired, after returning to the PG from work.

For two days, I was assuring myself that I might be exhausted due to the workload.

When it continued for the third day, I ran to the nearby hospital. The situation did not change much even after the doctor had prescribed medication for mild symptoms. Instead, I was suffering additionally from a cold. With a runny nose and a sore throat, I decided to visit the doctor again. However, this time he advised me to do the COVID test.

The University had constituted a committee for the COVID management. I contacted the concerned people and informed them about the whole situation. I was relieved after knowing about the facility of having a lab person come to my place to take the samples. I contacted the concerned lab immediately. I was working from the library that day. But as soon as the doctor had advised me to do the COVID test, I went back. This itself was the first step of my fear and anxiety.

After a day, the fever seemed to have reduced. I went to stay in the neighbouring room as a caution so that



others don't get infected even if I am infected. The results were going to come after 48 hours. I was very distressed. *What will happen? What will be the result in the report? What will I have to do next?* The day was very long due to these worries. I was using a vaporizer to relieve my blocked nose by putting Vicks in hot water. But I was not able to even smell that water. I got confused. I did not feel any taste of the food that had come for my dinner. I began to feel that something very serious was happening with me. One by one, I was becoming aware of my symptoms and I was feeling very demotivated. The following afternoon, I received the results and I collapsed. My COVID test was positive. My mind was full of racing thoughts. *What to do now? Where to go? What must be the treatment?* I was following the guidelines given by the university's COVID committee. Meanwhile, the testing lab had informed the municipal corporation.

I had two options for my further treatment. One was to stay in my room and the other was to stay for ten days at the COVID centre. I began to feel worse as I was experiencing all the symptoms one by one. In the PG, we had to go to a common place for having food and water. *Whom to call if my pain increases at night? What to do?* Due to this fear, I decided to go to the government hospital. The owner did not want the ambulance to come to the PG, so I had to wait at the end of the street. For the first time in my life, I was sitting in an ambulance. The ambulance siren

began and it rushed to the hospital without paying heed to any signal and rules. I burst into tears. I was very scared. The stretcher in the ambulance, the oxygen tank and the people on the streets looking at the speedy ambulance with a strange look, everything is very difficult to describe.

Even though this COVID centre was in the middle of a big crowded city, it was a different world in itself. Everyone here was affected by COVID. People of all age groups were here. There were different arrangements for men and women but everyone had a frustrated and nervous face. I tried to have a conversation with the person next to my bed to calm my mind down. I was very surprised by the information he gave. He said, "No one here pays attention to us. The food is of low quality. There is no re-examination of health. The condition of many people gets worse over time. It would have been much better if I had stayed home. The people who have enough money can go to private hospitals for treatment, but, where will the poor go?"

I was upset and anxious after hearing such negative feedback. *I came here to receive proper health care but, won't go home cured!*



This fear was occupying my mind. I was thinking how anxious my parents would become if they knew about my situation. I am not even allowed to meet anyone. I was alone in this odd situation.

People were spreading misinformation, so I decided to be alone. My fatigue was reduced after four days. I was feeling hungry from time to time. I was able to fall asleep but I was still not sensing any smell or taste. More than this, my mental stress was bothering me. While coming to the isolation centre, I had brought a book, a diary and a bundle of blank pages along with my clothes. I started reading, drawing cartoons and writing in order to get rid of loneliness and mental weakness. I had also begun solving arithmetic problems to do away with the mental stress. It was a very difficult time for me.

Ten days of isolation finally ended. The day I was waiting for had finally arrived. I wanted to go out and say, *More than the disease itself, the problem is intensified by the spread of misinformation. Who should the patient trust? The Government? Other patients? Doctors? WHO? ICMR?* There are more serious consequences of the misconceptions in comparison to the coronavirus itself, resulting in many people not getting well early. I was young and hence somehow managed to get cured. However, the old, the poor and those who are suffering from pre-existing illness need more time to recover from this mental illness than the COVID illness.

AND THE LONGING CONTINUES

by Sariya Ali (Azim Premji Foundation)



My dearest, it has been a year since I saw you last, since I met you and touched you and that feeling which I could savor when you kissed my forehead and pressed my hand telling me, "We will meet soon". Months have gone by and I am still looking forward to that 'soon' to happen. I guess this is a feeling which most of us have been going through during the pandemic, that feeling of missing the physical warmth, the warmth of a loved one! With a forced confinement during the pandemic lockdown, a lot of people got stuck quite far away from their families, friends, lovers, and because we have the gift of virtual technology that seeing the person on the other side of the screen gives some kind of psychological satisfaction.

A kind of calmness, amidst all the reported counts of deaths, that at least that person still exists, safe, healthy and alive. But things have not been as simple as reading here, in hindsight of all the happenings, mis-happenings and virtual reality security, mental health struggle has gone up. With isolation termed as 'social distancing', living alone has not been easy, especially the fact that not everyone is in a space where being able to connect with each other is possible. For me, this experience made me slip into a pool of deep overthinking, even getting through the days and staying afloat seemed impossible.

The pandemic has been like a forced mirror reflection, during which my involuntary introspection has kept me wondering about all the things which are very hard to see during a busy life. Having spent a few long nights and uneasy days in the same bed inside the four walls, I was constantly dwindling between my thoughts as a negative and positive contributor to the human race collectively. As an individual, I tried identifying the needful decisions one needs to make keeping in mind the objectivity of uncertainties and their subjective impact. In all of this struggle, longing has been the one emotion which has personally affected my mental peace making me slip into constant anxieties. There is this silent experience you go through during which your sweaty palms and numbness in the head just wants you to reach to the person whom you have been longing for. Nevertheless, the state of action remains helpless and the longing continues.

More than anything what I am taking away from the pandemic is the value of human beings in physical space. I do not know if my mental health would have been better if times were normal, but definitely passing through anxieties has always been easier with the ones you want to share it with; those who you don't have to tell explicitly, but would understand just by seeing your pale face, divided attention, or just with the fact that you passed a half-hearted smile. Reaching almost towards the end of 2020, many of us are still in this state of longing, spending each day in hopes of better days; if you are not one of them, cherish each moment you have been blessed with, share your joy and your pain, share it with the one where each day has been worthwhile even under the rain!

