

Environment and Mental Health

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Introduction

Mental health is a state of good adjustment with a subjective state of well being, zest for living and the feeling that one is exercising his talents and abilities (Mathur, 2009). Mental health refers to the all-round well being of an individual. The World Health Organisation (2001) has identified four aspects of an individual's total health viz., physical, mental, social and spiritual. Sound mind has a sound body and vice versa. Thus, body and mind are intimately interconnected. If either of the two goes wrong, it directly affects the other. As a result, the total health of an individual goes wrong (Chengti and Kedarnath, Dakshinamurthy, 2008). Mental health is very much related to environment. The effect of environment on mental health is manifold. Environment refers to the surroundings of a man. Environment includes everything that affects the individual. A person's environment consists of the sum total of the stimulation which is received from the conception until death. The question that now arises is: How can mental aberration be prevented in home as well as in school? Hence, the endeavour of the present article is to examine the role of environment in mental health.

Biological Environment (Pre-natal Environment)

In fact, development begins to take place the moment conception occurs. The health, age and nutritional status of the mother affect the physical and mental conditions of the developing child in the mother's womb. A woman older than 35 years has greater chances of having defective babies. Intense and negative emotions release

certain hormones which have a negative influence on the foetus. Certain diseases such as rubella (German measles) during pregnancy may lead to blindness, deafness and brain damage in any child. At the time of birth, lack of oxygen and any injury to the brain can cause impaired motor and mental development in the new born hence proper care must be taken during pregnancy (Kapur, 2001 and Rawat, 2005). Indeed, one study found a higher rate of crying and low attention in infants of mothers who had been stressed during pregnancy (Dakshinamurthy, 2008).

Family Environment

Family has the greatest importance in maintaining a condition of mental health and within the family the greatest burden of responsibility is on the parents. What is mostly needed in this connection is the creation of suitable and congenial atmosphere in which the child's personality can adequately develop. A child's delicate and sensitive mind is influenced by the character of parents, their mutual behaviour and relations, their behaviour towards the children, the child's relations with the siblings in the family. Hence, it is essential that these relations should be healthy. The family environment should be free from all types of anxiety and unvoiced tensions among the members. A child should feel secure in the family which is pre-requisite for his mental health. In the home a number of factors operate in the formation of mental development. These include child training methods, parent child relationship, sibling relationship and child's position in the family structure. If a child's training is based on democratic methods, he/she will make better

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social adjustments outside the home and have more favourable attitude towards people thereby leading healthy personality. It also helps in the development of confidence and positive self concept of healthy mind in a child. Authoritarian training method makes the individual weak and fragile. He becomes mentally sick, becomes submissive, less competitive, suspicious, anxious, sensitive and introvert. He becomes withdrawn and all this deteriorates the mental health of an individual (Chauhan, 2006). This atmosphere curbs the expression of his feelings and thereby become less confident. In this atmosphere, the child is deprived of the opportunities to learn, to take decisions etc., which affects his mental health negatively. In brief, the attitudes of the parents which facilitate the development of healthy mind signify understanding, love and interest in the child. Lack of emotional warmth, broken homes, long-term parental absence, rejection on the part of the parents, hostility, lack of sincere care and affection from parents and extreme behaviour control by them produce an unfavourable environment for the development of healthy mind (Vasudeva and Jain, 1998). The parents' attitudes towards the child and sibling relationships are perhaps the most important factors in promoting the mental health of children than other environmental factors. Parental rejection of the child threatens his/her security and creates in him/her the feeling of uncertainty and helplessness. Preference for a child of one sex makes the child of another sex unwanted. This bias creates anxiety and hampers the proper mental development of the child. Similarly, parents project their ambitions on their children without regard to suitability and interests of their children. They place excessive pressure on the children to live upto unrealistically high standards which cause anxiety in the minds of children. Children who attempt to live upto their parents' expectations are constantly in a state of tension and may develop feelings of insecurity and threats to their self-esteem (Patel, 2000, Joshi and Tomar, 2009). When they fail to come upto

the expectations of parents' children feel inferior which leads to mental illness and remains throughout.

