

Mental Health Afflictions Can Be Treated

From The Druk Journal

Bhutanese society is increasingly recognising mental disturbances as a health problem that needs professional attention. It is either because the number is on the rise as we deal with the side effects of modernity, or because we are now understanding it as a health issue, or, very likely, both.

The dilemma and nature of mental health are not unique to Bhutan - the effects of cyberbullying for example, much of it starting or being nurtured in schools. Addiction to alcohol and substances is common in society at large as well as institutions.

The current generation of Bhutanese face common mental health issues: anxiety, stress, emotional stress, depression and addiction. Not surprisingly, it is a growing problem in schools. Bhutan has no concrete data but professional counselors have identified factors such as family problems, substance use, relationship issues, exposure to violence and abuse, individual personality traits including genes.

One example, which is becoming more familiar, is a recipe for disaster. A young man grew up in a dysfunctional family. His parents are alcoholics, now separated. By his teens he was unable to keep up with other children in school and sought comfort and confidence in alcohol, marijuana, drugs... "anything to get a high".

The next stage of life was a routine of living in and out of jail. He sat in jail, nursing a sense of hopelessness, until he hallucinated. His father and relatives were unable or unwilling to help. Like some others who made the mistake, he thought suicide seemed to offer a way out of such a depressed state. And he tried to harm himself several times.

Well-wishers took him to detox and rehabilitation programmes, for medical and psychiatric treatment and medication that are free of cost in Bhutan. He kept running away from the hospital to drink, mixing alcohol with medication.

In the absence of strong family support, a lam took him into his care and taught him to meditate and to practice chanting. This spiritual support is a Bhutanese treasure which is available in abundance but not much used.

Nineteen-year old Dechen also pulled herself out of a painful bout of mental health problems. In a not altogether unfamiliar story, Dechen was a victim of cyberbullying in school. She was a child actress who gained some fame. Someone posted nude sexualised footage of a girl on social media alleging that it was her. The clip went viral and Dechen found herself the victim of the infamous crime – cyberbullying.

School became an unfriendly environment to say the least. She was mocked by peers (mostly girls), she felt shunned by teachers including the school counselor who seemed to avoid her. It appeared to her that they believed the video post and its damning implications.

The police recognised the footage which had already been in circulation. They knew it was not her but were unable to help. It appeared that the problem was more sophisticated than they were used to dealing with.

Dechen suffered depression for two years, unable to face people. She was helped by her parents who trusted and supported her, with her mother being a constant companion. The family learnt that such situations can also take a toll on parents and family members.

Dechen posted her story on a site called the “Humans of Thimphu” started by a group of Bhutanese youth. As small as the site is, she started receiving calls from people who had read about her problem and wanted help.

In the process of dealing with the problem, Dechen learnt that there are people suffering similar problems and seeking help. It is dawning on society that there are solutions to what was believed to be the cause of effect of past lives. A counselor at the national referral hospital points out that mental illness is treatable and curable. People need to seek treatment on time, before the problem becomes chronic.

There is compassion in society. In the past, the community took care of its people. Even now family, friends, the health system, the Buddhist sangha, the Royal kidu system, provide support. But there is an urgent need for

professional skills and better understanding of mental health. Today, people who have thoughts of self-harm do not seek consultation because of the fear that they will be stigmatised.

The Education Ministry has started a counseling programme which now has a total of 175 school guidance counselors. But they are unable to cover the 600 schools and not all of them are ready to fulfill this responsibility.

Officials say that Bhutan needs to create more awareness and invest in mental health. We need to build the capacities of the service providers like counselors and teachers, strengthen and prioritise psychosocial support services and programmes in schools and communities, and make mental health treatment services easily accessible.

This needs to be done by government, CSOs, and all sections of society as a multi-sectoral approach. There are a growing number of individuals, informal groups, CSOs, branches of international organisations dealing broadly with mental health related issues. The Pema Center has been set up to consolidate all these activities.

But, in the end, the only solution is knowing that mental health problems can be treated and that stigmas can be overcome.