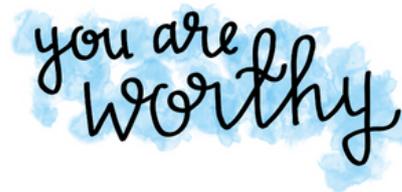


✧ self-care stickers ✧

2020 was terrible. For a multitude of reasons.
 But hopefully these less-than-perfect stickers bring you some joy.
 You can print them out and stick them where'd you like.
 (Also, if you actually do end up using it somewhere, I'd love to see it).



look out the window



Pro-tip: While cutting them out, they look better with a white outline.

Also, hey, go easy on yourself.
 ~Meenakshi Pradeep (2nd year, BA Econ)



Artwork by Viba K S (MAE2019)

A TALE OF PHASES

by Anagha Ann Thomas (MAD2020)

At first, I humbly acknowledge my privilege of having a safe place to live during the pandemic and adequate financial buffer to meet my needs, while there were many others for whom the pandemic and lockdown was much more of a bane.

Shut inside our homes, quarantined, being physically safe (to an extent), made us more vulnerable to mental health issues. For some the already existing situation aggravated, for others new dimensions popped out, and for some these issues were new. Altogether each of our quarantine stories are different and also valid.

No work and no classes; 2020 was quite empty in terms of engagements for me, so, the pandemic lockdown and quarantine implied being at home doing nothing. Online courses, re-building old hobbies and picking up new ones were all trendy, but nothing lasted long. There was too much time to feel things deeply- the guilt of not doing anything creative or productive, anxiety of the pandemic and sadness. This led to more thinking, or maybe overthinking, along the same lines of thought. The whole lockdown period at home went in phases. Being engaged in creative activities, feeling active, catching up with friends followed by days of curling up and doing absolutely nothing, then days of being overwhelmed with guilt and anxiety. It was a cycle which kept on going. It was also a time when mental health felt more real and personal. I understood that being aware of mental health issues feels very different from actually “experiencing” a near real mental health issue. Until then, the term anxiety attack and panic attack were just terms, but after going through almost an anxiety attack, the term got life and depth. (Thankfully by God’s grace, my mother and my cat were there to pull me out of it). It became such a revelation to know that these issues aren't actually very far from us, are common and could reach us anytime without notice.

The quarantine mental health stories of each person are nuanced by a lot of internal and external factors. A lot of external factors trigger in addition to the internal complexities.

Bombarded with news and, also false news; sharing space with family that seldom understand the importance and in some cases, the existence of mental health issues; home being an unsafe place, especially domestic violence adds to the mental health complexities.

As innate human traits, we look for ways to survive and for the silver linings. Getting professional help is the most important aspect. Normalizing mental health issues and perceiving it the same way we do about any physical illness is the need of the hour. It is also extremely relieving to talk about our mental health concerns with friends who have gone through or are going through the same. Shared experiences (even though not exact) helps to feel more at ease. Venting out our thoughts and feelings is healthy. Writing to let out overwhelming thoughts and feelings is one form of venting. It is nothing but a trial and error method to find what works best for us and what makes us feel light. And the biggest learning is to accept your feelings and to allow them to be felt. A time when not much happens, is often associated with 'being stuck' and much effort is put to resist it. And this adds stress. Accepting our dark days and knowing that we will come out of it is important. Of course, all this is easier said than done but all we can do is to be mindful and live one day at a time!



HOME COMING AND WHAT FOLLOWED

by Jayati Banerjee (MAD2019)



When the first case of COVID-19 was detected in India, around the end of January, I remember talking to my worried mother over a phone call, assuring her that I was safe and there's no need to worry. Fast-forward to March, I found myself hurriedly looking at tickets to return home before the prices surge higher than usual. A week later, I was home to my worried parents. Prior to the lockdown, we saw people frantically buying groceries, stocking up on essentials. I couldn't understand why people were going crazy, neither could I bring myself to think more about this because everything around me was changing so drastically. It was hard to grasp the reality and live in it. I had no idea about how unsettling the upcoming months were going to be and how badly it would affect my mental health.

The next very distinct memory I have is the PM announcing a lockdown for 21 days.

The numbers kept on increasing exponentially since the lockdown began, the atmosphere created by the uncertainty of the situation was really grave. People were desperately trying to wrap their heads around what was happening and so was I. Simultaneously, pictures of migrant workers and their families walking, trying to reach home surfaced and the sense of an emergent humanitarian crisis affected all of us and made us question our privileges again and again.

Until this point, I hoped things would go back to normal soon. I had left almost all my belongings back in the hostel, like many others, in the hope that it is 'only a few months'.

The first few weeks went into trying to acquaint myself with the new routine, getting used to being around the parents took a long time. Accepting the confines of the home as it is, has been difficult for me, especially this time, adding COVID-19 to that. The conversations which were a part of my every day suddenly changed, and started to feel different. They had a flavor of worry, uncertainty and sexism casually fused into it. At first, I tried to fight it but later realized that I was fighting years and years of ideas fueled by a male-dominated society, which wasn't that easy. But I haven't given up yet!

The lack of a routine made it difficult to wake up every day just to be stuck in time. I then realized how much I long to go back to the old schedule, the classes, the assignments, and everything.

Soon enough the hope of going back became fainter. The challenge now was to accept that and get on with my life. I wouldn't claim that I have quite accepted the idea yet but I have worked my way around it.

Another part of being home was the rampant body-shaming which became a part of day-to-day conversations. I would be called out for gaining weight during the lockdown because I was 'sitting at home and doing nothing' and 'eating too much'. I was angry initially. But the good thing that came out of this was that I embarked upon a journey of accepting my body, I found a lot of courage, strength and peace just by acknowledging my body for what it is and that it is worthy of being accepted and celebrated. I made peace with the fact that I am not perfectly built, neither do I want to conform to the god-awful standards set by society. Now I eat when I want to, portions depending on how large or small I want them to be. I have mustered up the courage to stand up for myself and what I believe in, more so during the lockdown; which I believe is one of the biggest positive outcomes of the lockdown due to the pandemic.

