Mental illness and stigma

November 24, 2013

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Trishna Ghosh Bista: It is hilarious, but true that ,even in this 21st century Nepali Society feels uncomfortable about mental illness. It is not seen like other illnesses such as heart disease and cancer. Due to inaccuracies and misunderstandings, people have been led to believe that an individual with a mental illness has a weak character or is inevitably dangerous. Mental illness can be called the invisible illness. Often, the only way to know whether someone has been diagnosed with a mental illness is if they tell you. The majority of the public is unaware of how many mentally ill people they know and encounter every day. Mental illness affects people of all ages, in all kinds of jobs and at all educational levels.

**Effects of stigma?**

If you became physically ill, you would go to a doctor. Once you got better you would expect to get on with life as usual, but individuals struggling to overcome a mental illness can find themselves facing a constant series of rejections and exclusions.

Due to stigma, the typical reaction encountered by someone with a mental illness (and his or her family members) is fear and rejection. Some have been denied adequate housing, loans, health insurance and jobs due to their history of mental illness. Due to the stigma associated with the illness, many people have found that they lose their self-esteem and have difficulty making friends. The stigma attached to mental illness is so pervasive that it debilitates the person in all sphere of life.

We all have an idea of what someone with a mental illness is like, but most of our views and interpretations have been distorted through strongly held social beliefs. The media, as a reflection of society, has done much to sustain a distorted view of mental illness. Television or movie characters who are aggressive, dangerous and unpredictable can have their behaviour attributed to a mental illness. Mental illness also has not received the sensitive media coverage that other illnesses have been given.We are surrounded by stereotypes, popular movies talk about killers who are “psychos,” and there is news coverage of mental illness only when it is related to violence. We also often hear the casual use of terms like “pagal” or “crazy,” along with jokes about the mentally ill.  This is the basic reason why people do not  seek help for fear of what others may think. Spouses may be reluctant to define their partners as mentally ill, while families may delay seeking help for their child because of their fears and shame, however **Reporters club Nepal** have initiated a noteworthy step in psycho educating the mass regarding the sensitivity or mental illness and its crippling effect.

**How do we erase stigma?**

We can battle stigma when we have facts. We all have times when we feel depressed, get unreasonably angry or over-excited. We even have periods when we think that everything and everybody is out to get us and that we can’t cope. For someone with a mental illness these feelings become enveloping and overwhelming. There is no particular way to develop a mental illness. For some people, it occurs due to genetic factors in their family. Other causes may relate to environment stressors such as experiences of severe child abuse, war, torture, poverty, loss, isolation, neglect or abandonment. Mental illnesses can also occur in combination with substance abuse. No matter people develop mental illness, there is usually some form of support available which will help them to improve their health and lead a productive life. The support of family, friends and employers is also critical.

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