

7. First Aid in Mental Health

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Learning Objectives

1. To sensitize students to mental health issues.
2. To make them aware of the signs and symptoms of various mental illnesses.
3. To acquaint them with various first aid techniques for mental health issues.
4. To increase their awareness about the importance of mental health professional.

Activity 1

- Make a list of the activities you perform to take care of your physical health. Now make a list of the activities you perform to take care of your mental health. Discuss the two lists in your class.
- How many things could you list? Did you find making one list easier than the other?

7.1 Introduction :

If you found making the second list harder, do not worry you are not alone. We are usually aware of what we need to do to take care of our physical health but we are unsure of how to take care of our mental health.

As children, our parents always tell us

what we need to do in order to lead a healthy life. Usually this advice is about the behaviours we should adopt in order to stay healthy. For instance, before exams, they might tell you to eat food that has been cooked at home, get adequate sleep etc. This is done to make sure that you do not fall sick during the exams. These are some of the preventive measures that are taken to protect the body's immune system which might already be compromised due to the stress of the examination. We all agree that our physical health is important; do you think our mental health is any less important? How much care do we take of our mental well-being?

Look at the box given below -



Box No 1

Mental health statistics in India

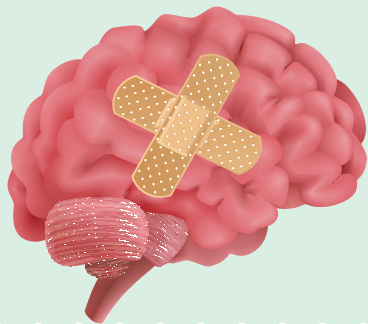
According to a study conducted by National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS) from 2014 to 2016

- 10% of the population suffers from common mental disorders.
- 1.9% suffer from severe mental disorders.
- 13.7% of the Indian population will at least once in their lifetime be diagnosed with a mental disorder.

It is important to remember that even if one isn't diagnosed with a mental disorder, stressors of daily life such as pressures at work or studies, overcrowding, lack of social support can all contribute to poor mental health.

Do you Know?

Mental Health First Aid(MHFA) is an internationally recognised training programme designed to teach people how to identify the signs and symptoms of mental health and provide assistance on a first aid basis. The MHFA course was originally developed by Betty Kitchener, a registered nurse specialising in mental health education and Anthony Jorm a professor of psychology in Australia.



7.2 Need for first aid in mental health

As we have seen, many individuals in India can benefit from mental health first aid. Unfortunately, many do not get the help they need due to various constraints.

Box No 2

Some of the hurdles to receiving treatment

- Lack of knowledge
- Lack of awareness
- Cost of treatment
- Non-medical explanations for mental illness like evil spirits, black magic etc.
- Shortage of trained mental health professionals.
- Unwillingness of the individual and the family members to get treatment due to stigma.
- Untrained individuals giving wrong advice.
- Slow improvement in the individual's behaviour.

Given below are some of the reasons why first aid in mental health is required

1. Stigma associated with mental illness

One of the major obstacles to getting help from a mental health professional is the stigma that is attached to mental illness. We fear things we do not understand. In the same way our lack of understanding of mental illness makes us fear it. This lack of knowledge and awareness makes us-

- a) Blame the individual i.e. think that mental illness is a personal failing or weakness.
- b) Think that mental illness is caused as punishment for our sins.
- c) Think that the person is intentionally behaving in an inappropriate way.