Thus, it is the duty of the parents to provide congenial atmosphere at home. The needs of children especially of the adolescents must be fulfilled in order to avoid any feeling of frustration and insecurity. Parents should never reject their child. Children should be loved and valued by their parents. Parents should be democratic in their dealings with the children. They should neither be too harsh nor too lenient as both are harmful for harmonious development. Parents should not project their own ambitions on their children and should take into consideration the abilities, interests and weaknesses, while deciding for their wards. Parents should maintain cordial relationship with affection and mutual respect for each other and cooperation in the solution of problems, all of which create desirable atmosphere for the development of feeling of security and self-esteem in their children. This all promotes the mental health of children (Symonds, 1961, Sharma, Verma and Malhotra, 2009).

School Environment

Following the family, the other institution that has responsibility of promoting mental health in children is the school. It is the school that has the greatest influence, after the home in shaping the child's personality. Even in school, the most important factor is the atmosphere existing there. Among the factors affecting mental health of students in the school are the nature of the school environment, type of curriculum, teaching methods, personality and mental health of the teachers, peer-group influence, etc. The most damaging school environment is one when the child begins to perceive school as hostile towards him. School's emotional climate which makes the child nervous, anxious and complaining leads to poor mental health. During the elementary school years, the impact of the school on mental development of the child is significantly more as compared to the influences later on. School climate depends upon the following factors:

(i) Physical Setting: The physical environment of the school affects the students and teachers. Physical characteristics such as location, size, design, furniture and light arrangements affect both teachers and students physically as well as mentally. It has been suggested that the school should be located outside the city away from the hustle and bustle of the city life because teachers - students are under constant stress and strain in schools that are situated in the centres of big cities. Schools should also be situated away from crime spots, wine shops and industries, etc., so that the climate be pollution free i.e. must not be dingy and should be airy and spacious. All these features equally affect the mental health of teachers and students (Thakur, 2009).

(ii) Psychological Factors: Schools which are business centred institutions full of bias, quantity oriented and which do not cater to the needs of the students affect not only the mental health of children but also the teachers' mental health negatively. Healthy school environment is free from caste, creed and religious prejudices. In healthy atmosphere, the children adopt discipline and other qualities. There is greater fear of some children being spoiled in school. Such children should be especially attended to and must be given definite and expert guidance. Not only school climate should be congenial but also the classroom climate. Classroom is a group of students with a social structure. Classroom climate is congenial if the interaction between students and teachers and among students itself is marked by various patterns of friendship, cooperation, healthy competition, acceptance, etc. Congenial atmosphere promotes mental health and eventually leads to a healthy personality (Cohen, 1980).

Similarly, classroom climate also depends upon how teachers interact with students in the class. Climate in the classroom is open and democratic when there is open interaction between the teachers and students. In this democratic set-up, pupils are allowed to take active participation in discussion, etc. They are encouraged to give their ideas

regarding any field or on any topic. This climate leads to greater cooperation, cohesiveness, production and greater team spirit. All this promotes mental health of the students. But in closed climate 'pupil-control' ideology exists and there is no open interaction which kills the spirit of freedom. It promotes bigotry and authoritarian attitude and in this climate students become more compliant to the teacher but autocratic in their attitudes towards teachers. This climate hampers their creativity and in turns affect their mental development as in this climate pupils have no say and are discouraged to express their views freely on different problems. In this climate the child is made to sit passively and assimilate whatever the teacher teaches in the classroom. All this hampers his personality and mental health. Thus, school environment plays an important role in determining the mental health of students. In schools the teacher should keep the following factors in mind if he is to preserve mental health, prevent mental disturbances or promote mental health among his students:

(a) Discipline: Discipline in the school or college has an important influence upon the mental health of students. This discipline should not be rigid and very hard since such conditions will lead to mental ill-health. Discipline should not be exercised through creating fear of punishment but through arousing feelings of responsibility and the desire to the law-abiding among the students. True discipline is best discipline. Children should be given duties to perform which develops feelings of responsibilities among the students. An atmosphere of reasonable freedom and spontaneity should prevail in the school.

