“I’m Fine” – A Short Film on Mental Illness Stigma

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Abstract: Campus acts of violence, student suicide and the relative increase in mental health incidents among students are several reasons that mental health is a pressing issue. Unfortunately, stigma surrounding mental illnesses impacts youth and their abhorrence towards seeking professional help. However recent times have seen a lot being written and spoken about mental health issues. The sooner one accepts that there is a problem and seeks treatment, the better is the recovery. The research was accompanied by a short-film titled ‘I’m Fine’ which was generated through all three stages of production, i.e. pre-production, production and post-production. As a part of pre-production, documentaries and short-films were viewed so as to gather more information about the topic. Subject experts were also interviewed as a part of the research. The short-film was later shown to an audience to gather their reactions and feedback. As mentioned earlier, although information is now available about mental illnesses, the perception of stigma among majority of people has not altered to a great extent. Thus, it is time to increase awareness about mental illness stigma so that people suffering can reach out to seek professional help at the right time, save themselves and remain ingrained within society.

Keywords: Mental health, mental illness, stigma

Introduction

In this age of social media and infinite connections, we have hundreds of friends and followers on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter etc., but how many real friends we have is a big question. People around us may seem perfectly happy, but we do not know what is actually going on in their mind. This is because most people find it difficult to share their true feelings to friends and family, for the fear of being judged or even rejected.

Technology has indeed brought people closer and made it easier for us to communicate all over the world, but this communication is only virtual in nature. It is quite common to see friends and families at a dinner table with most of them pre-occupied with their gadgets. The fact is that though we may be together, we may not be aware of the small or major problems that our friends / family members may be going through.

It is quite common that when we undergo stress, anxiety and depression we tend to go ‘in a shell’ and quite often we choose not to talk to anyone about it. We tend to avoid people in the fear of being ridiculed, taken advantage of or being branded as ‘abnormal’. Children and youth bottle up stress and don’t speak of their true feelings even to parents, which has led to several cases of suicide and depression in the recent times. A feeling of restlessness, hopelessness, guilt, worthlessness or helplessness is often reported in depressed individuals with disinterest in regular activities and cutting yourself out from social circles.

Symptoms:

The symptoms for mental illnesses include –

- Continuous feelings of sadness or anxiety for no specific reason,
- Significant loss or increase of appetite leading to drastic weight loss or weight gain,
- Having trouble sleeping or sleeping almost all the time,

- Feeling irritable about little things and losing your temper often,
- Thinking that nothing will ever go right in your life.

Having said this, most of these symptoms may be seen in people around you. It is not necessary that all of them are undergoing mental health issues. Due to work pressure, assignments or other personal problems, a person might display some or all the symptoms mentioned above. This situation however may be transient and the person can revert to normal conditions with the change in the situations surrounding them. Since the symptoms of mental illness are so common and subtle, the realisation and acceptance of the same is also very difficult. Hence it is important to note that only professional mental health practitioners can evaluate and confirm the diagnosis.

It is very easy to say that a person is 'depressed' if he/she has socially isolated themselves or has been seen upset for a long time. We hear so much of these issues often these days and end up throwing big words like 'depression' and 'bipolar' in the most common situations. This misinformation has led to a stigma which creates a barrier for all those who want to seek medical help. They believe that if ever anyone finds out about them visiting a psychologist, counsellor or therapist, they are going to be made fun of or mocked for it. Such feelings restrict a person to be open about their true feelings and might result in worse consequences.

Stigma

People dealing with mental health issues often say that their health condition is not as worse as the kind of treatment they receive by people. These difficulties make it even harder for them to recover. This stigma has a negative impact on many aspects of their lives for example not being able to do well academically, not finding work easily, being suspended after diagnosis, end of a long-term steady relationship or not being generally included in the social mainstream society.

This is because people have stereotype views like; people with mental illnesses are –

- Crazy, weird and unpredictable,
- Violent and dangerous,
- Attention seekers,
- Blaming others,
- Shirking responsibilities.

In fact, stigma victimizes such people further. The society believes they are the culprits for causing unsafe situations; however, this is not true. Rather, they are victims of crimes and are mocked by strangers or friends. The media has portrayed such individuals to be violent, dangerous, evil and unable to live a normal life. Such negative stereotypes cause people to further undergo suffering, pain and agony thereby pushing them to remain isolated from the mainstream society.

