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Gandhian Concepts on Mental Health in Contemporary COVID-19 Pandemic Times

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The title of “mahatma” for Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was first used by the noble laureate Rabindranath Tagore on March 6, 1915.¹ Agnes Maude Royden included Mahatma Gandhi in her work on makers of modern thought.² Gandhi’s thoughts, ideas, and perspective on various mental health concepts of the time have served as a source of inspiration for improving resilience during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. The way in which Gandhi expressed resilience through his lifestyle and mental health concepts and teachings influenced many people. Many of his core beliefs, including humanism, fearlessness, nonviolence, social equality and integration, self-discipline, and harmony, have proved important during the COVID-19 pandemic. His holistic approach to solving problems has had a lasting impact on those with mental health issues.

Gandhi was a firm believer that human beings should not lose faith in humanity during crisis situations. Gandhi’s way of living, a blend of spirituality, self-control, self-reliance, and being truthful, was a guide for many individuals. Gandhi had a keen interest in harmonious mental health care.³ He was a dedicated follower of preventive interventions and viewed preventive care as superior to treating mental illness later. He conceptualized optimal health as a balance of good physical and mental health.⁴

Gandhian mental health concepts attributed an individual’s living environment, social relations, and society as having an influence on mental health. These concepts hold equal importance in the maintenance of an individual’s mental health as well as mental health care delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic. His societal impressions of status and gender equality encouraged women to play an important role as community health care workers providing mental health services in India during crisis situations.² His

mental health ideals were a fresh breeze in times of despair when India was gasping for a breath of freedom. Even in contemporary COVID-19 pandemic times, national policy planners can utilize Gandhian mental health concepts to guide the formulation of mental health prevention strategies for marginalized sections of society, in line with his vow of “Sarva Dharma Samantva” (equality of all religions).⁵ Gandhian teachings emphasized extending mental health services to rural areas where most of India’s population lives. These individuals have an urgent need for such services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Gandhi also drew attention to the problem of rampant psychoactive substance use in India. He openly criticized tobacco and alcohol use for their deleterious effects on mental health and one’s ability to participate in society, which have long-term consequences for individuals and the community.⁶ The teachings of Gandhi also motivated individuals to include physical activity in their daily lifestyle. He was a strong supporter of exercise for improving stamina, flexibility, and metabolism. Daily brisk walks were a part of his routine, and he managed to transform his habit into one of the most well-known acts of revolution, Dandi March.³ Gandhi advocated ice treatment, nutrition, and hydrotherapy as ways to improve mental health as well as various other preventive interventions.⁴

Gandhi’s views on euthanasia and assisted suicide were inadequately studied.⁷ But, some literature shows he had an unequivocal opinion regarding palliative care and euthanasia, which was reflected in how he took care of his wife, Kasturba, during her final days.⁸ Gandhi’s vow of “Sharirshrama” (bread labor) emphasized physical labor and earning for oneself.³ This mental health concept has implications for psychosocial rehabilitation services in which employment is considered an important method to uplift and socially integrate individuals with psychiatric disorders.

In brief, Gandhi’s mental health approach was holistic in nature. There is a lot to learn from his mental health ideals, beliefs, experiments, and lifestyle. This resilient personality of such magnitude has influenced and inspired many during the COVID-19 pandemic and will continue to do so in future pandemic situations. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the forefront many lessons from Gandhian teachings, such as decreasing health disparities among various sections of Indian society. Gandhi is still revered today for his resilient mind and unshakable faith in his beliefs.

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