2. Shame

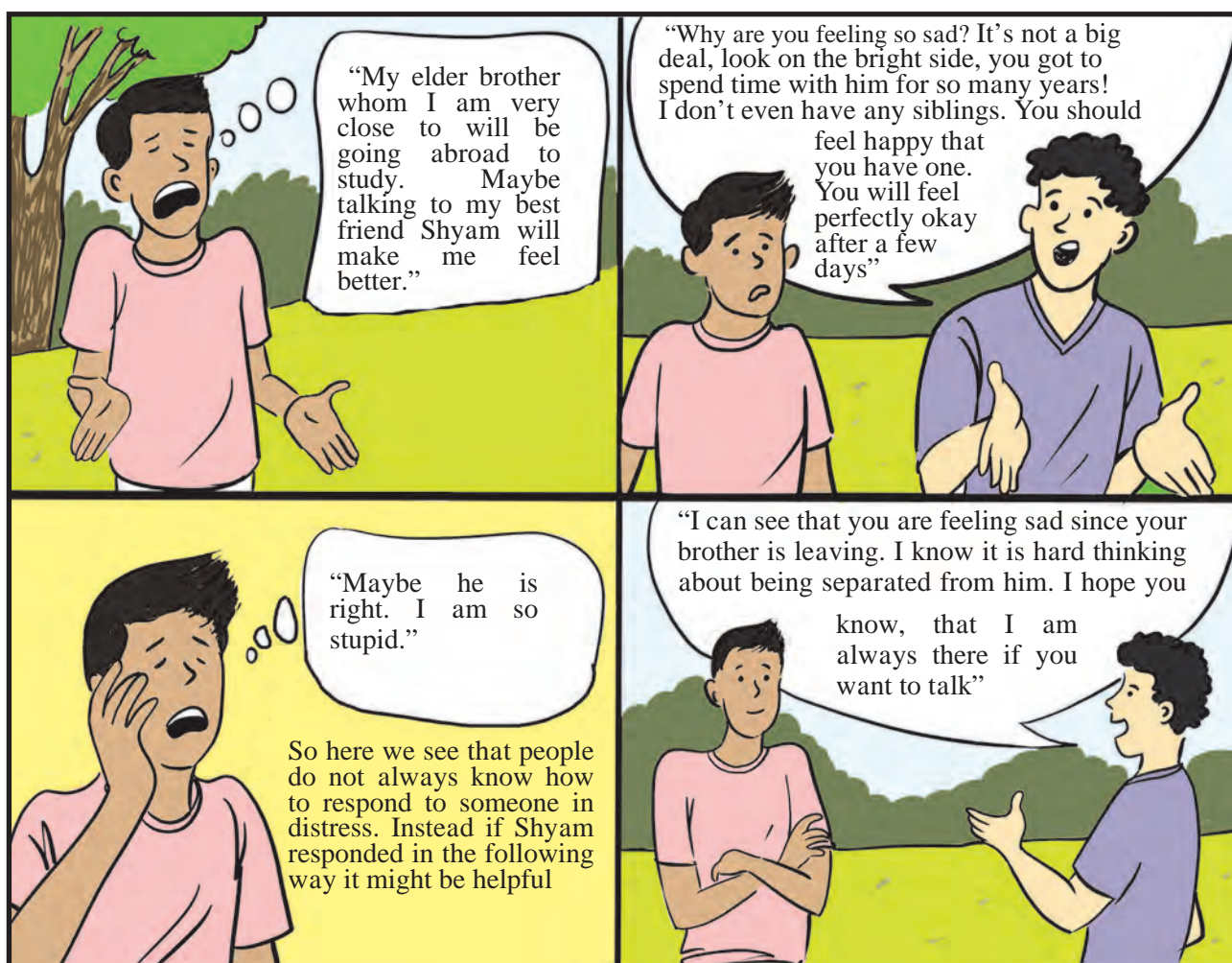
When a person experiences shame, he/she tries to hide from others. For example- If Jai fails in his 10th board exam; his academic failure is considered to be an act that brings shame not only to him but also to his family. As a result they withdraw from social interactions.

When we experience shame we do not want to talk about it. It prevents us from reaching out to others and therefore we do not seek help. It is important to remember that mental illness is caused by a complex combination of factors like genetics, socio-cultural factors, environmental factors etc.

It is NEVER caused because of personal weakness. Thus blaming the individual who has been diagnosed with a mental illness is not helpful. Instead, it will be beneficial to provide support and show understanding towards the individual.

3. People do not always know how to respond

We really want to help our friends who come to us for advice but we aren't always successful as we do not know exactly what to say. In these cases we might do more harm than good. Let's see the case of Amit and Shyam.