(b) Teacher-Pupil Relationship: Teachers are said to be the second parents. The mental health of the students is very much influenced by the attitudes and behaviour of their teachers. Therefore, the teachers' behaviour must be sympathetic. They should have feelings of warmth and affection for their students. They should be

as impartial as possible, since favouritism and discriminatory attitude of the teacher always disturbs children. They must not play an authoritarian and dictatorial role. They should try to understand their children and render them desirable help and guidance. Teachers should also possess consistency in their behaviour as inconsistency in the part of teachers disturbs the child which tells upon the mental health of students.

Affectionate behaviour towards students on the part of the teachers has good effects on the formers mental health. It will inspire them to obey the teachers, respect them, to do nothing that may inch their displeasure. A teacher must maintain the same loving attitude towards all his students. Any discrimination in this treatment injures the feeling of students (Ram and Sharma, 1988).

(c) Play and Recreation: Mental disturbance and imbalance is created by the repressed motive surging in students' brain. They can be given opportunities for healthy expression through games and other forms of recreation. Play and recreation have a cathartic effect.

(d) Sex Education: Because of the sexual instinct in adolescence, the morals of young boys and girls show alarming tendencies to proceed to degradation. Its repression also leads to much mental diseases. To remove these mental aberrations, the teacher should provide young boys and girls with the necessary elementary sex education. This will help them to develop a healthy attitude towards sex and prevent them from forming harmful complexes. It also aids in their physical, mental and emotional development and thus become well developed and integrated individuals (Adell, 2002).

(e) Education, Vocational and Personal Guidance: Guidance must be provided by the teachers to their students if they face some problems related to education, vocation or any personal problem in order to maintain their mental health. They should be helped in removing their unusual mental tensions, conflict and disorders.

(f) Moral and Religious Education:

Loss of moral and spiritual values results in dishonesty, corruption, nepotism, favouritism, unhealthy rivalry which breeds mental conflicts, tensions and disorders. So, the school must inculcate moral and religious values in children so teachers should be the epitome of values.

(g) Formation of Good Habits:

Mental health depends upon good habit. Hence, it is desirable for the teacher to help students in the formation of good habits regarding a regular life, balanced diet and exercise, good behaviour, and thinking, etc.

(h) Checking Unhealthy Competitions:

Unhealthy competitions make children uneasy and perturbed. In the blind race of excelling others, children lose their patience and presence of mind. They are always worried over their place in the group and often acquire negative characteristics like jealousy, envy, dishonesty, telling lies, etc. Therefore, students should not be made to engage themselves in the blind race of unhealthy competition.

(i) Balanced and Enriched Curriculum:

The present day curriculum is also responsible for bringing casualties in the mental field. Therefore, attempts should be made to bring desirable changes and modifications in the existing curriculum. The curriculum in schools and educational institutions should be such as to develop all aspects of the students' personality, to increase his fund of necessary knowledge and avoid all unnecessary strains on the mind. The integrated development of the students can be promoted through the organizing of various kinds of extra-curricular activities in the school colleges and university. Adequate provision for the proper outlet of emotional energy and creative artistic expression in the form of curricular activities brings positive results in helping children the acquisition of proper mental health.

(j) Balanced Home Assignment: It is improper to think that if the child is given too much homework to do he will not have the time to indulge in destructive and naughty pranks as he will be too busy. Loading them with too much homework only leave them

worried and anxious with the worst influence upon their minds. Hence, the homework required of them should be carefully and sensibly formulated (Georgion, 2002).

(k) No Place for Defence Mechanisms:

Children are usually found to blame their mates, teachers or parents or illness for their failure in examination. Such type of defence mechanisms are often used by them to protect themselves from the anxieties and worries created through their failures and frustrations. Though such type of false protection is temporary but it can lead them to serious mental conflicts and disorders. Therefore, children should be helped to develop proper patience and power of tolerance to face the failures and frustrations in life (Bnote, 2001)..

(l) Efficient Methods of Teaching:

Sometimes the improper teaching techniques and methods bring dissatisfactions and tensions in the minds of the students. Therefore, teachers should try to adopt psychological methods in their teaching. The maxims like learning by doing, from concrete to abstract, from known to unknown, etc., should be followed and the students should be made to feel the joy of discovery and self-learning. This all leads mental development and finally to mental health (Atkinson, 2000).

