

## College Mental Health: the Disha Experience

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### Introduction:

College Mental Health is a world unto itself. The world of students in terms of its cultural, ethnic, racial, sexual orientation and age diversity has to be understood. The presenting concerns, developmental issues of their stage of life and readiness for treatment have to be understood too. Every day is a new challenge. Treating a college student on campus is quite different from seeing the same student in private practice. Developmental stage challenges, stressors for the college experience, social life, self-care, change, diversity, sexual orientation academic performance disturbances, crises are some of the issues that need to be tackled (Grayson, 2007). Taking this into consideration, most of the Colleges and Universities in Europe and USA have strengthened Counselling Services in Higher Education Institutions over the last few decades.

The situation in India is a far cry from this. The University Grants Commission (UGC) 2002-03 estimates state that there are 92, 27, 833 enrollments in various Universities & Colleges. These students are facing several mental health issues on a day to day basis and a lot of them cannot afford to go to private practitioners. In 2000, the University Grants Commission made it mandatory for colleges and Universities to have Counselling Centres on the campuses, but most of these have remained either on paper or are not functional. The causes are evident: students are unwilling to access these centres due to lack of rapport with the practitioner or the stigma of seeking help.

The poorly developed Mental Health Services on College campuses are certainly a cause for concern. The concern is further augmented, since the WHO report 2014 titled Preventing Suicide: a Global Imperative has been published, which predicts that the highest Youth Suicides in the world will be from India. Earlier, according to a Lancet study, India has the highest suicide rates in the world with maximum number of young people on the brink, worse it may soon turn out to be the biggest killer in the country (Patel, 2012). Mathew Varghese, Professor and Head of Psychiatry, NIMHANS, says though there are many impulsive suicidal attempts, not all are due to depression. "Suicides in teenagers and young adults are possibly due to change in the social fabric of our society and much more complex in causation. For



example, causes may vary from performance expectations, loss of family support and communication, urbanization, poverty, loss of desired objects and so on. (DNA, June, 2013). This corroborates the fact that many of the suicides amongst Youth, both in urban and rural are caused by psycho social factors.

The demographic profile of students in College campuses has changed in the last ten years. Gone are the days of the homogenous classroom and campus, with middle, upper middle class and upper class students (especially in the elite and ivy- league institutions). The campuses are full of a lot of urban and rural poor and marginalized students, students from various states in India, various parts of Maharashtra (my location) and students from foreign countries.

Most of the Counsellors and Psychologists are not equipped to deal with this diversity and myriad aspirational dreams of this wonderfully heterogeneous group of youngsters. Neither their University training in etiology, diagnosis, psychometrics and therapy nor their superior position of a 'healer' has prepared them to engage with the 'lived realities' of these multitudes of youngsters so diverse, different and unique, who bring their own ethos and phenomenological self ! into the picture. Students who have already visited Psychiatrists (with venerable exceptions) are often wary of seeking help. It is against this backdrop that I wish to share the 'Disha' (Disha – the Psychology Study Circle) Experience.

**Disha - The Background:** It is both a Speak Out group as well as a Peer Support group, run and managed by the students in my college for the last 20 years. There are six coordinators and fifty regular members, a floating population of around eighty to one hundred others (apart from the fifty members) participate in all the activities organized by the group. The members are from Pune, other parts of Maharashtra, other states in India as well as those from other countries. There are first and second generation learners as well as well to do students. It is a truly inclusive group. This aspect is both a challenge and the strength of the group.

**The Philosophy:** A gender-just, secular, non- discriminating (on the basis of language, religion, caste and class) humane platform (these are the specificities that most mainstream psychologists and psychiatrists rarely go into) that allows dialogue, debate and dissent. It also creates a space for friendships, bonding and nurture. The commonalities and differences help to embrace 'multiple realities' which in turn help to look at life, issues and conflicts in anew light.

