

## Ice Buckets and Mental Illness

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Stories like the death of actor-comedian Robin Williams, and the ALS ice bucket challenge have dominated the Internet over the past few weeks. Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), commonly referred to as Lou Gehrig's disease, is a neurodegenerative disease that hadn't received a ton of press until the ALS ice bucket challenge took over the Internet. About ice bucket challenge, since it has gone viral, millions of people - many of whom are unaffected by the disease or may be don't even know about it have dumped ice on their heads, and invited their friends to join to raise awareness. It's fun, funny and effective. Challenge has essentially united the nation to the need for awareness for ALS & showing the ignorant a strong united front. Where millions have participated in the ice bucket challenge for ALS, there has not been a similar public swell to combat the issues of mental illness.

Globally, mental illness has affected over 450 million people, and 80% of them live in middle and low-income countries. According to a community based study under the WHO Mental Health GAP Action Program, in India, the lifetime prevalence of mental disorders range from 12.2% to 48.6%. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare suggests that 6-7% of India's population suffers from mental disorders with about 1% suffering from severe mental disorders. Mental Illnesses like Schizophrenia and Bi-polar disorder are prevalent in about 200 cases per 10000 people. The burden of these disorders is likely to increase to 15% by 2020.

Now this raises an interesting question: Why is it that as a society we are willing to publicly support or attempt to remedy some problems and not others? Why has the ice bucket challenge for ALS gained traction, but for issues like mental illness has yet to occur? Does this reflect a collective judgment that mental illnesses are societal wounds that will cure themselves, or worse, are incurable?

Lack of social support combined with the absolute lack of care have become home to the mentally ill in India. Statistics suggest that 25% of the mentally ill in India are homeless and 90% of the mentally ill homeless people are suffering from Schizophrenia or an alternate mood disorder. These mentally ill people are very much capable of harming themselves or those around them.

Urbanization has also an effect on mental health owing to the influence of factors such as overcrowded, polluted and a fast paced environment and with problems of violence, abuse coupled with increased costs and reduced social

support. These rural migrants who are vulnerable to mental illness due to the strenuous city life and difficult living conditions. A study in Sangam Vihar area of Delhi where a large number of migrants from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana and Rajasthan live, 23.4% of the migrants were at moderate risk of mental illness and 3.4% were at high risk. Mental illness is attached with age old stigmas in India as well as across South Asia, and is therefore neglected, suppressed and untreated. Overall, the cycle of mental illness can push people further into poverty, making conditions even worse.

Most commonly, depression often is not readily recognized. There is no easy way to know who has it or how it affects someone. But to be aware of depression or other mental health issues means acknowledging that someone who appears perfectly healthy can be suffering from a pain that can be debilitating. Mental health issues are often marred with a sense of shame.

I am not trying to suggest that mental illnesses are comparable to ALS or any other physical or psychological disease and disorder which deserve equal broadcasting time in the media. But, The biggest challenge that Mental Health Care in India faces is the lack of awareness and social stigmas attached to the illness. In light of this challenge, community mental health programs in slums seem to an option for combating the issue. So as the ice bucket challenge has created a sense of unity amongst millions of people who have no obvious connection, has heightened awareness & started a conversation in every class of society, could people be as kind-hearted and united when it comes to the debilitating societal problems of mental illness?

Let's Bring an Ice-Bucket Level of Awareness to Mental Illness too !!.