Word of Caution

We must always remember that like in the case of a physical illness which is treated by a board certified medical doctor. In the case of mental illness also medication and therapy must **ONLY** be given by a trained and certified mental health practitioner. In first aid in mental health, the idea is **NOT** to look at your friends or family as a **substitute for professional help**. The idea is helping the family, friends etc. of the individual to identify early signs of mental illness and help the individual get medical and professional help.

4. People with mental illness do not always seek help

It is seen that very often people with mental illness will not go to a mental health professional for treatment. There are a number of reasons for this. Some of the reasons are as follows.

a) **Culture**- In our culture the behaviour of an individual is considered to be a reflection of one's family. The stigma attached to mental illness, prevents individuals from seeking professional help as it might hurt the reputation of the family.

b) **Advice from elders**- Many a times we look to our elders for advice to solve our problems. People might incorrectly believe that advice and guidance of elders alone will be sufficient to cure mental illness and do not feel the need to go to a mental health professional.

c) **Superstitions** - Individuals who believe that mental illness is caused due to sins or due to supernatural forces are less likely to go to a medical professional. They do not think the

illness can be treated by modern medicine and psychotherapy and prefer going to untrained professionals.

First aid in mental health is a concept which is based on the idea of “prevention is better than cure”. Mental illness usually does not develop ‘out of the blue’. Often there are small or subtle changes where the individual feels like something is not right. People around them might also notice a change in their thinking, feelings or behaviours. If these early signs are recognised, it can help in the following ways

- 1) **Diagnosis** - It might prevent a severe form of the illness from developing.
- 2) **Intervention** - It can help the individual get help. This is known as early intervention.
- 3) **Relapse prevention** - It can prevent the reoccurrence of the symptoms of the illness if they occur after a period of improvement.

Do you Know?

Chennai has obtained the International license in the year 2017 to carry out the standard MHFA programme across India. Since then it trains thousand of MHFA instructors to reach out to people suffering from mental illness

7.3 The ALGEE- Action plan

‘Be the difference in someone’s life- Apply ALGEE’

Case study

Ali is 19 years old and the captain of the cricket team. He was popular amongst his classmates and well liked. But for the



last month, he had stopped interacting and going out with his friends, he would rarely respond to text messages or answer calls. He had suddenly broken up with his girlfriend after an argument and now he feels very guilty about that. Ali was having difficulty sleeping and concentrating at college. Ali had lost lots of weight in the past month, and he looked tired and irritated. As captain of the team, he had always been calm. But during a match when his team was losing, he fought with the umpire. Due to his behaviour he was asked to leave the field. His best friend Rahul had noticed all these behaviour changes happening over the past month and was concerned for his friend. He wanted to help him but didn't know how to help.

Write down what you think Rahul should do to help his friend.

In this section, we are going to see one of the methods that can be used as part of first aid in mental health to help someone you think is in need. After reading the next section, see if the answers you gave for the above scenario are similar.

Often we have an image in our minds that someone suffering from a mental illness will behave (eg. talk to themselves, be violent) or dress (eg. wear torn or dirty clothes) in a certain way. However in majority of the cases individuals with a mental illness will appear just like someone without a diagnosed mental illness.. Their behaviours initially might appear to be different from how they usually behave only to close friends and family members, like we saw in Ali's case. If these early signs are recognised as being a 'red flag' that is something to be concerned about, then steps can be taken to try and prevent it from becoming a bigger problem.

