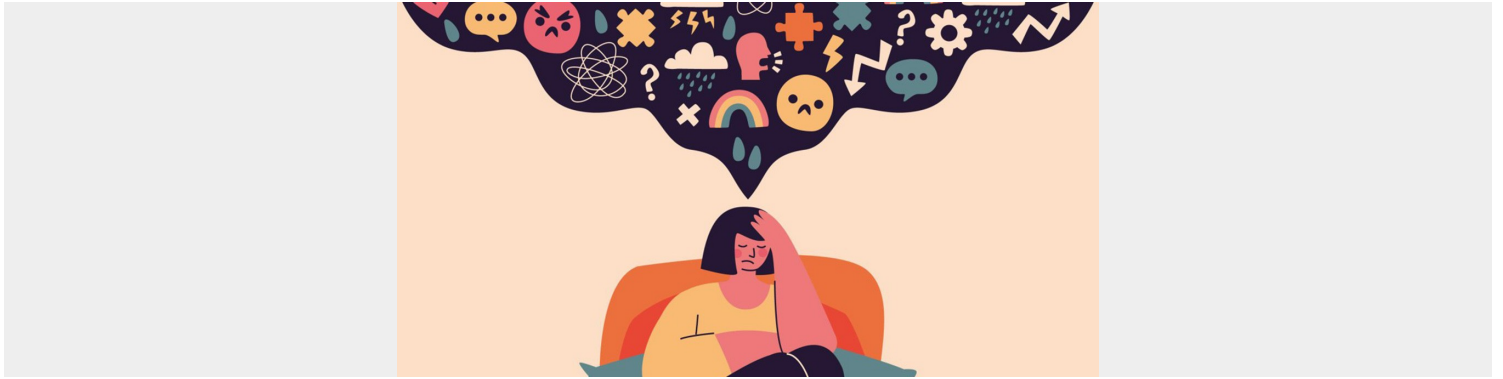


# MENTALLY ILL, NOT MENTALLY STILL: BASED ON A TRUE STORY

*Posted on August 13, 2020 by Dr. Keerthana Thatavarthi*



Category: [Opinion](#)

Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, defined in the best of world's more so ideally. But do we really understand it?

'Mental illness is an excuse for bad behavior'

'People don't recover from mental illnesses'

'People with mental illness can't work'

'People who experience mental illness are weak'

'Mental illness affects only adults'

'Depression is actually stress and just a part of aging'

'Mental illnesses aren't real illnesses'

'Mental illnesses will never affect me'

These are some of the many stereotypes surrounding mental health that are proof that we do not understand it holistically. We already have a great deal of information about mental illness on the web to educate and fascinate ourselves.

But I would share one patient's story which impacted me. Anjali (name changed), who is in her early thirties, was admitted to the psychiatry hospital, where I work, by the cops for wandering suspiciously on the roads and bothering passers-by in that area. We did not know anything beyond this.

She came to the interview room after multiple caretakers took turns to request and convince her for an interview. She walked in with utmost disinterest. She was quite shabby with undone hair, barely nourished and barely happy. She sat looking down with no eye contact whatsoever. I tried everything to make her understand that we only wanted to help her, that she needs to trust us and that all she has to do is talk. She did not open her mouth. We tried everything from asking her about her favorite movies to playing some popular songs to bribing her with chocolates. Nothing worked.

She would either laugh at me or glare at me as though she would punch me any moment. This went on for a week and was only getting more frustrating with each passing day because of her distressing glares and my professor's disappointing looks that I had to dodge everyday. I was on leave this one particular day and came to know the next day that she asked for me. At this point we were quite chuffed that something worked and considered it some progress that she wanted to glare only at me. Eventually we developed rapport with her and she told us that she was an MBA graduate who worked as an IT employee and a part-time beautician in the past. Honestly, we were in two minds about believing her considering her current circumstances. Being cynical is a part of being objective I realized. She gave a contact number which she was not even sure was correct. I called the number with very little hope.

Someone answered the call and confirmed that she was in fact a friend of Anjali's from college. I introduced myself and informed her that Anjali was at a psychiatric facility and that we needed some information to understand her better. At once she broke down as she could not believe Anjali was in such a state. She explained how Anjali was the only student with a scholarship and how she was good at everything she did. She revealed that Anjali had a troubling family not supportive of her, cheated by her sister financially and eventually abandoned. She never heard from Anjali again until 2 years ago when she got a call from a random man saying that he found Anjali tied to a pole near a temple and that he was going to marry her. She could hear Anjali screaming in the background and recollected how helpless she felt. The next day I told Anjali about the conversation and she confirmed all of it. She revealed how her family abandoned her in the initial stages of her illness,

refused to get her help and how she had nowhere to go. She has been living on the streets for almost 5 years with people everywhere laughing at her, chasing her away or assaulting her. She was assaulted emotionally, physically and sexually multiple times over the years. Some of them took advantage of her promising some kind of help which made her more paranoid and contributed to the progression of her illness.

Mentally ill people are the most vulnerable to sexual assault as they are not taken seriously and are easy targets. She had to endure all that pain all these years because we as a society collectively failed her at multiple levels. A simple phone call to the mental health helpline or to the local police station by one of the million people who passed by would have turned her life around. The thought that getting help early on could have changed her life still bothers me and rightfully so. She is slowly recovering after initiating the treatment with medication and psychotherapy. She will hopefully go back to leading a normal life that she deserves. We come across many Anjalis everyday and choose to look away. Some of us are intrigued momentarily but continue to hustle away. Each of them is fighting a battle that most of us cannot even fathom. We need to do better. All of us.

Not correcting children when they point fingers and laugh at mentally ill patients, cracking inappropriate jokes about 'mental' people, labelling them and undermining the agony of those in these circumstances contribute to the stigma, discrimination and neglect of those suffering from mental illnesses. According to WHO, about 450 million people currently suffer from mental disorders, placing them among the leading causes of ill-health and disability worldwide. Close to 8 lakh people die due to suicide every year. It is unfortunate that we do not comprehend the need to act immediately. We need to unlearn the years of conditioning filled with stigma and have the right conversation about mental illness even if it makes us uncomfortable. Let us truly embrace that health is indeed a state of complete physical, mental and social well being.

**About the Author:** Dr. Keerthana Thatavarthi is a psychiatric resident based in Hyderabad, India and life member of CHD Group. She focuses on social psychiatry in shaping community development in mental health.

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