Of the multitude of things that happened in 2020, coming home was challenging, yet a very important experience for one's personal growth. The challenging circumstances made us question and reflect on our every day and reinstate the importance of accepting reality by slowly making sense of it, in one's own time.





A moment ago, I was part of your future.- As you read this, I am quickly becoming part of your past. But in this moment, I strive. I strive so that each one of us feel the same. Lately, I've turned to rather unlikely places in need of a conversation- not without being pleasantly surprised though.

Dear windowpane,

I think I understand you a little better now. You've been on the inside all your life. The just-beneath, the in-between, the almost-but-not-quite. I'm sorry I overlooked you. I was too busy looking over you. To the bright shiny lights outside. Despite the saying, so many of us still believe most of what glitters is gold. Was, at least. But I need your help now. Tell me how you've been, what you've been doing all your life to remain sane, dear windowpane.

They all used to say a windowpane life is no way to live. To watch, to dream, to hope, to despair vicariously. To be an arms' length away from everything that's glittery.

Not anymore. We're all living a windowpane life. That's the only way to live now.

Let me begin by saying thank you. Thank you for holding my cup of coffee when I couldn't. Thank you for letting my groceries rest on you before I find the motivation to put them in their place. Thank you for not complaining about getting soaked when I leave the windows open during the rains. Thank you for letting me pretend that my life is a music video as I sit on you for hours at a stretch. Sometimes, I think I'm going mad, turning to a windowpane for answers. But I've stared outside the window long enough to know that I need to talk to something inside. I will be very happy if you talked to me, maybe over a cup of coffee?

Yours,
Manasi

Letter to a human (a reply)

Dear human,
Your letter warms me, as do your cup of coffee and yourself.

I'm going to let you in on a little secret: The window and I are good friends. The window doesn't think of me as beneath it, as I don't see the window above me. Sure, outside is where all the brighter lights are, but inside: there's so much more.

There's drama. The conversations, the fights and apologies.

There's work. The *jhadu*, *pocha* and dirty utensils.

There's emotion. The sighs, 'I'm home-s' and goodnights.
Take it all in while you have the time.
The outside will catch up soon enough.

I only have one complaint- the window just doesn't get my humor.
Now that you're here, you and I can share some inside jokes (*over a cup of coffee maybe?*)

Oh also leave the window open, I quite enjoy an occasional shower.
Woman please, clear out your groceries, woman.

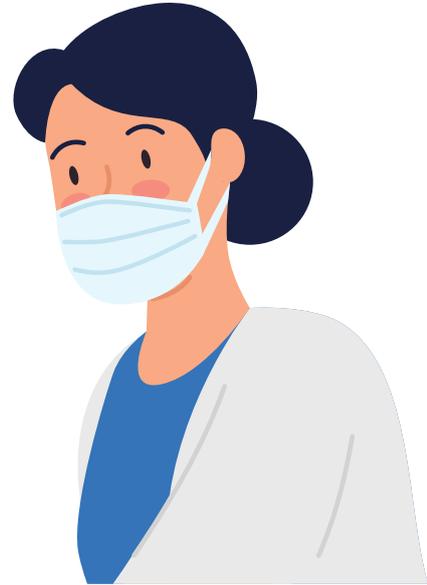
Yours,
Windowpane



Artwork by Viba K S (MAE2019)

MY LOCKDOWN EXPERIENCE (HOW I MAINTAINED MY SANITY)

by Nikhita Agrawal (MAD2020)



At the stroke of midnight, on the 24th of March, when the whole world slept, India went into a nationwide lockdown due to coronavirus. Like many other fellow citizens, I found myself stranded, away from the physical comfort and safety of a family. So, the initial few days went by with me coming to terms with the fact that I have to navigate an extra-ordinary, unprecedented lockdown on my own. Staying and managing things alone were new to me; I have been moving cities for years now. But this wasn't akin to anything experienced before. There was a sense of palpable fear and wariness all around me. The early days of the lockdown resulted in additional chores and sleepless, distressing nights- affecting my emotional and mental well-being.

Thus, I decided to engage myself with things that will keep me happy and hence made a few lifestyle changes. I picked a few new and some old activities to keep myself happy and peaceful. Here are the things that helped me during the lockdown:

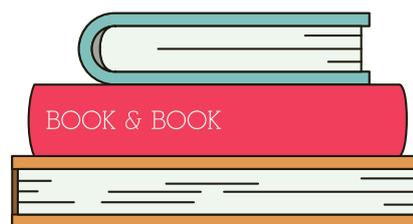
- **Cooking-** Since cooking became the most crucial part of our lives during the lockdown, I used the time to curate many one-pot meals for myself. The fun part was sharing and exchanging the photos and recipes of our creations on WhatsApp family groups.



- **Video and phone calls** with family and close friends was the greatest solace. It provided me with much-needed emotional support during such trying times. It kept us connected, giving comfort that we are all in this together, and this too shall pass.



- **Reading-** I devoured one book after another. I read almost all those books which were lying untouched since the time I bought them months ago. The books gave me an escape into a world free from coronavirus-induced anxiety and stress.



- **Meditation & Yoga** came as a bliss, maintaining both my physical and mental health.



- I learnt a new craft- **Origami**. Creating beautiful pieces added joy and colour to the otherwise dull lockdown life.

The whole experience was a life-altering process. I became more aware of my privileges and vulnerabilities. It took a pandemic for me to realize the importance of emotional and mental well-being. And how you can be the best companion for yourself. All we need to do is to understand what makes us happy and find the time for it in our 'busy' lives.



THE SILENT PANDEMIC!

by *Tanisha Venkani (MAE2019)*



About a year ago, our lives changed completely. For better or for worse, you decide. But our lifestyle has changed dramatically. It's because of the Novel Coronavirus or COVID-19 as we call it. Everyone has been taking precautionary measures in order to keep themselves fit and not get the infection.

Now, I am not saying that one should not take precautions or not try to stay fit. I am saying that this isn't the only pandemic in today's times. There's a silent pandemic, equally worse if not more than coronavirus. I am talking about mental health issues.

