

Tap the power within

Author: Vandana Gopikumar

- Published Date: 17-Feb-2012 00:01
- Last Updated: 16-May-2012 17:58

Crime and suicide can be wiped away totally if we as a society woke up to the power that we have within and unleash it.

This sudden spate of suicides and crime involving children and families, in recent times, seems to have gotten policy-makers, mental health professionals and the government thinking. Good governance and effective social reforms are indeed critical as are mental health interventions and life-skills training for children in schools. However, one cannot emphasise enough on the importance of random acts of kindness — small and spontaneous. Otherwise the problem always seems to be somebody else's. It's time we placed ourselves, not just the charismatic leaders and the government, at the centre of the problem and the solution. It is only then that we will own the world that we live in and that which we aspire to create.

Being a mental health professional and activist myself, I deal ever so often with psychological problems and distress amongst people. While severe mental illness is a reality and calls for a robust, rounded approach that includes medicine, psychosocial support and counselling; much of what we see today cannot be associated with altered dopamine or serotonin levels alone. For those of us who live privileged lives and are based in a city or a metro, the lives of the poor and rural folk is distant, hazy and at best an inconvenient truth.

How extreme is the anger of a child that he slaughters a teacher? How deep is the anguish and suffering of a family that the father kills his wife and child and then himself because he is overwhelmed with debt? How severe is the stigma of being different, that parents plan for months to end their lives and the lives of their children because their child is mentally challenged? How fearful and lonely is the life of a child who chooses to end it because s/he feels s/he cannot compete in a target-oriented, fast paced world whose notions of success and accomplishment are etched in black and white, with little or no space for the bold greys.

Are these acts a state of mental ill-health, poor systemic responses alone or are they a reflection of where we are as people, as a society? Improved resource allocation and mental health facilities have been recommended by a resolution adopted by the 65th World Health Assembly, that also advocates for a 'comprehensive and coordinated response from health and social sectors', to deal with the global burden of mental disorders. Furthermore, it stresses the need for addressing issues of unemployment, poverty, and stigma in addition to medical issues related to mental illness.

The recent World Disability Report (2010) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) make it mandatory for people with disabilities to live a life that ensures equal opportunity and effective participation in daily life. While this legislation is progressive and the more recent policy reforms essential and timely, what changes do we presume this will impact at our core? Will this change or evolve our behaviour? Will this alone improve our social fabric and encourage responsiveness towards those in difficult circumstances? Will this instil a sense of social justice and equity? Dignity is something we are born with; it is inherent. How can anybody, a constitution or legislation provide me with something that is within me, if I fail to recognise it, if we as a society fail to realise it?

How caught are all of us in our stereotypes of birth, education, work, asset-building, targets, marriage, a good quality of life and reproduction? Do we even allow for differences to be a part of our system? Every society is protective of who enters it. We are a world of clones. We like sameness and are harsh towards anything that lends a different vibe or energy to our world. We are exposed to one reality and are protected by it. To be in conflict with

that can upset our sense of equilibrium. In a way we are trapped by conditioning, by society. All change that governance and policy can bring is extraneous to our core. If we do not emerge as individuals and assert our uniqueness, accept our positions and spaces and yet marry other ideas and worlds, other realities, how can we as a society evolve? We can progress, in tangible terms and achieve a higher GDP; but in abstract terms, that perhaps could impact lives a lot more significantly, we are a lost world — moving far away from a world of oneness.

How many of us have stopped to understand why a man is homeless; or what poverty means to a woman who has an alcoholic husband and four children to support; or a child who spends most of his life on a sand pile watching others drive by in their cars with mothers who discourage them from lowering the window and sharing an ice-lolly? It is by virtue of birth, by virtue of the unknown that we are where we are. And we could all be wiped away in an instant; such is the transient nature of our life. We have lessons and messages that the universe provides us everyday. And yet, we don't learn easy and continue with our closed lives.

I struggle in similar ways. I'm a selfish being today. But I was a selfless child. I believe that good governance and policy can set things right and take us down a path of sustainability as a nation. But for us to live a happy life as a society, we the people, have to rise above ourselves, our lives and engage with others. We should understand real problems, fight our inner battles, and struggle to be kind, struggle to share, give, be open and accepting. When we do, we will speak kinder, act kinder and think kinder. It is then that we will evolve as a society — when people know that they will not be lonely and left behind if they choose not to compete; when the breadwinner of a family who goes bust knows his neighbour will support him through a crisis, when a poor working woman knows her village cares and when a child knows different people make this world.

When lowering a glass window between her world and her leaky nosed counterparts' and holding hands, sharing an ice stick and chatting, being friends, isn't unusual.

Crime and suicide can be regulated with policy, but it can be wiped away completely if we as a society woke up to the power that we have within and unleash it. This could first seem difficult, then fun, then filled with hope and finally addictive, easy and free spirited. The way life is meant to be.

(Views expressed in the column are the author's own)

Vandana Gopikumar is member, Mental Health Policy Group, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, and founder of The Banyan. E-mail: vandana.gopikuma

Copyright © 2012 The New Indian Express. All rights reserved.