

# Mental health: Let us create a 'Tamil Nadu model'



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Private schools have, of late, been pressuring the students to go for psychological tests. Consequently, parents are waiting on the corridors of hospitals with bated breath to have their wards undergo psychological tests. Even if the children are said to be mentally sound, the parents are forced to corroborate their statement with proper certificates.

Recently, a class 3 child had a little bit of dyslexia. When clinical treatment was launched for the child, the management concerned dismissed the child from the school on the basis of the medical certificate issued over the child's mental health. In fact, I was expecting the school to pay special attention to the child. But on the contrary, the school management said it could not go out of its way to exclusively focus on the child and so removed it. It was quite shocking.

There has, of late, been a trend emerging. If some children slightly deviate from the school rules and regulations, they are forced to go for psychological tests.

At a time when the children's psychological problems are increasing day by day, a proper treatment should be undertaken in an atmosphere friendly and hardly threatening to the children and through reliable and well-known doctors. The tendency to send children to psychiatrists even on the flimsy pretexts is not advisable. It looks like a punishment to the children concerned.

In a recent chat I had with a private school teacher over the issue, he said, "What else can we do, doctor? In case there is a problem in future, the government takes action against us. So, for the sake of protecting ourselves and under pressures, we send the children to psychiatrists like you."

We have lately been struggling to cope with the problems of increasing suicide, psychological issues and addiction to narcotic substances among the students. When a tragic incident involving a student takes place, the media and social media bring it into spotlight and a heavy dose of fuss is made. As a result, fearing reprisals from the society, action is taken against the school and the teachers concerned and that is all about. Finally, we put the whole episode behind us.

The students' psychological problems cannot be approached from emotional perspectives. New action plans and guidelines have to be drawn up. A constructive approach with a genuine care for the students is the need of the hour. A committee consisting of teachers, parents, students, educationists, social activists and psychiatrists must be set up to formulate guidelines and accordingly take initiatives. When a problem arises, action taken in a hurry under the external pressures will prove a remedy worse than the disease itself.

Recently Health Minister M. Subramanian launched the mental health centre called 'Manam' – Mananala Nallaatharavu Maiyam –

a mental health support forum – in the Madras Medical College and it will be set up in all medical colleges purportedly to safeguard the mental health of the medicos. The government has also released a set of guidelines in this regard. This scheme is a pioneering initiative on this count.

The scheme will pay off well if it is emulated in schools too. The school students' mental health will be upgraded so they pursue their studies efficiently.

### **Mananala Nallaatharavu Maiyam**

A committee consisting of teachers and students as also, if necessary, psychiatrists can be set up in every school. The committee members can be trained by experts at the district and state levels.

Through this Mananala Nallaatharavu Maiyam, mental health awareness can be created among the teachers, students and parents who can be enlightened on the characteristics and impact of psychological problems and their initial symptoms. This 'maiyaam' (centre) must coordinate the activities of the students apart from their healthy lifestyle, human ethics, values and learning. The centre must empathize with the students' problems and approach them with an intention of solving them in such a cordial manner that their studies are not affected.

Teachers, who are interacting with the students every day, must spot even small mental changes in the attitude and activities of their students and act accordingly to see them right. If the problems persist, attempts must be made to solve them in the next phase through the centre.

In most cases, the mental changes among the students are socially and economically oriented. They must be set right in a cordial atmosphere the students are accustomed to.

Mental health, by and large, must be approached from the social angle and not from the angle of hospitals. A hospital is the place where the diseases are cured and the society is the place where initiatives are taken to prevent the diseases.

At a time when there is no universally accepted plan of action the world over to redress the psychological problems, the Tamil Nadu government must set the ball rolling, taking pioneering initiatives. The experiences we gain from these initiatives towards addressing and redressing mental health issues may set an example to the world on this count.

A 'Tamil Nadu model' may in the long run emerge, which we may feel proud of when it is emulated by the world.

**Translated by V.Mariappan.**