Of late, terms such as 'therapy' or 'counselling' is trending and everyone seems to be talking about mental health – on social media, during peer conversations and what not. Yes, we cannot deny that we are a more aware generation than ever before in terms of taking our mental health seriously. But there are gaps nevertheless.

In this essay, I will talk about my reflections around mental health in India, especially during the pandemic. I have had an opportunity to interact with psychologists, psychotherapists, and mental health activists to understand the subject better and educate myself. I must say this before I start, that I am not a mental health professional and therefore in no way an authority on mental health advice or authentic knowledge. Anything that I say in this is not an advice but mere opinions and reflections.

One of the natural responses to real-life situations like COVID where you are at a great life risk is fear. Most people are fearful about themselves during the pandemic. A drastic change in lifestyle only adds to this condition through anxiety, a feeling of loneliness, loss of jobs leading people into depression, and not being able to socialize. It is also not news when I say that social media is already affecting our youth's mental health. With the pandemic, everyone is spending most of their time on social media, which is contributing to their deteriorating self-worth, confidence, and lack of motivation. Studies have shown that people have reported having mental health issues all over the world. The major issues that were reported were stress, depression, fear, insomnia, and anxiety. We must also not forget that many people lost their lives to suicide because of the pandemic and their existing mental health struggles, or economic struggles.

There are interventions at all levels to look after people's mental health

including regular awareness sessions and counselling. Most of them are picking up speed with the online mode.

Why am I talking about all of this? Because the rate at which our mental health is deteriorating is alarming. And if anything, we must educate ourselves and seek help when required, or at least keep our mental health in check at regular intervals. COVID-19 showed us the importance of keeping fit and physically healthy. Let this also be a wake up call to keep ourselves mentally fit and healthy. Below are some of the things I learned while talking to mental health professionals and activists, and here are some helpful tips that they offered:

- If you think you're struggling with your mental health, it does not make you weak. Things will get better, it won't be like this forever. Seek help. Talk to the people you trust and tell them how you feel. Reach out to a mental health professional if you need it. It's absolutely fine.



- You need to separate the problem from yourself. Understand that you are not the problem. For example, you can say that you have depression rather than saying you are depressed and attaching the label with your identity. Such self-talk really helps you think that if the problem is not a part of your identity, you can work on it and eventually overcome it.
- When someone is sharing their mental health issues with you, really listen to them and try to look at things from their perspective. Empathy goes a long way.
- Showing your emotions or crying does not make you weak. It is an essential part of being human. It's okay to cry and let your emotions out.



COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

by Rijuta Kulkarni (MAD2020)

STORYTIME!

Showing gratitude is an essential value to imbibe; it takes you a long way! Whenever I'd receive a gift from a family member, my mom would compel me to thank them over a call (text was not allowed). It made me appreciate more, look at the good in people and situations. It works wonders for your mental health and overall well being!

POSITIVITY DURING THE PANDEMIC? HOW COME?

Be it people clanging utensils in their balconies, banging drums, singing patriotic songs or lighting up diyas—these little gestures created an atmosphere of joy and positivity during the lockdown. The pandemic has compelled us to introspect and reflect on every aspect of our lives profoundly.

Managing work from home to the household chores has been mentally excruciating due to self-quarantine. Yet, nothing feels more relaxing than enjoying a hot cup of coffee in the balcony, noticing the changing colours of the sky! However, these testing times have made us more thoughtful, kinder, more observant and more thankful towards our domestic help, the milkman, the newspaper guy, the *laundrywala*, the *bhajiwala*, the waste pickers. Yes, we miss those dinners, parties, chai dates, college days and

going out for drives but have you noticed how the frequency of communication with our dear ones has risen? Pulling us closer than ever before! The pandemic is making us all more grateful towards the little things in life.

WHAT IS GRATITUDE?

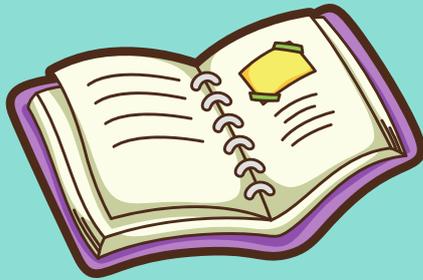
The secret of living a contented life. A beautiful way of seeking happiness in what we have than what we lack. It is about appreciating and valuing everything we have. It helps us to see the goodness in life, be it people, things, opportunities, situations etc. People feel more positive, have good experiences, improve physical and mental health, face challenges with ease, and cultivate healthier relationships. It is commendable to want more, achieve more, strive for a better life and keep progressing. But once in a while, pause for a bit, look back and be proud of the milestones covered. It would help if you reflected on how much your accomplishments mean to you.

During these times, we realize how millions of Indians around are struggling to make ends meet, starving, trying to keep a roof over their heads or facing multiple hardships while returning to their villages. This tells us how we are living in better situations with the best of resources. However, everyone has their own set of issues across class, caste, gender, race. etc. but one must be grateful for the availability, accessibility and affordability of the most basic needs.

COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS (CONT'D)

HOW TO BE MORE THANKFUL

1 GRATITUDE JOURNALLING



Jotting down everything we are grateful for regularly, in a small diary, propels us to see the goodness in our lives. Feel free to a visually appealing look! Add this to your daily night time skin routine! A little nourishment for your mind.

2 THANK YOU NOTES



Paste those post-its which come in cute shapes, colours and sizes OR tiny cards thanking someone for a specific thing that meant a lot to you.

3 CALL/ TEXT



That joy of receiving a call from your childhood friend after several months is inexplicable. The moment you'll catch up, you feel nothing's changed. Feels great, right?

4 GIFT AWAY

Let's agree that a bouquet or a box of chocolates with a handwritten note makes us all feel special!

