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Crazy about teaching **By Dr. Kausar Waqar**



Mental health generally refers to an individual's thoughts, feelings and actions, particularly when faced with life's challenges and stresses. Good mental health is not simply the absence of diagnosable mental health problems. Good mental health is characterised by a person's ability to fulfill a number of key functions and activities, including, the ability to learn, the ability to feel, express and manage a range of positive and negative emotions, the ability to form and maintain good relationships with others.

A person with good mental health will have a sense of wellbeing, self-confidence, good self-esteem, and the ability to enjoy life.

The ability to cope with and manage change and uncertainty form an important element in mental health. It is imperative to have a sense of balance in one's life — between solitude and sociability, work and play, sleep and wakefulness, rest and exercise, etc., with the ability to care for oneself and for others.

Society is a heterogeneous group of people who live close to each other and interact with each other. A person living in society has his life touched and influenced by countless people every day.

One of the places where people come together, have relationships, and are in a position to influence each other is a school where children and teachers spend a large part of the day. Teachers play an important part in the academic, social and emotional development of children. Teachers influence children's development by providing them with experiences that shape their lives. As mentioned earlier, only a person with good mental health is able to participate in life through meaningful activities and positive relationships. The teacher's ability to influence the development of the child positively or negatively depends on their own mental health.

Realising the importance of this issue a workshop on mental health was organised for teachers at a leading institute of educational development in Karachi. During the workshop teachers explored their own mental health through some activities. The results indicated that the majority (two thirds) of participants had problems related to mental health. Sixty per cent felt they had

difficulty managing their emotions. Sixty-eight per cent had low self esteem, and 20 per cent felt unable to share their feelings.

That some teachers had difficulty managing their emotions was apparent from their responses to the questions asked. Some teachers shared that they became bored very soon, felt that they were over sensitive and could not tolerate anything against their wishes. Some shared that they had a quick temper and difficulty controlling it.

“I may not say that my mental health is balanced as I sometimes become furious for the discipline of my children, students and staff when they cross their limits.”

The findings revealed that some teachers had low self esteem. The teachers felt that they lacked confidence. They shared that they had problems taking decisions. They felt they could not argue for what they felt was right and had to give up their own point of view because of this inability to stand up for themselves.

“I am always afraid that someone will scold me and will degrade me in public. That is why I stay away from confrontation. This habit comes in the way of me getting my point [of view] accepted. I also cannot get others to see my point of view that is why I mostly fail to win arguments.”

It was further revealed that some teachers felt they were unable to share their feelings with the children. They thought they could not reveal their true personality traits in front of the students.

Mental health problems can be the outcome of many different kinds of experiences in a person’s life, from early childhood to later life events. For example, chaotic, unsafe or dangerous home, schools or other surrounding environments, emotional, immature parenting, early life serious losses or traumas such as the death of a parent in childhood, or being abused or neglected or loss of trust can affect the mental health adversely. Other important factors are unhealthy social conditions such as poverty, homelessness, and community violence, experiences that undermine self-confidence such as social or work-related failures.

Teachers participating in the workshop identified experiences in their childhood and past lives in homes and schools as a basis for their current problems. Some had had rough childhoods, loss of parents, improvised life, violent parents, etc.

“I spent my childhood without my mother.”

“I lived in very secure and difficult environment.”

“My teachers degraded me, therefore I do not have confidence.”

“I had a bad childhood. I cannot pinpoint the actual events, but because of them I am not confident.”

Thus teachers went through traumatic childhoods and adolescence and are now in charge of young children giving them experiences which might lead to similar problems for the children.

Our minds are not separate entities from the rest of us. When we are distressed, our physical health is also affected, and our spirits go down. Many physical conditions are actually rooted in a state of mind, or in a history of stress that has never been addressed. Personal relationships and work abilities are affected by both physical and mental health issues. Lives can even be endangered when people are stressed, depressed, anxious or grief-stricken. When teachers are in such a state, the worst affected by this situation are their students. These children are in danger of being mentally and physically abused. Mental and emotional child abuse is defined as any attitude, behavior, or failure to act that interferes with a child's mental health or social development. It can range from a simple verbal insult to an extreme form of punishment. Emotional abuse is almost always present when another form of abuse is found.

Child abuse can have dire consequences during childhood and adulthood. The effects of being abused as a child vary according to the severity of the abuse and the surrounding environment of the child. If the family or school environment is nurturing and supportive, the child will probably have a healthier outcome.

It is a vicious circle. We have seen that the problems these teachers face have roots in their background and childhood. Teachers in turn affect children's life experiences and might cause them difficult childhoods and adolescences. These same children, when they grow up and choose the teaching profession, may affect a new generation adversely. There is a need to break this cycle. It has been seen that the social support system is very important in maintaining a good mental health status. Efforts can be made to build support systems in the schools.

Some suggestions:

- Support groups or clubs, and professional development activities organised by schools will help teachers deal with personal and professional issues effectively.
- Teachers with a shared interest can form a group that shares their interest or subject areas so that they have a platform to deal with the issues and to feel connected.
- Schools can arrange workshops for teachers for anger management, behavior management and communication skills.
- Schools can organise various fun activities for the teachers such as end of term dinners, picnics, etc., where they can enjoy some healthy entertainment.

The measures may reduce stress levels, contributing to achieving a healthy and peaceful mental health status.

Many minor mental health problems can be relieved by taking personal commonsense measures such as:

- Taking care of the physical health like getting enough rest, eating a balanced diet, avoiding caffeine, tobacco or other drugs and engaging in physical activities can relieve stress and lead to a feeling of well being.
- Do something that is fun or relaxing. Watch a funny movie, take a walk on the beach, listen to music, read a good book, call a friend, etc.
- Attend to your spiritual needs by meditating, praying or appreciating a beautiful sunset
- Make a list of the things troubling you. Analyse these realistically and decide what you can do about them. Accept your limitations and move on.
- Prioritise your challenges and deal with the ones that are either most stressful or easiest to check off the list. Reward yourself for every challenge you overcome.
- Be sure to spend ample time with people whose company you enjoy, generally — those who have an upbeat and positive attitude.
- Visualise yourself as a person in charge of your emotions, relationship and life.
- Get rid of the victim mindset regarding what you have gone through in life. As a teacher you are a model for so many young minds. You are a leader.

If feelings of depression or anxiety continue to the extent that they start interfering with work or personal life, consult a mental health specialist for assistance. The sooner help is sought, the less negative outcomes are likely to be. The majority of people who experience mental health problems can overcome them or learn to live with them, especially if they seek help from a qualified source soon enough. Modern approaches to treatment can relieve symptoms and prevent long-term disabilities from mental health problems.

It is hoped that improving the mental health status of the teachers will in the long run help improve the mental health of society.