

Mental Health Cafes – an innovative idea

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Mental Health is now widely discussed among several age groups, across global demographics. To celebrate the progressive attitudes towards mental health, also speaks of the multitudinous efforts by the communities to break the silence and weaken the stigma around this topic. However, one must understand that stigma comes under several layers and is never truly eradicated. Nevertheless, awareness, psychoeducation and efforts to initiate responsible conversations around mental health are some simple yet powerful means for dwindling the holds of stigma and taboo. In the effort to make mental health a talked enough and discussed subject, individuals, organisations and mental health fraternities have taken several steps for the same [1]. Where on one hand, the formal ways of addressing this have involved psychoeducation, teaching, training, facilitation and research; the informal counterparts have also ushered efforts in the form of campaigns, casual dialogues and public narratives. The voices of celebrities and role of media have also been instrumental to help absorb mental health in pop-culture, accelerating the ‘mental health vibe’ further.

The recent approach to mental health has also been oriented in the preventive and mental well-being model. The preventive and well-being model focus on activities and measures taken in order to promote well-being and prevent (or delay) mental health problems by imbibing healthier lifestyle practices. With greater awareness about mental health problems and increased sensitivity towards the issues, rehabilitation has also taken a prime place in the treatment systems. Intriguingly, there have been several efforts at the individual and institutional levels in order facilitate rehabilitation. Though there remains a larger gap to be filled, it is a positive stride to welcome a variety of such initiatives geared towards better mental health [2].

Innovations in mental health have seen a recent amplification over a decade. From mobile applications, to technology-driven chatbots to playful interventions and poetry jams, the wave of novelty has done good to mental health. As an innovative approach, we aim to propose the concept of a ‘mental health café’. Mental Health Cafés have existed as communities in several countries, however, a concept like this is non-existent in our country except for a sole initiative by SCARF, Chennai [3]. Mental health cafes exist and serve multifarious purposes such as of that being an informal community bringing together support, mental health conversations with coffee and cake or groups of people coming around to discuss mental health, mental illness and well-being. The air of informality has allowed for commoners to trickle in the ‘serious’ talks about mental health.

The café, as we would like to propose, will have the following dimensions:

1. **Mental Health Cafes in Schools:** Routine gatherings of students along with a mental health professional in an informal space conducive for youngsters to initiate questions, talks and views about mental health. It will be a circle of learning where students get to learn from each other with the support of a professional.
2. **Mental Health Cafes in Colleges:** This would be a refined and more advanced version of school mental health cafes where there would be an informal space for teenagers and young adults to meet and discuss mental health. An informal support group for teenagers and young adults may run here with the help of a professional.

3. **Mental Health Cafes for Public:** This version will be for everyone above the age of 16 years to participate in public spaces over coffee to discuss the gravity of mental health in a way that it creates a ripple of communication around mental health. The conversations will involve awareness, demystification of myths and progressive understandings on mental health. This gathering will see the presence of mental health volunteers that will help promote well-being by allowing people to discuss about their personal, emotional and psychological struggles as well. This will help develop a sense of community and bring about access to awareness and coping mechanisms for the people.
4. **Mental Health Cafes for Experts:** This version will be an informal closed gathering for mental health experts in order gather along for exchange of practices. This space will allow mental health professionals to come together informally yet have round table conversations over coffee about practices, research and clinical underpinnings on topics of mutual choice, as opposed to have more formal and structured platforms. This version will also involve experts conducting panels, interactive discussions, debates, quizzes and involving psychology students, mental health professionals and allied professionals for the general community as well.
5. **Mental Health Cafes for Elderly:** This model of mental health café would have a retro feel with songs and décor that takes the elderly back to their young days and shall also provide them with a feel of oneness with the café. There would old songs and old books and movies for them along with a psychologist trained in elder care available for help. Some help for memory and focus and discussions on psychological issues in old age could be held here along with joint interactions with people from the older and younger strata.

Whenever you hear mental health talked about you see pictures of people holding their heads in their hands and that is not the 'catch all' face of mental health. The mental health cafes will raise awareness of mental health issues, and share coping mechanisms - as well as sharing resources that promote happiness and wellbeing. These hubs are vitally important in empowering people to talk about how they experience their own mental health in an environment where they feel supported or can share their own experiences to help others. In the presence of formal structures to address mental health problems, there is a need for informal ones as well in order to meet the demands and needs of the millennial generations. Allowing an informal space allows for a sense of relief for many and brings a sense of belonging. With changing times, it is necessary to refashion ways of addressing mental health.

Mental Health Cafes will be a space for peers, patients and allies to have open conversations that represent a wide variety of opinions and beliefs, some of which everyone may not agree with. As a community, we expect everyone to hold respectful conversations. Certain rules will be enforced where anyone who attacks, harasses or discriminates against another member will be asked to leave and will be potentially banned from future events. As a space, the café shall prioritize and centre the voices of people with lived experience of mental illness, trauma, substance use, other addictions or another similar experience and those from marginalized communities with mental health issues.

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