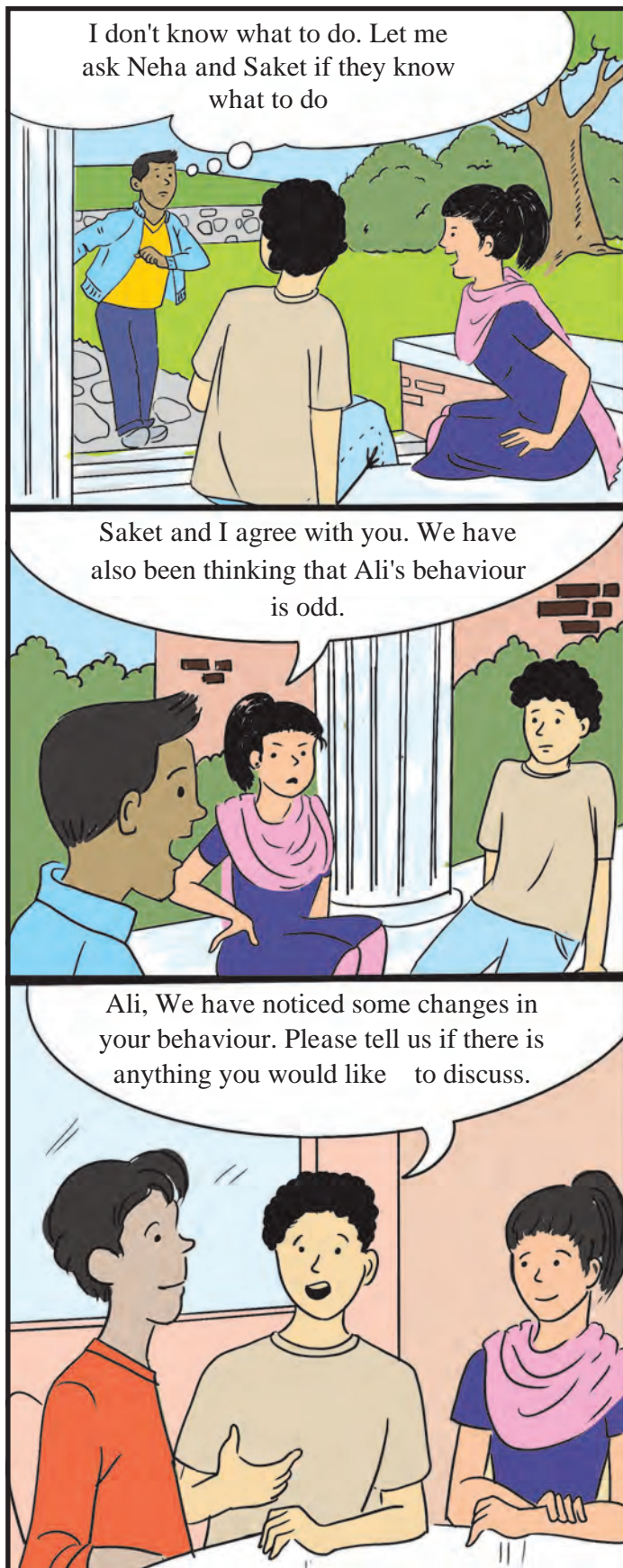


Diagram no 1 : Showing the ALGEE - Action plan

(Source : <https://mhfa.com.au>)



1) Approaching, assessing and assisting :-



It is a common tendency to avoid things that make us uncomfortable like talking about feelings. We find it difficult to reach out to people who are in distress as it makes us uncomfortable. We stay quiet out of fear of offending the other person.

Here Rahul could have done nothing or just gossiped about Ali's behaviour but instead he has used the concern he feels positively to try and help Ali.

Rather than being a mute spectator, approaching the person you are concerned about what will be helpful. Though the term used is assessment we are not referring to the use of psychological tests. It can be based on assessing the individual's behaviour through observation. Here an attempt is made to understand the situation and notice if there are any behavioural changes in the individual.



2) Listening non-judgmentally



Many a times though we are trying to help, our responses can be damaging. Often this happens because we say things that make the individual feel guilty about how they are feeling, sorry for themselves or helpless.

Listening non-judgmentally means that you listen to the other person without letting your own views and opinions influence you. While listening we must ensure not to criticise as it makes the other feel judged and they become defensive and stop talking. Listening non-judgmentally does not mean you have to agree with what the other person is saying. It means that you are showing them empathy and are accepting them. You show that you understand that they are currently struggling with certain situations. When we are able to listen non-judgmentally the other person feels supported and speaks more freely.



3) Give support and information

Ali talking to Rahul, Neha and Saket



Offering genuine support to someone shows them that they matter. Individuals who receive support feel more in control of the situation. It reminds them that they are not alone.



4) Encourage to get professional help



In your last year's textbook, you already have studied the work done by counsellors and clinical psychologists. Just as we go to a doctor when we fall sick, likewise we should not hesitate to go to a mental health professional when we are dealing with a mental health issues. Mental health practioners are trained. Thus they can help an individual identify their problems. They also help the individual cope with the situation.



