

Mental Health Issues in Pakistan :

Addressing the Growing Crisis

OUTLINE

1) Introduction:

Thesis Statement:

Mental health issues in Pakistan exhibit in various forms and are endemic due to lack of awareness, stigmatization of issues, lack of facilities and governmental neglect. Effective redressal of the crises requires governmental focus, awareness and capacity building.

2) Mental Health : A crucial indicator of human health and wellbeing in Pakistan

3) Common mental health problems in Pakistan

4) Stigmatizations of mental health problems

5) Institutional Hurdles

- i) Deficiency of trained professionals
- ii) Lack of facilities
- iii) Disconnect between International best practices and Local laws
- iv) Mental health issues and legal challenges

6) Social reactions to mental health concerns

7) Addressing the Growing Crisis : Strategies and On-going efforts.

- i) Creating social awareness about the realities of mental health.

Case in point: Using mental health awareness month to raise awareness

- ii) Free psychosocial health camps especially in rural areas

Case in point: Unicef's mental health camp

- iii) Training of medical staff on mental health aspects.

Case in point: Use WHO's Mental Health Gap Intervention guide (2016) as a guide in training

- iv) Integrating forensic psychiatry in legal system of Pakistan

- v) Using media campaigns to raise mental health awareness and counter stigma

- vi) Ensuring effective implementation of mental health legislations

Case in point: Mental Health Legislation (2018)

8) Conclusion

In the seventh part, of the bestselling children novel ^{Harry Potter} is a line by Professor Dumbledore, that goes: "Ofcourse it's happening inside your head, Harry. But why on earth should that mean that it's not real?" Dumbledore said that to explain to Harry whatever was happening before them, but this quote ^{can} also be used to explain the mental state all those people in Pakistan who are facing mental health struggles of one form or another. Yet people around them fail to understand them, dubbing them as actors, maniacs or nutcases. The social scorn is not all that people with mental health issue face, there is so much more that adds insult to injury. Firstly, there is an utter lack of understanding of the diversity of mental health issues that manifest in various forms. Secondly, there is lack of sensitized staff and lack of medical facilities in proportion with the number of patients in Pakistan. Moreover there is a huge difference between the international best practices and local laws and practices. At best, there is the prescription

of antidepressants, sleeping pills and
anxiolytic drugs to deal with such
patients. What the country needs to
address the growing crisis is a multifaceted
approach comprising of public awareness
about realities of mental health, training
of medical staff and implementation
of mental health legislations on priority
basis. Integrating forensic psychiatry into
the legal system and offering free
or subsidized mental healthcare will
also be monumental. Anyone looking
for comprehensive solution to the
country's mental health crisis should
understand that these issues exhibit
in various forms and are endemic
due to lack of awareness, stigmatization,
lack of facilities and governmental neglect.
Effective redressal of the crises
requires governmental focus, awareness,
and capacity building.

Whenever we think of
human health, we imagine bodily
well being and a good physical
health but we often forget
the mental health aspect. In
reality, however, mental health is a

crucial component of human health.

Dr. Dawn Elise Snipes (Psychologist and Mental Healthcare Practitioner in UK) describes mental health as "having sufficient motivation, control over behaviors, experiencing a manageable range of emotions, tolerating distress, coping with stressful situations, thinking clearly, learning and remembering things." Just a cursory look at the numbers of mental health in Pakistan tells us that the crisis is severe in Pakistan. According to WHO (2024), 36 percent of adults in Pakistan suffer from mental health issue of some sort. It is even more alarming to know that most of these issues have roots in childhood. A country like Pakistan where child abuse is common, the chances of development of mental health problems is extremely high.

Before we delve deeper into the root causes of the problem, it is pertinent to know the common illnesses that plague the minds and lives of Pakistani people. Obviously, the list of these issues is a long one and ranges from short-term

acute problems to chronic illnesses. According to Psychologist, Amna Iftikhar, the top 5 mental health issues in Pakistani population are anxiety, depression, OCD, Panic Attacks (with PTSD) and personality disorders like schizophrenia. Triggering factors that work slow are childhood trauma, domestic violence, economic struggles, social pressures and deteriorating condition of the country or surroundings. On the other hand, sudden triggers can be a sudden personal loss (economic, social or familial), head trauma and high or low blood pressure.

What exponentially increases the burden of these crises is the stigma that is associated with mental health issues and people suffering from them. In Pakistan, instead of offering help, guidance or treatment to such people, the society labels them as 'maniacs', 'nutcases' or calls them 'over-dramatic'. Such labels lead to internalization of stigmas and steals such

patients of the chances to seek help from family or community. According to anchor Shehzad Ghias, this stigma is much worse than the actual health issues (Mental Health Stigmas in Pakistan, Shehzad Ghias, 2017). These stigmas are another reason why diagnosis rate in Pakistan is so low (i.e. 4%) and people shy away from talking about their mental struggles openly.

The utter scarcity of medical professionals and poor awareness of the available medical staff is yet another crisis. Since mental health is not something of a concern to most of the people of Pakistan, they are highly unlikely to consult psychologist or psychiatrist for their own mental health issues or take a psychiatric patient to a doctor. This is one of the reasons why the number of medical health professionals is so low. According to Dr. Zafar Mirza, who is an advisor to WHO and a member of Pakistan Mental Health Coalition, there are 3000 psychologists and 1000 psychiatrists in Pakistan.

This means there are 0.09 doctors available for each 1 lac patients. The insensitivity of medical professionals towards mental health patients is yet another problem which compounds the crisis.

