

Progressive Parents, Grandparents And Children Find Hope In Collective Therapy

STRONGER TOGETHER

How families can help each other

TREAT MENTAL ILLNESS LIKE PHYSICAL ILLNESS | Just how you empathize and care for someone with a raging fever, understand that anxiety, depression or conditions like bipolar disorder are as real

UNDERSTAND THE SCIENCE | Disorders create anatomical changes and neurochemical reactions that are beyond the control of the person, so they cannot 'snap out of it'



SEEK HELP COLLECTIVELY | Coming together for therapy helps the person with the mental illness and helps the caregiver to stay strong and healthy, while attending to them

“Breaking a transgenerational trauma pattern takes tenacious work, but is vital for harmony within the house. At times, it may take years

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The day Suman Narayanan* learned that he had gotten through industrial engineering at UC Berkeley, it should've been a party that was four years in the waiting. The 27-year-old had toiled the years after college away to study abroad — a family tradition.

But as the champagne bottle cork was popped and the Chinese ordered in, Suman sat drenched in cold sweat until 4am, contemplating on ways to end his life. “I had had two harrowing realisations — one, that I cared little about engineering, and the other, that the years I had spent preparing to study abroad were just a desperate bid to get my parents to like me,” he says.

Today, Suman, who does creatives for an ad agency, is glad he sat through the storm and stayed back in Chennai, because he's come a long way. But more importantly, so

has his family. Thanks to the four highly disconcerting but perseverant years of mental health counselling they sought together.

In what is a welcome trend, mental health professionals are observing a steady rise in urban families as whole units seeking different kinds of psychotherapy to resolve decades of multigenerational trauma and toxic behavioural patterns, or at times, to become sensitised caregivers to a mentally debilitated person at home. As a holistic approach to resolving longstanding domestic issues with accountability and resilience, this is also a progressive step towards destigmatising mental health.

For instance, while Suman's change of plans triggered severe reactions from his parents — such as giving him the cold shoulder and resorting to emotional manipulation — it was much later, when his father let his guard down at their family counsellor's office that he realised it was

his own inability to live up to his parents' expectations that made him a stickler with his son, who in the process, had ended up a nervous wreck. “It was certainly not easy to begin with; I was paying a stranger to iron out our domestic problems. But when I witnessed my son rapidly losing weight and developing chronic migraine because of his anxiety, I was determined to try something I haven't before,” says Suman's father, a banking professional.

According to a 2018 study by the Indian Psychiatric Society, family is a key resource in the care of patients in India, as its culture of interdependence gives it a pre-eminent status. In this context, family therapy can be a game-changer in addressing substance or alcohol abuse. Another 2005 study by Syracuse University, says Indian folk tales and scriptures refer to advice being given by family members, lawyers and priests.

However, the nuclearisation of Indian families and an increase in tension between

the old traditional and new individualistic values, have led to discord arising out of financial stress, academic expectations for children, generation gap between children and parents, disagreement over child-rearing issues, and under-involvement of spouses in household matters.

“But, that is not to say that it only takes a major altercation to cause mental distress. In a culture that has no discernment of healthy boundaries, maladaptive day-to-day actions done without malice — such as blindly endorsing views of one member, not paying attention to someone wanting to be heard, or displaying self-deprecating behavior, is manipulative and can cause long-term damage to a parent, child or spouse,” says Chennai-based counselling psychologist Saras Bhaskar.

Unfortunately, within India's complex socio-cultural framework, a patriarchal power dynamic and hierarchy are often at the crux of most domestic discord, resulting in trauma that grips ‘weaker’ members in the household, and grows unchecked.

When Mallika Arjun*, a middle-aged homemaker, approached Bhaskar, her only goal was to raise her kids right.

However a few sittings later,

Bhaskar realised Mallika was running a one-woman show in a dysfunctional home, with an alcoholic husband who was financially dependent on his parents well into his 50s, and in-laws who had been poor role models.

“This was inadvertently affecting the children, who didn't know who to look up to,” says Bhaskar. In a few sessions with the family, she realised that each of them suffered from low self-worth and childhood

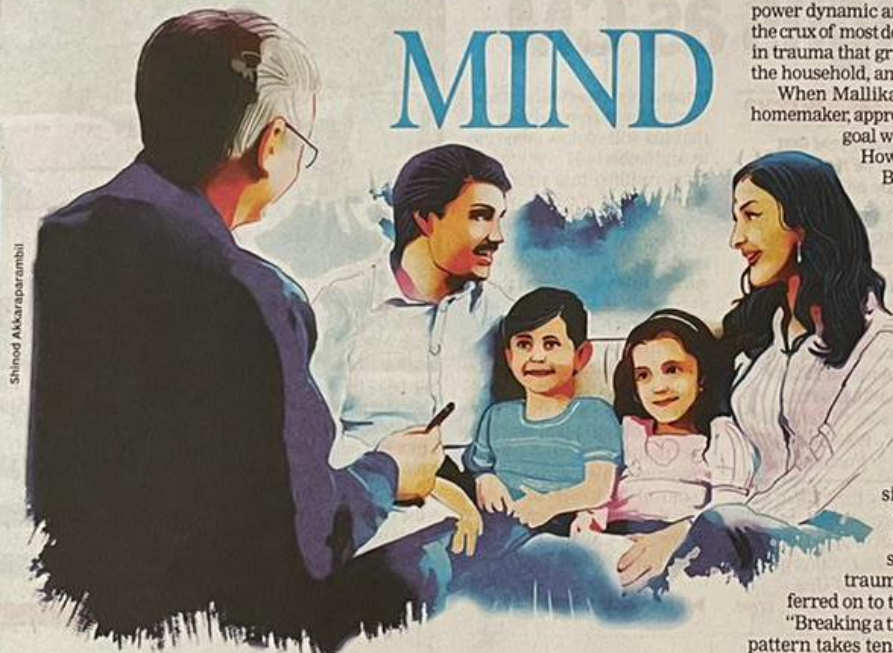
trauma that was being transferred on to the youngest generation.

“Breaking a transgenerational trauma pattern takes tenacious work, but is vital for harmony within the house. At times, it may take years,” says Bhaskar. “We first have to build awareness in every member about their own wounds, get them out of their comfort zones and then empower them. In Mallika's case, the kids turned out to be youngsters with high self-esteem and have left home to study abroad,” she says.

Also, in a country of multigenerational people with joint families, kids learn stuff from members across age groups, says Bengaluru-based psychotherapist Malavi Madhusudan. “As a professional, my biggest challenge is to manoeuvre around regressive cultural systems — like when the head of the family dismisses the idea of therapy, everyone else has to follow suit; or when an older sibling is given preference to the younger one, or a male child to the female child — all owing to this hierarchy,” she says. “But when a family understands that it has the power to transform the situation for the better, amazing things happen.”

(*Names changed on request)

THE FAMILY FIX FOR A HEALTHY MIND



Shinod Akararambali