**The Module:**



Group Discussions on topics ranging from

- Battling with science ( a huge cross that those who opt for science since it is the smartest stream and not because they like it, carry)
- Changing the stream( from science to commerce, humanities, arts, social science etc.) and dealing with educational hierarchies ( self- esteem is affected by what stream you are studying in)
- Diversity, Inclusion and Exclusion
- Relationship issues- love, living in, marriage, one sided attraction , rejection in love ( also how these issues are complicated by caste, class and gender intersections)
- Academic pressure, Competition
- Cultural adjustment ( students from other countries, states, rural areas, urban poor)
- Dealing with hierarchies- parents, teachers, ragging, sexual harassment

Workshops on topics like

- Gender and Sexuality
- Gender sensitization
- Stigma of Mental disorders

Study visits to CBOs working on mental health issues and social issues, volunteering with them, watching films and short films on psycho social issues (followed by a discussion) and a lot of other interactive activities.

### The Model

Peer Support: The free flowing discussions help the youngsters that to realize that they are not alone (others are facing similar problems too) and also to validate their experiences. The atmosphere is non-threatening, especially when we have just the members, and most of them speak up.

PeerLearning- a lot of them learn by listening to the experiences of others (their age and their kind) both present members and a lot of our Alumni whose life stories are full of resilience and triumph.

Resilience by experiential learning- e.g. the visits to organizations like SWACH where interaction with the feisty 'rag pickers' (the real role models) left an indelible impression on their minds. These visits are meant for interaction and are not just a mechanical exercise.

Feminist counseling and empathetic listening: My learning in grass root level organizations and engagement with feminist counseling allows me to take a 'hands off' approach ( intervention only for those who come for one- on -one counseling after attending a Disha meeting, on their own. This is because I believe that counseling is not the only option- nor is the counselor/ clinical psychologist a pre-ordained healer! In fact I learn in and enjoy my role of Disha facilitator far more than that of a 'so called practitioner '!



In the counseling sessions I practice the principles of – validating their experiences, making a connection between their problems and larger social contexts, respecting the clients' resilience and agency (Vindhya, 2013)

### Kaleidoscope the student journal

Students write on psychological and psycho social themes giving expression to their thoughts, emotions and angst. It is therapeutic for them and an eye opener for others.

#### Some Illustrations:

(Sourced out from previous volumes of Kaleidoscope)

#### Finding Myself

*"I would like to share the reason I'm here as a first year arts student rather than walking around in some hospital in white coat, as was planned by me and well everyone. I'm sorry if I bore you to tears. Please bear with me for the new few minutes. I passed my high school as a science student and spent two years in medical coaching classes before I decided to be a psychologist. This change of mind is something quite consistent*

*with my history. At age ten I was adamant on being a doctor. Then I decided to be an archeologist before I was sure I would be seeing the gates of NASA one day. No small dreams, you see. I was the golden child – the shining star of the family, made*

*hide and seek almost impossible after dark. Then I passed tenth, all grown up, set to break records. One month in, with both mathematics and biology on my back I was sure I was meant to be a psychiatrist. Couldn't put two concepts by Einstein together*

*but I was probably going to Stanford for my masters. I got these weird spinning feelings when I used to look at the board for more than ten minutes. I was creating fictional characters in my head while my biology teacher was telling us how many type of leaf arrangement we can find in plants. I loved studying brain and it's function, knew that adding something to alcohol gives you aldehyde and that every action has equal and opposite reaction – that's about the total of what I got in the two years. I then spent two months on anti-depressants before I could give my board finals. This summer I finally put my foot down – I was done with science.*

*So how does it feel to attend classes these days? – Like I finally belong somewhere. Science was not Chinese for me but rather Hindi – a subject that I could read as long as I'm not asked to write it down. I*



am finally reading and writing the same language. And "Disha" is a big part of this new niche. When I started my classes I was content and had a plan that didn't leave me with dread. Then I attended Disha, I realized that I was happy too, that even though I did not have many friends. I wasn't an outsider. It is a group where every word that you say matters and you learn the value of words off stage. The group being bilingual did make me feel like banging my head against the