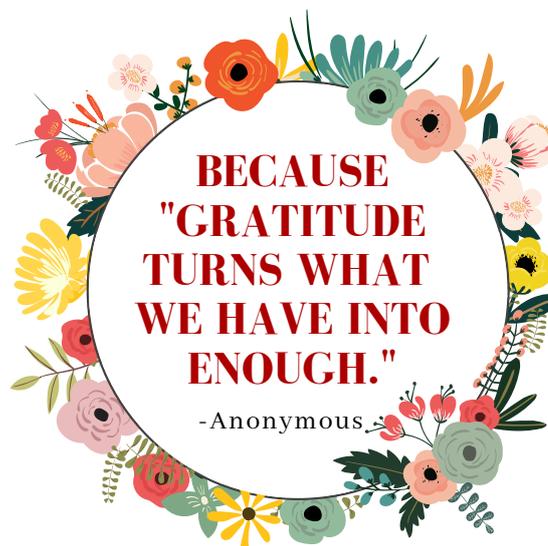


5 AN APPRECIATION POST ON SOCIAL MEDIA



We know the many disadvantages of social media, but why not make it a safe space to be kinder and more appreciative. Posting a photo/video/simple note of acknowledgement can mean so much to that person. So ready to make someone's day?

Remember, our lives change at a very fast pace. We experience so many highs and lows that the destination ends up being the ultimate goal, but why not embrace the journey - the lessons we learnt, the people we met, the rewards we earned!



As soon as the lockdown was announced it was not easy to cope. Uncertainty lasted for months altogether adding to fear and slowing down.

Reflections of moments interacting with students in a nut shell is as follows.

I EXPRESS

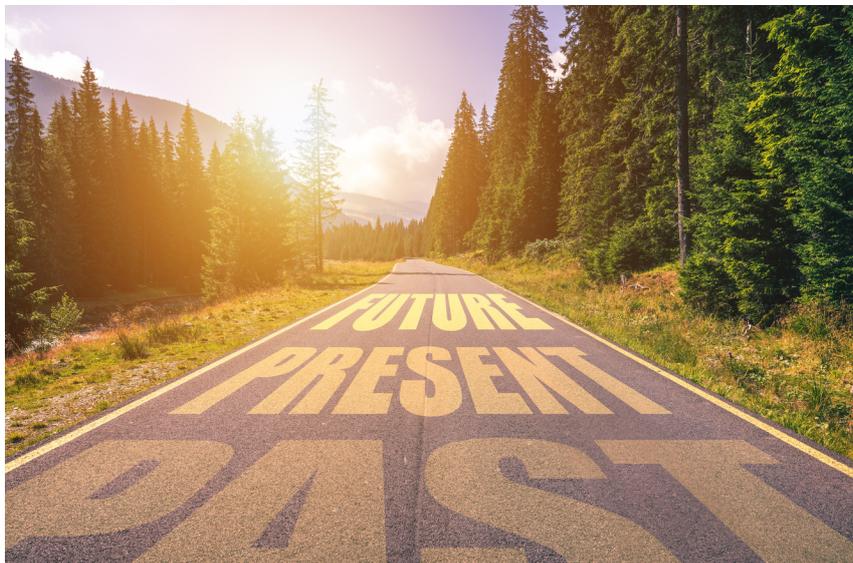
The window is new home.
 The wanderer has got
 Some space to breathe,
 But not settled in heart.
 Breathing in uncertainty
 Puzzled,
 Are things falling into place?
 Or out of place?
 Anyway,
 The gypsy must move on
 Bags already packed up
 Just waiting for the siren.
 To travel and find new windows
 Until settle in peace.



MY DILEMMA HAS WORDS

Low about the past hopeful about the future
Which to listen -the history or the future?
History reminds me of the voids
Future aspires to be great
But it has not come yet!
Many say that the future has numerous possibilities, so think of the best
Then only will you get best.
But what about me, where is I in me?
It took years for me to realize that I present in the PRESENT.
Then what is the dilemma I am talking about.
Yes, the dilemma lies in present.
My present is ambitious in the head, but fearful to act.
It happens at every moment I live.
I don't know what the fear is about, but it is there in my feelings, in my heart, since the first day of the LOCKDOWN.
It has made my heart a blue ocean.....
But now there is some light.

The blue ocean in my heart is becoming deep, calmer, and bright
Unconditional love is poured from the universe.
The higher power continues to sustain my present life
I still feel the blue at times.
In short, my present, the I in me is the process of the becoming.....
So, it has the dilemma.
Dilemma of what I would become
How I would become
Would I become really?
As I said Its ambitious in the head, but fearful to act.
It happens in every moment I live.
But by the grace of the higher power I sail through it.
I survive.....
To enter another such present- Ambitious in the head, but fearful to act.....





VEDA'S VISUAL VERSES

AS JULIA CAMERON ONCE SAID, "ART OPENS THE CLOSETS, AIRS OUT THE CELLARS AND ATTICS. IT BRINGS HEALING."
 WELCOME TO A SPACE WHERE I EXPLORE MENTAL HEALTH THEMES AND CAPTURE EXPERIENCES THROUGH ART AND POETRY!

284 DAYS

Of living in this new normal.
 Time bleeding
 like water on ink, sinking
 into the pages of the calendar.
 One day, two days, three days, four.
 A week, a month...
 and then one moment, I realized
 I was not counting anymore.

How long until...? How long?
 Waiting for turbulences to smoothen,
 living in the reality of screens
 for work, for love,
 for everything in between.
 Eyes adjusting to the 'almostness'
 of granulated faces.
 We must make do, at least we have these pixels
 and echoes of sound
 to remind ourselves we are not alone.
 We must continue
 for work, for love,
 for everything in between.

And in that between,
 a despondence settling in.
 Unpacking and un-layering itself
 on the bedroom floor.
 Hanging in the air,
 wafting through the door.
 How long are you visiting? How long?
 Please leave. Go on...

I know not where it'll go
 or who it'll visit next,
 but I cannot entertain this guest.

For I must go on.





