

THE ROLE OF RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY AND CULTURAL BELIEF SYSTEMS IN MENTAL HEALTH

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ABSTRACT:

The timely intervention on the issue of mental health of especially of the young people in our country is laudable because it has become a pressing issue in India where young men and women are taking their own life without batting an eye lid for trivial matters. This is worrisome for the society and nation.

This paper is focussed on the possible nexus and influence of religious beliefs, spiritual experiences and cultural practices on one's mental health. It is an undeniable fact that most people in the world subscribe to one religious system or the other; a small section of the population, of course, may not affiliate themselves to any established religious system. And religious beliefs can have both positive and negative influence in maintaining one's mental health.

KEY WORDS: Role of Religion, Spirituality, Cultural Beliefs, Mental Health, Adolescents, Youth, India

Positively, religions provide their adherents a blueprint for life: a value system, a sense of community fellowship, code of conduct, and above all a meaning system to live by. And following a religion can be ennobling for its followers provided they consider and treat religion as one of their – albeit important - aspects of life. A healthy balance is to be maintained among various aspects of one's life and not dragged into exaggeration of any one particular aspect of life.

William James a well-known philosopher and psychologist, in his seminal book, 'Varieties of Religious Experience' has defended the value of religious experiences as something that contributes towards one's personality. He goes on to say that even the 'bizarre' religious experience carries a meaning for the subject, though others may dismiss it as something beyond the range of rationality.

Negatively religion can contribute towards mental disorder if it is used indiscriminately at every turn of one's life. That is to say appealing to religion even for those aspects that do not fall under its purview can lead one to cloud one's vision of life and thereby detail his individual and social connectivity. And it can even lead one to illusionary approach to life. Some critics of religion such as Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud have considered religion as unrealistic and even unnecessary for carrying on with one's life; it can even be considered neurosis.

The fact remains that religion if practiced in right earnest can become a means for maintaining good mental health.

Spirituality, often is intrinsically related to a particular religious tradition; hence we have Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist spiritualities and so on. And each of these spiritualities has contributed towards human growth and welfare in so many different ways. Each spirituality attempts to raise the level of consciousness of its members in knowing and relating to the divine power described in various forms in their respective religious texts and traditions.

However, there are neo-spiritual movements that do not want to align with any one particular religion or religious tradition; it rather prefers to follow a non-affiliated path that leads people to find inner strength and resources to face life and its demands. To my mind, it is the fall out of the recent trends of advanced societies to go beyond the confines of religion, coupled with the push of the secular ideologies that relegate religion to the margins. These neo-spiritualities do influence the mental health of people. While there are genuine seekers within these neo-spiritual movements who want to delve deeper into the mystery of life though the practice of various means they suggest, there are also others who under the guise of these movements pursue their own selfish agenda. And often less informed and gullible people fall prey to the unscrupulous elements in such spiritual movements, and it will have an adverse effect on their mental health. Unfortunately, there are no safeguards against such misuse of spiritual movements prevalent in the society today, except that the law of the land comes into force when some patently criminal activities are exposed.

Cultural values and practices are often influenced by -though not exclusively – by religions and their

belief systems. And cultural conditioning of individuals and social systems have a bearing on mental health. While some cultural values and practices can be quite liberating for individuals, some others can be intimidating and even stifling one's individuality. This is more applicable for women and other vulnerable sections of the society that often bear the brunt of cultural stereotyping. It is unfortunate that in some areas of our country mental health is culturally viewed not as a disease that can be treated but as something consequential to the influence of 'evil spirits'. This distortion needs to be changed and it can happen only with raising the level of awareness among people regarding the mental health issues as something related to human beings.

CONCLUSION

it would be quite right to say that religion, spirituality and culture are intertwined with mental health issues. They do influence individuals in their vision of life, conduct and relationships. And if these factors are able to positively contribute towards bettering the mental health of people, it is something to be welcomed; but if they turn out to be stumbling block then they have to be reviewed and renewed in the light of modern science and knowledge regarding human beings and their wholistic health.