The joy of mental health: Some popular writings of Dr N.N. Wig

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BOOK REVIEW

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When I first got a copy of the book, I was intrigued by its title since the book was especially meant for the general public which usually views mental health as synonymous with mental illness or as a marginalized component of overall healthcare. Where was the joy? Dr Wig himself offers two reasons for choosing this title. First, it has given him immense joy in helping patients and their families in their struggle to cope with mental health problems. He has equally enjoyed his role in planning and developing strategies and programmes for promotion of mental health along with organizing mental health services in India and many parts of the world. Secondly, mental health is not about mental illnesses and their treatment but about living a healthy mental life. It is the mental health component of overall health that gives quality and meaning to our lives.

It is customary in a book review to introduce the author; but how to introduce the author of this book? I have attended several scientific meetings where Dr Wig was a speaker and even eminent orators shied away from introducing Dr Wig and took refuge by simply stating that 'he needed no introduction'. Nevertheless, Dr Wig has been variously described as a world-renowned mental health expert, a compassionate psychiatrist, a teacher par excellence, and an excellent, humane person. Salman Akhtar, the well known psychoanalyst and Professor of Psychiatry at Jefferson Medical College and Harvard Medical School, describes him as a mentor in an essay in *Mental health in India: Essays in honour of Professor N.N. Wig,* [1] a collection brought out on the occasion of the 70th birthday of Dr Wig. Akhtar writes: ‘A mentor is more than a teacher. He undertakes a task larger than the transfer of knowledge. He excites the student, recognizes unyoked potentials, nurtures talent, and sponsors his student towards the outer intellectual and organizational limits of the latter’s vision. A mentor works with his student outside the formal teaching arena and on topics beyond those formally prescribed.’ I will personally venture a little further in saying that Dr Wig has been a mentor not only to his students, but also to his patients, colleagues and acquaintances.

The joy of mental health is a collection of articles and essays by Dr Wig written during 1995-2005 in newspapers, medical journals and books. The book is divided into three parts: Part I contains some articles from newspapers, etc.; Part II has articles from medical journals along with some lectures and orations; and Part III is a collection of some interviews and news items related to Dr Wig.

The editor of the book, Dr K.J.S. Chatrath has done a great job in selecting these articles from hundreds authored by Dr Wig and then compiling them into appropriate sections. While selecting articles from medical journals, he has taken care to choose only those that are written in simple and non-technical language and are of direct relevance to the general public.

The articles in Parts I and II are amazingly wide-ranging. Part I is of relevance not only to the lay public, but also to mental health professionals, health planners and policymakers. Many of us have struggled when people have asked us to define mental health. The first article of the book gives a simple but practical definition of mental health: ‘Feeling good about oneself, feeling comfortable with other people, and being able to meet life’s demands.’ There are chapters on stigma and human rights of the mentally ill which have also been high on the agenda of the World Health Organization (WHO) and many professional bodies. However, by having them in newspapers Dr Wig has brought these issues to the
attention of society since it is ultimately the society which has to fight stigma of mental illness and ensure human rights for mentally ill people. Importance of stress, especially work-related stress, and its impact on all aspects of health including mental health have been discussed very effectively. These include absenteeism, alcoholism, early onset of many physical disorders and sexual violence. Natural or man-made disasters occur quite regularly in our country, as well as in the developing world. Governments everywhere measure the magnitude of disasters by estimating loss in terms of lives and money. Relief agencies are mainly concerned with providing for physical needs and attending to physical injuries. But emotional injuries also need caring, otherwise they can predispose a large number of victims of disasters to long-term mental health sequelae.

Alcohol is gaining wide social acceptance in India. At times, various state governments have reacted to the situation by imposing a total ban on consumption of alcohol, which has largely remained unsuccessful. Dr Wig admits that drinking is now considered ‘cool’ among young people, but he advises them that drinking is all right provided it is done sensibly, occasionally and in moderation. Planning of mental health services has been a subject close to Dr Wig’s heart, and he has been instrumental in making blueprints for the organization of mental health services not only for India, while he was Professor of Psychiatry at the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER), Chandigarh and later at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi, but also for the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region of WHO as its Regional Director of Mental Health. Through the columns of newspapers, he has sent timely reminders to mental health professionals as well as health planners and policy-makers of India to increase the allocation of resources for mental health and to apply the available knowledge and expertise in a humane and caring way.