(m) Mental Health of the Teacher:

Mental health of a teacher is a pre-requisite for the mental health of students. Teachers cannot be expected to improve the mental health of their students unless their own mental health is sound. If the teacher is not sound mentally, he can do incalculable harm to the nation in terms of poor guidance to the students. The inadequate salaries, low social status, poor condition of services, unnecessary interferences of higher authorities, antagonistic attitude of students and inadequate teaching facilities all create tension, conflict and frustration in the minds of the teachers. Therefore, teachers should be helped in their problems so that they can put their heart and soul in helping children to teach their maximum. Thus, mentally healthy teachers prove boon to the student as teachers are the torch bearers and models (Thakur, 2009).

Neighbourhood Environment

The neighbourhood environment has far reaching influences on the mental health of an individual. The locality in which the individual lives, hygienic conditions, climate, etc., all affect the mental health. As childhood is the crucial stage they suffer the most. So, the atmosphere of neighbourhood should be congenial so as to promote the mental health of children.

Cultural Environment

An individual is open to the cultural environment whether he is in school, in his neighbourhood or at home. The cultural environment is made up of ideals, objectives and values. Mental development is healthy and comprehensive if these elements are themselves valuable. But, if these factors lack real value, mental development is likely to be hindered leading to mental ill health (Caplan, 2002).

Socio-economic Environment

Poverty, hunger, insecurity, lack of opportunities, unhappy marriages, frustration, emotional stress, industrialization, urbanization, lower socio-economic status and overcrowding, war and violence, inflation, employment problem, competition, complexity of modern living and the like are some of the socio-economic factors which produce mental illness. Recently, social environment has been contaminated by feelings of communal hatred, hostility and aggression which is a serious blow to the mental health of children and youngsters. So there is a greater need to bring mutual understanding among different communities for promoting mental health for the welfare of the nation (Rawat, 2005).

Ecological Environment/Physical Environment

It includes aspects of natural environment such as climate, terrain, temperature, rainfall, flora and fauna. The environment has both nourishing as well as destructive effects on human life. Environment affects human behaviour and the human actions affect the environment. Rapid modernization and industrialization

have led to the degradation of quality of air, which is so vital for the human, animal and plant life. Harmful and toxic gases like carbonmonoxide, nitrogen dioxide and industrial emissions have led to serious physical and mental health problems due to global warming and green house effect. This can be reversed if human behaviour that brought about this problem is changed i.e. by reducing the carbondioxide emissions, planting more trees and ban on the chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) for refrigeration. Not only this, industrial and technological advancements have led to considerable increase in the level of noise. Daily exposure to high intensity sounds causes adults to have memory loss, hearing loss, hypertension, and higher incidence of fatal strokes. Thus, it is important to realise the environmental problems created by man's anti-environmental behaviour, so, motivational approaches should be usefully employed to make their behaviour pro-environmental to have good quality of life and mental health (WHO, 2001, Baron and Byrne, 2007, and Brannon and Feist, 2007)).

Hence, stresses and strains encountered in early life lead to failures which lower the self esteem which is one of the vital aspects of mental health (Kanungo, 1982). People living in environment that is full of anxiety, tension, restlessness, anger, strain, loneliness, etc., suffer from remarkable lower mental health status (Chente and Kedarnath, 1999 and Sharma, et al., 2009)).

Conclusion

The maintenance of proper mental health is a gigantic problem that needs all round efforts. The cooperation of the State authorities' family and other responsible members of the society is an urgent necessity to achieve success at this point. Incongenial atmosphere at home and in social situations brings harmful effects on the tender minds of children and others around. Thus, congenial the atmosphere, the better will be the mental health.

As individual especially the child needs care, love, guidance, encouragement and

discipline for healthy development, negligence of parents and teachers in their facilities may cause mental illness. Quarrels, lack of trust, injustice, cruelty, anxieties and tensions make everyone unhappy and unable to face stresses and strains of life which cause mental illness. Hence, atmosphere at home, in school and place of work should be one of peace, affection and understanding which are essential for the development of healthy mind in youngsters.

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When the veil of intellectual knowledge of 'avidya', is swept aside, a flood of light breaks upon the awakened soul and a universal self is achieved

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