5) Encourage self help and other support strategies



In addition to professional help, making the individual aware of other ways to deal with a difficult situation is important. Having social support i.e. the support of loved ones can be healing.



Self help strategies refer to tasks that you can perform yourself. These are tasks that help maintain your mental health. This will help increase your resources to deal with stress. Refer to Box no. 3 for some suggestions of strategies that you can incorporate in your daily life.



Box no. 3

Self help strategies are not luxuries but rather essential things that can be incorporated in your life

1. Sleep hygiene

Ensuring that you get 7 to 8 hours of sleep every night. You should try to maintain the same schedule, that is go to sleep every night at the same time and wake up at the same time every day. This will help set a routine and improve your well-being

2. Reduce screen time and digital involvement

You should disconnect everyday for some time from your gadgets. Try to set a time limit for the number of hours you will surf the internet each day.

3. Physical activity

Try to add some physical activity in your day to day schedule. This can be playing a sport or just going for a walk every day.

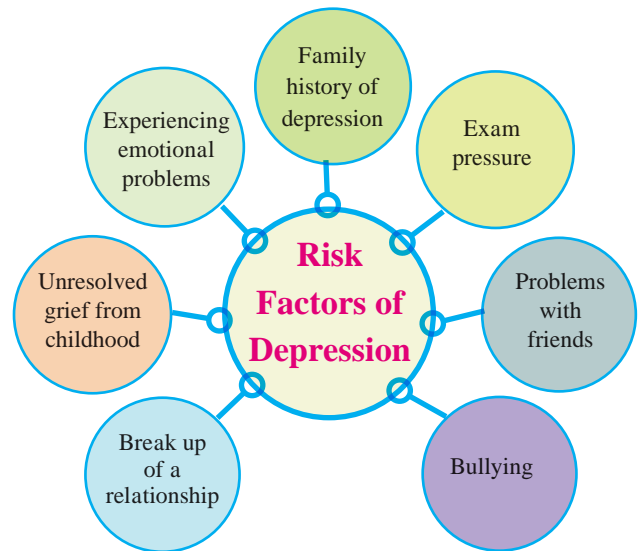
4. Engage in activity that you enjoy doing, cultivate hobbies

This can be any activity like reading a book or listening to your favourite song.

5. Build and maintain Social Support -

Meeting and spending time with your friends and family . Participating in social gatherings.

7.4.1 First aid in depression



We all feel sad or unhappy from time to time but in most cases when our situation changes, we no longer feel this way. However if we continue to experience these emotions for a long period of time then it might require attention. If unattended this can lead to the development of a disorder such as depression.

Individuals who experience depression commonly have negative thinking style with the themes of hopelessness and helplessness. They may say things to themselves like:



7.4 First aid in mental illness

In this section we will see how the action plan that we just studied can be applied to psychological illnesses. We will be looking at two illnesses – depression and anxiety.

Some of the changes seen in the behaviour of individuals suffering from depression:

1. Complain of feeling tired all the time and sleep more than usual
2. Not doing household chores or forgetting to do inspite of telling them
3. Withdrawing from the family and spending much time alone
4. Getting aggressive especially seen in boys
5. Continuously remain sad
6. Perform poorly in exams
7. Bunk the classes or remain absent
8. Have difficulty in understanding what is taught in the class
9. Avoid friends and spend time alone
10. Engage in risky behaviours like alcohol and drug use etc.

Activity 2 - Try this

There are certain times when you feel tense or anxious. One strategy that we can use to help us calm down is the 5-4-3-2-1 technique. This is a simple technique that you can use whenever you are feeling overwhelmed by the situation and need to relax. First take a few deep breaths and then follow the below instructions-

- Think of 5 things that you can see around you. For example, a pen, book etc.
- Think of 4 things that you can touch around you. For example, your hair, the ground under your feet etc
- Think of 3 things that you can hear around you. For example, the sound of traffic, sound of people who are talking around you etc.

- Think of 2 things that you can smell around you. For example, the scent of soap from your hands, the fragrance of your deodorant etc
- Think of 1 thing that you can taste. For example the taste of the last meal that you had etc.