Another big issue is the dearth of mental health clinics and facilities. In a country where 36% of the population is suffering from mental health struggles at a time, it is a sad reality that we ~~sa~~ have so few facilities to treat and house mental health patients. The few facilities that are available are expensive, inaccessible or inefficient. At best, these facilities provide anti-depressants to every patient that seeks help or offer sub-standard housing facilities to the patients ~~that~~ who are beyond help. In the presence of such poor infrastructure, the mental health of Pakistani population is doomed to deteriorate even further.

The disconnect between international best practices and local laws is yet another issue that adds to the crisis.

According to International law, forensic psychiatry should be part of all criminal cases and mental soundness of every suspect should be ^{accessed and} determined before proceeding with ~~the~~ investigation or trial process. Unfortunately in Pakistan, this is not a mandatory rule. Here, the lawyers and the family of the suspect has to plead for getting ~~mental~~ mental health accessed.

Consider Safia Bano Case for instance.

She was a psychiatric patient charged under blasphemy law and sentenced to death. Her death penalty was suspended at the last moment by Supreme Court. Cases like these remind us of the disconnect that exist between international norms and local laws, regarding mental patients.

In addition to the above mentioned issue are the legal challenges that ~~exist~~ exist for mental patients under blasphemy laws. It is a sad reality that many psychiatric patients are accused of blasphemy every

year. Most of them face public fury, are injured and even killed before the law enforcement agencies get involved. The annual reports of Human Rights Commission of Pakistan ~~is~~ clearly cites such incidents and the lack of governmental attention in this regard (**Pakistan: Events of 2024, HRCP, 2025**). Lack of special provisions for mentally ill persons is an addition to this crisis.

While we are on the subject of compounding factors for mental health crisis, we also need to take a look at societal reactions towards mental health issues. In Pakistan, issues concerning mental health are considered trivial. The primary reaction is ignorance. If the issue persists, the patient is taken to quacks or fake religious shamans who perform archaic rituals to 'mend' the brain of the patient. The fact that only 4% of mental patients are properly diagnosed and treated

says a lot about the social perceptions of mental health and its importance in Pakistan's healthcare system.

Addressing this healthcare crisis is crucial to ensure holistic well-being of the populace. Of course, it is not a simple task and neither is it true that absolutely nothing has been done so far to deal with this crisis. Sporadic efforts have been made by government and civil society. However, the country now needs renewed strategy and consistent efforts to avert this crisis. The discussion henceforth is focused on on going programs and proposed strategies for strengthening healthcare infrastructure in Pakistan.

The very first and most important strategy is to change societal reactions to mental health problems. This small yet crucial change can help tackle the stigma associated with mental health disorders. This awareness can help people realize

that just like every other bodily issue, mental problems ~~are~~ also demand time, attention and energy for diagnosis, treatment and cure. They cannot just be ignored. The UN has declared the month of May as the month of awareness for ~~mental~~ mental health. Pakistan can also use this month to raise awareness at different platforms, through government led initiatives and collaborative efforts with private sector.

The next best strategy is to organize psychosocial health camps in rural areas where mental health issues get the least attention. Such free camps will encourage people with mental problems to seek help and get help from professionals instead of going to quacks. Unicef's mental health camp is a commendable precedent in this regard. This camp is organized in various villages of Sindh and Balochistan ^{where} ~~and~~ thousands of patients get free medicines or therapy sessions. (Mental Health

Crisis of Pakistan, PBS News Hour, 2016). Pakistani government can organize similar camp emulating their setup and scope to deliver mental healthcare services at the doorstep for the poor.

Moreover, the training of mental health professionals and courses on mental health treat regimens can also be monumental. Unfortunately in Pakistan, there is a dearth of psychologists and psychiatrists and the once available lack up-to-date knowledge on latest treatment regimens available. World Health Organization has compiled a resource in this regard that consists of all up-to-date mental treatments and interventions (Mental Health Gap Intervention Guide, WHO, 2016). Pakistan's government can use this guide to train and guide its mental health professionals. According to former health advisor of Pakistan, Zafar Mirza, the use of this guide will allow mental health professionals to see that there is so much more mental treatment than excessive prescription of anti-depressants and sleeping pills.

With regards to gaps in criminal justice system, the inclusion of forensic psychiatry can make a huge difference. This can ensure that mental health patients don't suffer lengthy trials and brutal sentences without getting their mental health checked. Inclusion of forensic psychiatry will also allow Pakistan to streamline its criminal justice system with international laws and obligation like the Mandela Rules. Pakistan also has legislations like the Mental Health Legislation (2017) that aims at increasing awareness for and providing newer facilities to mental healthcare (Mental Health Legislation, National Assembly, 2017). Effective implementation of such legislations is required.

Lastly, the media (both print and electronic) can be leveraged to raise mental health awareness among the public and help lessen the stigma associated with mental illnesses. The media can use latest research, forum discussions

and public health campaigns to make this happen. Collaborating with a healthcare institute is also a viable option. Agha Khan University is already working across multiple platforms for the same purpose. (What is mental health?, Agha Khan, 2019). The government can support such programs and leverage the influence of media to spread the much needed aware among the public.

Unlike physical ailments that exhibit symptoms objectively and clearly, mental health issues never really show up clear signs and if they do, they are belated and confusing. This is the reason why mental health issues are either ignored or treated via inefficient, archaic methods. All of these issues have compounded the mental health crisis in Pakistan. It is a silent plague that is affecting a huge chunk of Pakistan's populace. As discussed in the paragraphs above, this problem needs to be tackled on emergency basis via multipronged strategy that

covers awareness, professional training of medical staff, streamlining of legislations and their implementation. Mental healthcare needs to be prioritized and treated at par with other aspects of public healthcare before it turns into an even bigger crisis.