SWATI'S STORYBOARD

WAYS OF COPING FROM THE COMMUNITY

The community was invited to share ways that they coped with the pandemic. This was an invitation to share their stories, but also share ways that could be a document of resources for other people to use. Broadly, this is split into categories for your perusal. Feel free to borrow from these ways, and keep adding to your list! 😊

KEEPING OCCUPIED WITH THE EXTRA TIME

- Consciously building a new routine
- Drawing, singing, writing, dancing, music - working on skills
- Following video tutorials on arts and crafts
- Practicing yoga and meditation
- Time for reflection - discovering strengths and working on weaknesses
- Learning new skills (eg. new language)
- Making YouTube videos
- Catching up on: books, movies, TV shows
- Cleaning the house

COPING WITH THE DIFFICULT TIMES

- Taking up extra work and keeping busy to distract oneself
- Therapy
- Journaling everything going on internally
- Listening to calming music
- Crying it out
- Conscious periods of time-outs with electronic gadgets
- Long walks, cycling, working out
- Accepting the reality of the situation
- Acknowledging the difficult situations and emotions
- Holding onto the idea that battles fought during the lockdown will prepare one for any adversity to be faced in the future
- Thinking "This Too Shall Pass"
- Reminding oneself that this isn't the end of the world
- Shunning the idea of being productive all the time
- Remembering our privileges
- Hoping, wishing, praying for the best to happen
- Dialoguing with younger children on what is happening out there

WAYS OF REACHING OUT

- Sharing about your day and listening to friends speak about their experiences - on a daily basis
- Catching up with friends from hometown after the Unlock period
- Exercising together with friends through Zoom - staying active and connected
- Watching weekly movies together as a family
- Younger children being the oxygen to elder people within the family, with their spirit and talking them out of negative thoughts.
- Neighbourhood-watching and connecting with neighbours
- Helping all the older people in the neighborhood by getting everyone's medicines and recharging everyone's phones online.
- Got together all the neighborhood's children and families living abroad to do a video call with the neighbourhood, showing their grandchildren's photos and videos
- Working with children who do not have access to formal schooling at a time like this
- Volunteering with service organisations
- Feeding stray animals around the house - receiving love from them
- Expressing emotions through Instagram/Facebook posts - helped connecting with people and having healthy conversations around the posts.
- Thinking of and for each other within the large family of multiple generations
- Spreading smiles and laughter through engaging with family and friends
- Showing care for one another within family and friends

POSITIVE

STORIES

- Writing on an online portal - community responds with love, support and feedback
- Huge learning experience - developing empathy and gratitude for the comfort of having meals, a safe home and sleep
- Hope and confidence when one connects with people and has conversations with them
- Large family of 3 generations keeping a check on each other.
- Visiting one's hometown after ages and inadvertently spending months together - a reunion with one's childhood-neighborhood and family!

**WE WOULD REALLY LIKE TO THANK
THE FOLLOWING PEOPLE AND
MORE, FOR THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS:**

**SAMEER
SAYANTANI
VIBA
PENDYALA
VISMAYA
MANISHA
GAUTAM
SOWBHAGYA
SASWATI
SAMYUKTHA
SARAS
SWATI
RAJAGOPAL
SREEPRIYA
ADITHI
AATHIRA
SIVA
AND OTHERS**



LESSONS FROM THE SPANISH FLU

A HUNDRED YEARS OF SICKNESS

The COVID-19 pandemic saw a paradigm shift in global dynamics in a way no living person saw before in their lives. The widespread panic, mistrust, and anger, apart from health affected millions and changed how we see everyday life. Almost exactly a hundred years back in time, we saw another pandemic, deadlier than COVID, but perhaps lost in the sea of historic amnesia.

The inappropriately named Spanish Flu was first reported in summer of 1918, in Madrid, coinciding with the last few months of World War I. It killed at least 30 million people (with some historians believing the number to go as high as 100 million), and infected one in every third person in the world. Ironically, the flu did not originate in Spain; due to

media blockages and censorship in the USA and other European countries, it was first reported in Spanish media, misleading people to believe that the disease originated from there. There was no cure or vaccine, and advanced virology was not a thing yet (the cause was falsely attributed to bacterial infection initially). Predictably, apart from failing physical health, the flu also saw a surge in rising mental health conditions, the facilities and treatments for which were dangerous, under-equipped, and outdated.

More people died from the flu than they did because of World War I (which at the time, ironically, was called 'the War to end all Wars'). The majority of lives claimed were of young soldiers, which not only contradicts the general norms of epidemics (which usually claim the elderly more), but also explains the rapid spread of the virus in a short span of time. The War had heightened emotions all around the globe, which led to people not caring about the disease at first, which initially presented itself with treatable symptoms. The lack of news coverage for the disease induced a pattern of denial in the general population, which prompted them to initiate large gatherings, contradictory to the suggested measures, such as social distancing, wearing face masks and isolation (despite the clear cause not being known then). In a classic case of déjà vu, several anti-mask leagues were formed, calling the safety mandates '*an infringement on their personal rights and freedom*'. The authorities did not help, with several city council leaders and

mayors (especially in the US) spouted bigotry by blaming the disease on the immigrants, or that it was a German-made disease. Panic was widespread; people feared the disease to be not just the end of life, but human civilization. Morgues were crowded, and people dying in their homes were left unattended.

Back then, because psychiatry and psychology were in their infancy stages of development, there were no proper terms for the disorders, and no concrete treatments. The pandemic saw a sharp spike in suicide cases around the world, and 'delirium' and 'fear of persecution' was comorbid with the flu symptoms. Samuel West, a British physician, reported the depression that followed the flu to be so common and constant that *'it ought to be regarded as part of the disease'*. Severe fatigue, sleeplessness, restlessness, neuroticism, hallucinations, and even dissociation all followed the physical aspects of the disease. Psychiatric wards were getting overfilled, and especially considering the time in history, they were cramped, unhygienic, and inhumane, leading to death from preventable diseases such as tuberculosis and cholera.