Performing this exercise will help you focus on the present and stop worrying.

7.4.2 First aid in anxiety

Feeling anxious in certain situations is normal. However if your anxiety is not in the proportion to the situation or if it continues even after the anxiety creating situation has subsided, it's a matter of concern. If unchecked or not treated such type of anxiety can reach to the extent of anxiety disorder.

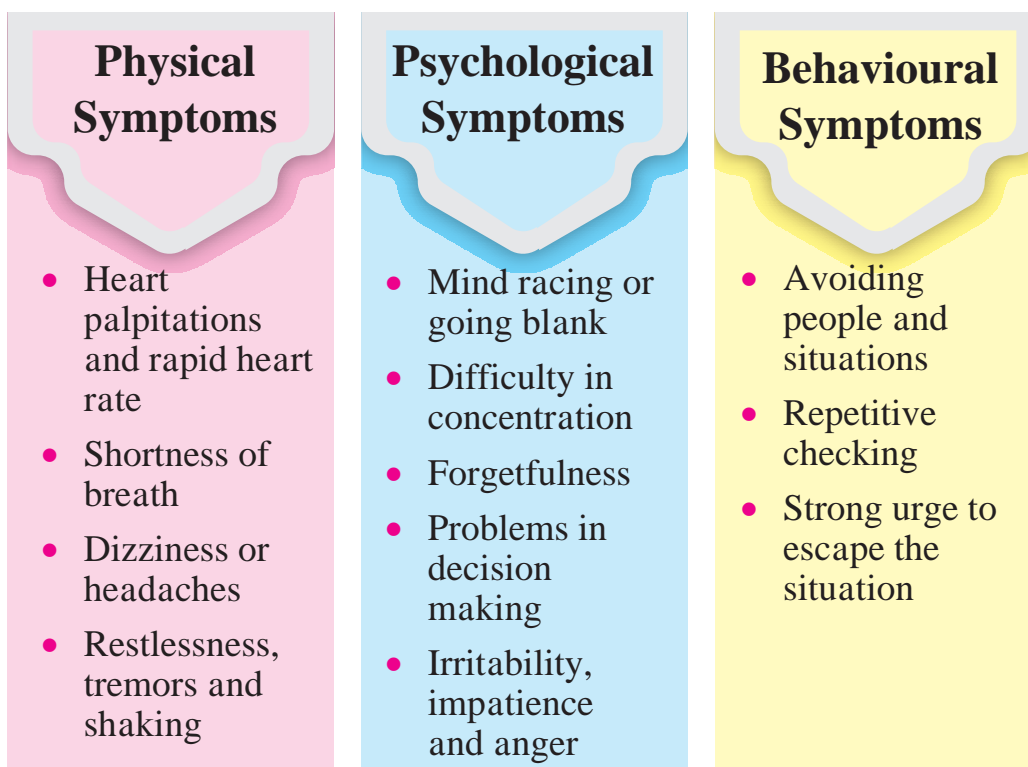
Some factors contributing to anxiety are as follows:

- 1) Genetic factors: Individuals who have family history of anxiety that is if they have anyone in the family who was or is suffering from anxiety issues, such individuals are at a higher risk.
- 2) Brain chemistry: Imbalance of certain neurotransmitters
- 3) Traumatic event like abuse, rape or sudden death of any of the parent
- 4) Parental divorce
- 5) Stress about college exams

Anxiety can be a matter of concern when it starts affecting and interfering with the functions of daily life of the individual. There are different types of anxiety disorders like social phobia, separation anxiety disorder, acute stress disorder.



In general the symptoms of anxiety are as follows:



Individuals who are anxious may -

1. Not want to go to college or work
2. Complain repeatedly of various physiological problems
3. Get irritated while interacting with their friends or family
4. Spend lot of time worrying about how they look
5. Be extremely quiet in the class or at work and get scared of asking questions to the teachers or colleagues
6. Sometimes ask the same questions repeatedly
7. They visibly show the physical symptoms of anxiety like sweating or excessive body movements.

Now that we have seen what kind of thoughts and behaviours of individuals dealing with depression and anxiety exhibit, let's try to see how they can be helped.