Though Part II of the book contains articles from medical journals along with some orations delivered at scientific meetings, yet these read like a work of literature. This section is very useful and informative for the general public even though medical and mental health professionals will benefit tremendously by gaining new insights. What impresses the reader most in this section is Dr Wig’s range and depth of scholarship when he discusses religious scriptures, historical records, various philosophies, and current controversies of science and religion in the context of mental health. He laments the fact that our current medical training draws heavily from western medical books and journals while ignoring local sociocultural values and ethos. Not being satisfied as ‘India Made Foreign Doctor’ (like ‘India Made Foreign Liquor’), he draws inspiration from Indian mythology and spiritual traditions for management of mental health problems. I was fortunate to listen to him narrate the story of Hanuman in a symposium on psychotherapy organized during the Indian Psychiatric Society (IPS) Conference at Ahmedabad in 1980 where he, in his characteristic spellbinding style, discussed the psychotherapeutic intervention of Jambavan in Ramayana extolling Hanuman regain his confidence and powers. In this book, he has christened this phenomenon as the ‘Hanuman complex’ to emphasize two points: first to the patient that he, who has temporarily lost the knowledge of his own powers due to illness and ignorance, has to shake off this diffidence and realize his true potential; secondly to doctors in training that ‘when you do psychotherapy do not assume that power to change the life of patient lies with you. In fact, the potential to change rests with the patient who has temporarily, like Hanuman, lost it. It is your job as a therapist (like Jambavan) to restore this power back to the patient.’ He observes that we have incorporated the psychoanalytic concepts of Oedipus complex or Electra complex for psychotherapy, which hardly make an impact on our people, while our own rich heritage of mythology remains untapped or unused.

Dr Wig is a strong advocate for provisions of mental health of women. He argues that a society cannot enjoy health without improving the mental health of women, and to improve their mental health, we will have to empower them by providing them due human rights and social status. Dr Wig points out that mental health of the mother is too important a subject to be neglected any more. It is not only the question of the health of the mother but also the well-being of future generations.

The reader also gets a glimpse of how Dr Wig became a psychiatrist, the struggle he faced in the initial years of his career and the challenge of starting the first psychiatric unit in a general hospital in North India. He must have had the satisfaction of putting Chandigarh not only on the psychiatric map of India, but on the world map. However, Dr Wig is not satisfied in looking back; he continues to look ahead to ensure that benefits of modern scientific psychiatry become available to all sections of the population in India, and that services must become more relevant in terms of Indian cultural needs.

Part III of the book contains some interviews given by Dr Wig over the past few years. This section amply illustrates that to be a successful mental health professional, you have to be not only good in your subject, but you should also have varied interests and hobbies to remain firmly in touch with the psycho-sociocultural correlates of mental health. Dr Wig has been described as a man of many parts having interests and hobbies such as bird watching, Urdu poetry, Hindustani classical and film music, history and star-gazing. Dr Wig has reached great heights in his chosen profession. After having an illustrious career in India, he served as mental health adviser to the Eastern Mediterranean Region of WHO. The book informs the reader of his several visits to Pakistan for the community mental health programme. The famous rehabilitation centre of Lahore, The Fountain House, has honoured Dr Wig by naming its new wing as Professor N.N. Wig Occupational Therapy Unit.

This book mirrors Dr Wig himself. One does learn not only about mental health, but also a great deal about the man for whom mental health has remained a passion throughout his life. This book is not only for the lay public, but a useful resource for students, teachers and practitioners of mental health. Its beauty lies in its simple language without technical jargon, and having a very practical and down to earth approach to overcome barriers of mental health in our society. Dr Chatrath has done a commendable job in undertaking this assignment of compiling and editing the book. He has succeeded in the daunting task of making the book relevant for readers of any background. The book has been very modestly priced, which brings it within reach of all sections of society.

### References


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Some are basic things that the general population just hasn’t learned about, while others are deep-seated beliefs that even I have had to un-learn. Here are some of the ones that still seem to stick around. Misconception: “Mental Health Problems Last Forever.” Doctors, patients, and friends alike that talk about mental illnesses will often tell you it “never really goes away.” They say this both to set expectations (as there is rarely a “cure” in the traditional sense) as well as to help others understand the struggle that those with mental illnesses go through. The problem is, this is often interpreted to mean that the symptoms of mental illness never go away. Advertisement. If this were true, therapy and treatment would be pointless. Natasha Tracy, a mental health writer and recipient of the 2014 Erasing the Stigma Leadership Award by Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services, said the hardest stigma to beat is the stigma that “looks back at us in the mirror.” Tracy helps her own bipolar disorder by writing about it on her wildly popular blog, Bipolar Burble. And just as with any physical illness, the pain of mental illness doesn’t go away unless you treat it. But instead of worrying about what others who doubt the necessity of mental health treatment think, focus on yourself and your own wellness. “It can be difficult if people around you can’t accept your mental illness treatment but first and foremost, treatment is about getting you better and bringing people onside is a secondary concern,” Tracy said.