The most puzzling part about the entire pandemic, which is the most important lesson to be learnt here, is how quickly the Spanish Flu was forgotten. For more than 60 years, it was not in public memory and rarely talked about. Multiple reasons can be attributed to this, ranging from the destruction caused by the World War I, to the emotional trauma the disease caused in the public, to the fact that time preceding and succeeding the flu was filled with significant events, such as the World War, Russian Revolution, The Great Depression, and so on. Since then, modern science and decades of research has drastically improved how we view and treat mental health conditions. This current pandemic, though, has exposed the global infrastructure (or lack thereof) of the mental health facilities that every country needs for its citizens, especially India. With less than 1 available psychiatrist for every 100,000 people, and even less psychologists, we lack the facilities to address the basic mental health requirements of the country, let alone for a pandemic. This is an opportune time to regurgitate the age old saying; *those who don't learn from history, are bound to repeat it.*



LAKSHMI'S LENS



TAKING A LOOK AT THE MIND-BODY CONNECTION

CONNECTING IN A CONTACTLESS WORLD

To connect, to belong, feel safe and secure are basic human needs which are under threat and being challenged during the pandemic. The year 2020 has transformed our collective understanding of “connection” and “security”.

As the world around us has dissolved into epidemiology, clinical features, transmission patterns, and social distancing due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we are realizing the value of interpersonal relationships and a far deeper, and probably more important one: the intra-personal connection—being in touch with your own body, mind, and spirit. We need to build a stronger, more conscious, mindful internal network.

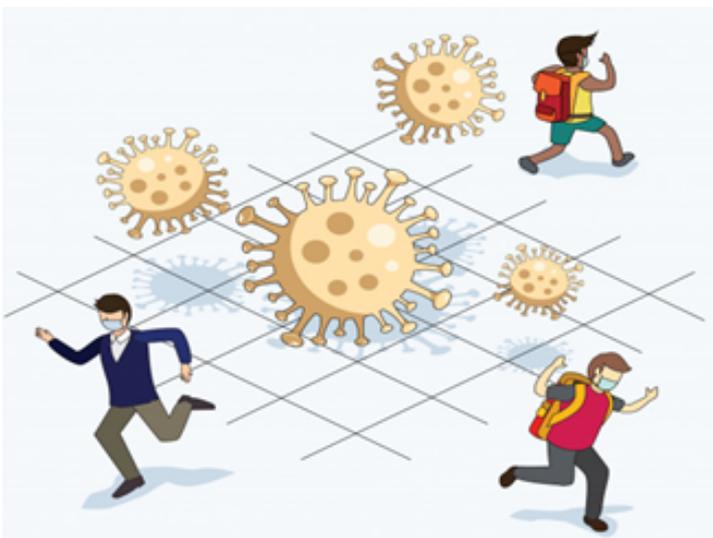
The healthcare crisis around us has forced us to confront the uncomfortable reality that distress and discomfort in one aspect, leads to distress and discomfort in the whole being. We are forced to take accountability for our mental health by addressing our physical health and vice versa. Our brains regulate the functions throughout our body, therefore, it would help to understand the lines of communication between the two.

“Uncertainty” and “unprecedented situation” have been the buzzwords of this pandemic. What does uncertainty mean for the human body? Our ancestors faced threats in the form of predators and physical danger to their lives. In our modern, civilized society, we have real or perceived, psychological threats and not much physical danger. In situations that are harmful and threatening to our being, our brain’s automatic, protective mechanism or the ‘stress response’, is triggered by the autonomous nervous system, to deal with potential threats and danger. The stress response is a kind of default protective response that pushes our body into action, irrespective of the kind of threat. Our brain does not differentiate between physical and psychological threats.

Most modern-day threats are psychological. Physical dangers are usually acute and of shorter duration, whereas, psychological threat is ongoing and for prolonged periods. Earlier, we were more efficient at regulating the response to keep our bodies ready for battle. In recent times, (even before the pandemic), the advent of modern technology, unhealthy lifestyle and

increasing pressures of the, “go-getter culture”, severely affected our ability to regulate this otherwise helpful biological system, putting many in a constant state of stress. This has been further exacerbated by the current pandemic. According to Aoife O’Donovan, (Associate Professor of Psychiatry at University of California, San Francisco), “prolonged activation of the biological stress response can have toxic effects on the brain and the rest of the body, increasing risk for both psychiatric disorders and chronic physical diseases”. This includes a severe decrease in immunity, ironically, making those with severe anxiety around COVID-19 much more susceptible to contracting the virus.

We are social beings. Due to the fear of contamination and the pervasive lack of safety, our social interactions have changed and severely reduced. In the words of psychotherapist Philippa Perry, “we are all becoming non-persons”. Our fear of physical contact has stopped us from enjoying the simple joys of interactions, like, greeting friends with a hug, visiting elderly family members,

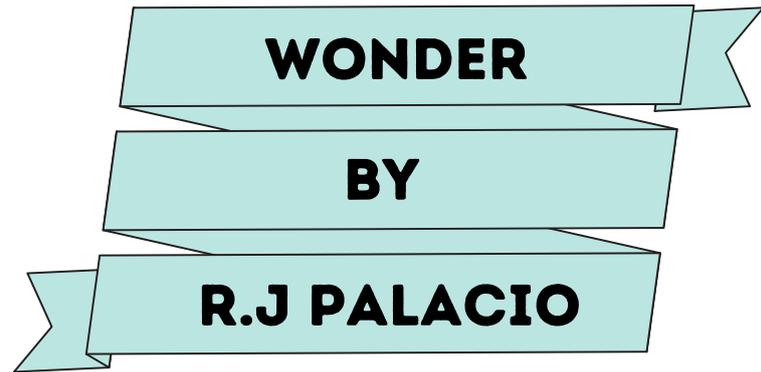


interacting with our colleagues at the workplace, or just going out and being among people. Even grocery shopping is a scary proposition. This is taking a toll on our emotional health and is registered as “rejection” by our brains. We are wired to experience a complex neurological reward system in response to interpersonal connections and touch that helps the body by reducing cortisol (the stress hormone) levels and increasing oxytocin (the hormone that plays a role in love and bonding) in the brain. As a result, much of our ability to regulate our own emotions (especially anxiety) are heavily dependent on “co-regulation” or physical contact with other living beings to regulate our breathing and “feel good”. This is a theory most often used to support “skin to skin contact” for infants and the use of emotional support animals in adults with anxiety and depression. Without touch, we’re not just lonely, but also far more anxious and could experience large scale post-pandemic stress disorder (a variant of PTSD) according to O’Donovan. Is it possible to still connect in a contactless world?