The action plan for providing first aid we have already discussed in 6.3. Now we will discuss it from the point of view of depression and anxiety.

Step 1:

If you see your friend showing symptoms that are mentioned above and if you feel that there might be a chance of the person harming himself, the first thing to do is meeting his/her close family members and sensitizing them about the seriousness of the issue. Also you can approach the mental health professional along with the family members and discuss your concerns

Step 2:

You can give your friend a patient hearing and understanding that neither is he/she behaving like that purposely or he/she is weak.



Instead he/she is suffering from a problem and needs a compassionate hearing from someone. Remember you should neither criticize your friend while listening, nor should you make any harsh comments.

Step 3 :

Sometimes the person may experience shame or feel guilty. In such a situation you can help the person by giving hope and making them realize that:

- Many people are diagnosed with mental disorders.
- Having a mental illness is not their fault.
- One may take some time to get better with the help of a proper mental health professional but it is certainly curable.

Step 4 :

As mentioned in step 3, depression and anxiety are curable with proper scientific treatment given by a mental health professional. You can support, encourage and even accompany your friend to see a counselor or psychotherapist. Getting the person proper professional help in mental health care is the KEY to dealing with mental health issues.

Step 5 :

You can help the person identify some of the positive behaviors which can help them to cope with their mental health issues. They can engage in the activities which they like or which they always wanted to pursue. Performing self help strategies can also help them regain control over their life.

Encourage them to use simple relaxation techniques as follows-

- Using laughter

- Deep breathing techniques
- Exercises like walking or running or playing any outdoor games etc.

In the case of anxiety and depression seeking professional help is very crucial. So encouraging a person to reach out to a professional for help is the most important.

Activity 3 - Try this

4-7-8 Breathing

This is an activity that you can do when you are upset by something. You can try doing this breathing exercise to relax before reacting to the situation.

Steps-

- Exhale completely through your mouth
- Close your mouth and inhale through your nose for 4 counts
- Hold your breath for 7 counts
- Exhale completely through your mouth for 8 counts
- This is one cycle, you can repeat this cycle three more times. With practise this will get easier.

7.5 Certain Behavioural issues

You may have heard of people becoming addicted to substances like alcohol, drugs or cigarettes but did you know that the same can happen with certain activities? Sometimes people feel the need to engage in an activity or behaviour even though it has a negative impact on their mental and physical health. It can also have an impact on their ability to function at home, school, college or at work. Such



behaviours are called behavioural addictions. Some examples are shopping addiction, internet addiction, excessive social media usage, exercise addiction, gambling addiction etc. these behaviours are not considered to be a mental disorder according to the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder-5). But they can still be a cause for concern. When an individual gets addicted to such behaviours, the following is seen-

- 1) They are unable to stop performing such behaviours as they find them to be rewarding i.e. it makes them feel happy or excited.
- 2) It adversely affects significant relationships in their life.
- 3) They experience negative consequences due to constantly engaging in such behaviours.

7.5.1 Internet and social media usage

Box no. 4

SHUT - Service for Healthy Use of Technology is a clinic started by National Institute of Mental Health Service (NIMHANS) in Bengaluru. This clinic has been started to deal exclusively with technology-related mental health issues.

The first case seen by the SHUT clinic was of a 26 year old unemployed man who had been referred for treatment because he was addicted to watching Netflix. For over the last six months he had been watching online television serials on Netflix for most of the day. The psychologist after interacting with him found that he was using this online streaming as a way to escape from reality.

He was unable to deal with the pressure that his family was putting on him to earn a living. Watching his friends doing well while he wasn't also had a negative impact on him. He was unable to exercise self-control.

Now a day's using the internet is essential. It is important to remember that the internet is not the problem. How we use it and for how long we surf the internet everyday is what can lead to problems. While the amount of time we use the internet can be a concern, so is what we are using it for. For example online gambling, gaming, pornography etc. In the above example we saw an extreme real life example of what being addicted to the internet can look like. Most of the time people do not need to get professional help, but their overdependence on the internet can lead to problems in their life.

Activity 4

Are you using the internet excessively?