wall sometimes but then you can't have dishes on a platter all the time. To add to the inside joke a big thanks to our senior coordinators who never made us feel little in any form. The funniest part is how people react when I tell them what I'm studying – I mean the people who know me from before. They blink twice and there is dead pause. I might as well be telling them that I have a terminal disease. People are literally telling

my parents that it would be alright and God would show a better path. My parents are worried about my future and trying to find a way to connect me to mainstream again, i.e. science. Well I can't go around making people sense. That without an economist a doctor wouldn't have a job to practice and without an engineer a geologist won't have much success in their studies and a two year old marked with period table won't assure a chemist in the future. So I would rather enjoy myself and adjust to everything that is new. In the end all I would say is that somehow I feel that I finally won."

### Peeking into lives

I am from FYBA and I'd like to tell you about my experience in Disha. But first, I probably should tell you a little about myself.

I spent the first 15 years of my life in a Hindu household, in a Christian school and in an Islamic country. My class was always a mixture of people from different religious beliefs. My mom is a commerce graduate, my father is an engineer and I've been exposed to different perspectives and have been able to form my own.

However, when I moved to India almost 3 years back, I felt very restricted and didn't bother to put my point across. I didn't want to deal with the criticism and then there were the people who didn't listen anyway.



However, with Disha, I got a platform where I could air my thoughts without being scared of being judged. Disha helped me learn new perspectives, think more broadly and peek into lives so different from mine. It instilled a new enthusiasm in me. Here, so many people come together and share experiences which are very personal but still inspire and help us be more empathetic human beings.

We visited a wonderfully enthusiastic woman named Saraswati Waghmare who is, what we would say, a rag-picker, but she is so much more beyond that. She left us all motivated, inspired and refreshed with a new spirit for life.

Disha has given me a new family and a new respect for my friends and all human beings in general. Kaleidoscope is the work of months of love and interest and I hope you thoroughly enjoy reading it.

*I am a Role Model too!*

For the rest of the college, I did not exist. Why? I am dark, I come from a poor background, do not wear fancy clothes and I am certainly not attractive! It does not amount to much that I topped the college every year, am sincere, kind hearted. That does not matter. You have to have 'attitude' and you have to impress and you must be able to speak English. The only place where what I said mattered, where I mattered was Disha! It is a platform for the intellect, the mind and also emotions. Nobody judges you. Your background does not matter. In fact after I did my MSW overcoming all odds, I have been invited several times to interact with the present members and actually hailed as a role model of sorts!

When I embarked on a MSW course I had a tough time emotionally, mentally and financially. I was really depressed. But thank God, I could not afford the fees of a professional- I survived! My friends from Disha and my MSW course and my mentor helped to come to grips with the situation and also to deal with my problems. This journey has made me stronger and happier than I ever was. I share my story with younger group in Disha every year.

*From local to global*



*My father is a rickshaw driver and my mother is a domestic worker. I am the first graduate, post graduate (my sisters could barely study up to Xth standard) in my family. When I was in college, I thought nobody would relate to my travails and anguish. I had to work and study at the same time. Finally I had to choose, I was lost. I wanted to continue my education, I was in great despair. But finally I could find a solution that helped me to earn while learning and to pay for my education.*

*My mentor and my group (it was not yet named Disha then) were a huge help and my source of inspiration and support. In our group discussions I realized that everybody had some problems, only the form, nature and severity of problems was different. This was a big relief! I was not alone after all. Especially the girls really had to struggle.*

*I have worked hard and managed to get selected for a prestigious fellowship in the US. After returning, I have been working in International research organizations. Every year, I am invited to talk to the members of Disha and I tell them about my journey and urge them to find good mentors and not to give up on their dreams.*

These four stories are fairly representative though not comprehensive of the kind of transformation and healing that happens through Disha. In Disha, we have chosen to build a collective where speaking out, venting, listening, solidarity have helped to deal with issues related to the self, interpersonal relationships and other mental health issues. The fact, that there is so much diversity in the group makes the engagement so much more real and strong. Perspectives get built and the youngsters choose for themselves and take ownership of Disha. We are looking for more creative pathways to take Disha forward.

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