Technology is the answer. During this unprecedented social crisis, connecting with each other, even virtually, and having conversations about our thoughts, fears, situation, would go a long way in making us feel secure and connected. The need of the hour for both mental and physical health is self-care and reaching out to people, creating a sense of community, talking to each other, and maintaining social connections while practicing physical distance.



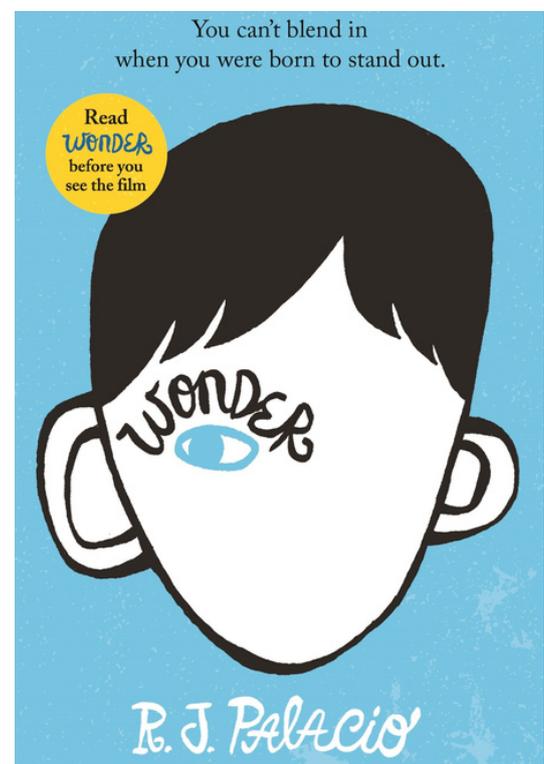
HELLO THERE! JOIN ME IN THIS JOURNEY OF UNRAVELING THE WONDROUS SPACE OF BOOKS/MOVIES THAT ARE LINKED TO MENTAL HEALTH 😊



2020 has been a challenging year for all of us in one way or the other. While it has brought about myriad changes and made us adapt to the 'new normal', perhaps few of us had to make some tough decisions, few others had to realign their goals for the year and none of this was anticipated. Amidst everything that surrounds us, what stands out for me is the capacity of the human spirit to bounce back in the hardest of situations and 2020 has indeed put our resilience to test, nonetheless, we continue to remain hopeful through it all! And hope and resilience are synonymous to Auggie's story.

August or Auggie Pullman's story in the book 'Wonder' captures the themes of resilience, hope, courage, friendship, kindness and acceptance that makes this a heartwarming read for individuals across all ages.

"Some things you just can't explain. You don't even try. You don't know where to start. All your sentences would jumble up like a giant knot if you opened your mouth. Any words you used would come out wrong." – R.J Palacio



This is exactly how I feel as I sit here trying to come up with the words to review this book and how it made me feel.

The story is about a ten-year-old boy called August Pullman. This marvellous boy is funny, loving, thoughtful and brave. Auggie (known to his family and friends) was born with a one in a million craniofacial abnormality, caused by a mutant gene, resulting in multiple

operations on his face due to which he was home-schooled until the fifth grade.

The story follows his journey through his first year at middle school which is filled with some tough moments and some of the best ones. The friends he makes, the trials and tribulations, good times and bad along the way. The more you read about Auggie, the more space he takes in your heart 😊

Palacio weaves the story together through the narration of several characters' viewpoints including Auggie himself, his sister Via and his friends Jack and Summer. Each narrator adds subtle dimensions to the story, and this is what makes the book truly fascinating.

This book is very uplifting and is easy to read because of the use of simple language; however, it is not an easy read. Understanding Auggie's point of view, how he processes people being mean to him felt so intimate and raw, and understanding the impact it had on his family members made the experience very emotional.

In 'Wonder', there are references to many of my favorite books and perhaps yours too: *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupery, and one of the most profound quotes from Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, all the quotes are meaningfully connected with the characters. I won't spoil the power they have in the story by relaying them here, you just must read it!

Overall, this book is a gem and is full of takeaway messages such as - *"Be kinder than is necessary. Because it's not enough to be kind. One should be kinder than needed."* And therein lies the central theme of the book. After reading the book you'll want to be kind to everyone, and not because Palacio told you to be so, but because she showed you with humor, sadness, joy and anger. While there are a few good quote-worthy moments in the book, it's not loaded down with "chicken soup for the soul" sweetness. It finds the perfect balance of moments that make you self-evaluate, a fast-paced plot that makes you feel for August, and central to it all, a character that's easy to love from the get-go.

Another line that really struck a chord in me was- *"The best way to measure how much you've grown isn't by inches or the number of laps you can now run around the track, or even your grade point average-- though those things are important, to be sure. It's what you've done with your time, how you've chosen to spend your days, and whom you've touched this year. That, to me, is the greatest measure of success".*

Thank you, Palacio, I will always try to remember to be kinder, because being just kind is not enough. Also, while we are surrounded by things that may dampen our spirit, let us remember to always be hopeful and kind, no matter what!

MY RATING:



EMOTIONAL SUPPORT AT AZIM PREMJI UNIVERSITY



MEET THE TEAM AT CONVERSATIONS!



Prarthana Pai

English
Hindi
Konkani
Kannada
Marathi



Soumitra Saxena

English
Hindi



Kavita Gladys

English
Kannada
Tamil
Hindi



Veda Dandamudi

English
Telugu



Lakshmi Acharya

English
Hindi
Kannada



Swati Sambrani

English
Tamil
Kannada

COMING SOON FROM THE CONVERSATIONS TEAM!

**CALLING FOR APPLICATIONS FOR THE 6TH BATCH OF
PEER SUPPORT (POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS)**

WORKSHOPS FOR STUDENTS ON:

- 1. TRANSITIONS**
- 2. SELF CONFIDENCE**
- 3. STRESS MANAGEMENT**
- 4. RELATIONSHIPS**

NEWSLETTER DESIGN AND LAYOUT CREDIT: VEDA DANDAMUDI