Self assess – using the four C's

1. **Craving** - Do you have an intense desire to use the internet?
2. **Control** - Do you have an inability to control your self using the internet?
3. **Compulsion** - Do you find it difficult to stop using the internet you know you should not spend so much time on it? even though you know?
4. **Consequence** - Have you ever experienced any physical or psychological ill effects as a result of excessive use of the internet?

If you answer a 'yes' for at least three of the C's, it can be a matter of concern.



Some of the ‘red flags’ that indicate an overdependence on the internet are -

- ❏ Procrastination
- ❏ Boredom with routine tasks
- ❏ No sense of time
- ❏ Feelings of euphoria when using the internet
- ❏ Inability to prioritize or keep schedules
- ❏ Failing to eat or eating excessively to avoid being away from the computer
- ❏ Physical symptoms like- headaches, neck pain, dry eyes, backache
- ❏ Poor personal hygiene like not having a bath to stay online

If you notice that you or your friends are showing these ‘red flags’, you can adopt some of the measures that have been mentioned in this chapter.

With the strategies and techniques discussed in the chapter, one can provide some simple yet important first aid to the person showing signs and symptoms or red flags of psychological problems. When these go undetected for a longer period of time, it results into a bigger psychological problem.

However one thing you should never forget that such psychological issues can be treated **ONLY** by mental health professionals and **NOT** by a layman. You can only be the bridge between that person and the mental health professional and can encourage the person to seek proper professional help.

Providing the person first aid in mental health issues is just as important as in the case of physiological issues and can at times be life saving!

Summary

- There are many ways to detect Physical Illness. However, There is lack of awareness on the strategies to detect mental illness.
- The concept of First Aid in mental health is not known to many and hence millions of people suffering from mental illness go undiagnosed.
- MHFA is given until appropriate professional treatment is received or until the crisis resolves.
- The ALGEE model is a mnemonic device for MHFA’s 5 step Action Plan.

- Depression is a serious mental illness that can take a terrible toll on you and your family. It often worsens if undiagnosed and can result into severe emotional, behavioural and health problems that affect all areas of a person’s life.
- Excessive ongoing anxiety is a major cause of concern and interferes with day to day activities. In most cases it improves with constant practise of coping skills, using self-care and support strategies and making lifestyle changes.



Important Concepts

- Mental Health
- Mental well-being
- Stigma
- Distress
- Sleep Hygiene

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Social phobia
- Procrastination

Important Psychologists

- **Anthony Jorm** : He is an Emeritus Professor at the University of Melbourne. His research has focused on the prevention and early intervention

of mental disorders at the community level. He was also the co founder of the Mental Health First Aid Programme.

Exercises

Q.1. Fill in the Blanks:

1. One of the major obstacles to getting help from a mental health professional is the _____ attached to mental illness.
a. policy b. stigma c. society
2. Friends and family are not a substitute for _____.
a. solving problems b. giving solutions
c. professional help
3. In our culture the _____ of an individual is considered to be the reflection of one's family.
a. intelligence b. behaviour
c. status
4. Individuals who experience _____ commonly have a negative thinking style.
a. depression b. phobia
c. acute stress

Q.2. Answer in 25-30 words:

1. Describe the term Mental Health First Aid?
2. What are the stigmas attached to mental illness?
3. 'Anxiety disrupts day to day functioning of an individual : State two predispositional factors contributing to anxiety.

4. Your friend confided in you that he is suffering from anxiety.
Suggest two self- help strategies to help him deal with this issue.

Q.3. Answer the following in 80-100 words:

1. List the common reasons why most people usually do not seek help during mental illness.
2. Explain the ALGEE Model in your own words.
3. Enumerate the various symptoms an individual with anxiety disorder exhibits.
4. Justify with the help of examples what over independence on the internet means.

Q.4. Analysis the following Case study:

Sujata is now a sad and lonely girl. She has cut off herself from all her relatives and family friends. She doesn't participate in any college programmes nor family functions. She is mostly found in the library all by herself. She has lost her self- confidence. At home she prefers eating in the bedroom and mostly indulges in television or mobile activities.

Apply the ALGEE model and help Sujata to evolve in her mental health.