Treating mental illnesses

Most people who suffer from mental health problems are able to live a normal life and recover completely. It is understood that if a person chooses to seek help early, the recovery is faster and they can manage their situations easily. The best way to challenge this situation is through communication, trying to talk to people about the condition and seeking help from mental health practitioners which aids faster recovery. Apart from this, a good diet, good sleep, lifestyle changes and most importantly support from family and friends can be a real help.

According to clinical psychologists, every patient is different, so the kind of treatment also differs. Therapies are tailor-made according to the severity and disorder. At times, an eclectic approach is used where a combination of therapeutic principles are combined to create an ideal treatment program for a patient. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and EMDR (Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing) therapy are said to be among the most effective interventions for treating depression, say experts. Together with medication, they work well to treat such disorders.

Clinical psychologists say that unfortunately there is still a stigma associated with seeking help for emotional and mental problems. Thus, feelings of mental illnesses often are viewed as a sign of weakness rather than as a signal that something is out of balance. The reality is that people with mental illnesses cannot simply 'snap out of it' and feel better spontaneously. The alarming nature of such cases is needed to be addressed now. It is high time we accept that mental health issues are a problem and start talking about it. Only when people suffering from mental illnesses realize that there is a space for them to be able to communicate or share what they are going through, only then they will feel comfortable to come forward and open up.

Rationale

"I'm fine" is such a casual and spontaneous response whenever someone asks us "how are you?", but a lot goes behind the response. Although it could be said to just carry the conversation forward or to not draw attention to a situation of ill-health, the answer is always quick. This thought caught my attention and I began to think how people who might behave normally in day-to-day lives are actually going through some trouble and might need help, but are too afraid to talk about it, due to fear of being judged, ridiculed or discriminated. Thus, the need of creating awareness about this issue was the main focus of my research. As I began talking to my teachers, family members and friends, I realised the seriousness of the issue. Unfortunately, except the print media, not many researchers or filmmakers had given this topic a thought and videos or films available online presented a western perspective. Their understanding of stigma and mental illnesses is far different from Indians. This is mainly because of the social disconnect they face and our socio-economic conditions and unawareness about the issue adds to the stigma. Keeping these views in mind, I thought it best to reach a wider audience with the film, rather than write a dissertation report and present it.

Aim of the study

The basic aim of the short-film was to generate awareness about the stigma surrounding mental illnesses.

Methodology

The short-film was generated through all three stages of production i.e. pre-production, production and post-production.

1. Pre-production

- Idea generation: Looking at the current scenario of the stigma associated with mental illnesses, I thought it is imperative to address the issue. Since not many films were available about how Indians deal with stigma, I thought my attempt to make a short-film on this subject could in a small way help to generate awareness about the same and reduce discrimination and victim-stigmatization.

- Discussion with the research mentor: After the topic and mode of presentation was finalized, I discussed with my research mentor as to which topics should be emphasized on and who would be the best people to be a part of this project.
- Researching on the internet: In order to know more about the topic, I decided to read online publications, research articles and reference papers. I also found a lot of Indian newspaper articles on the same subject. Since I had planned to direct a short-film on this topic, I planned to watch some related content and found several videos online (however mostly films according to the western perspective were available).
- Talking to subject experts: Psychiatrists, psychologists and counsellors were contacted to discuss the relevance and in-depth information about the topic and understand technical terminologies involved.
- Naming the short-film: Throughout my research, I observed that people who suffer from mental health issues do not want to be stigmatized. So whenever they are asked, "how are you", they answer "I'm Fine", whereas they are not fine. Thus, I decided to name the film "I'm fine".
- Casting: The cast and crew were primarily amateur artists from our college. Interview with a renowned psychologist was also included.
- Selection of the film format: Keeping in mind the aim of the research, I chose to go ahead with a fictionalised format for the short-film. The film includes portrayal of everyday situations, play acting and use of 'Vlog' (video blog) wherein the lead character expresses the emotions and the issues she is facing.
- Duration of the short-film: It was decided that the duration of the film should be 20-25 minutes which would be sufficient to do justice to the subject matter as well as give encourage people to open up and discuss about mental issues.
- Script outline: An outline was prepared to include major scenes like real-life testimonies, establishing shot, health expert interview, changes after medical intervention etc. This outline helped to plan the flow of the story.
- Preparing the equipments: The following equipments are prepared and tested before the actual shoot, during camera and dress rehearsals:

Camera: Sony MPW200,

Format: High Definition (HD),

Storage limit: 32 GB on memory card,

Microphone: Unidirectional mic,

Editing software: Adobe Premiere Pro CS 5.5 (Version Creative Suite 5.5)

2. *Production:* Along with the technical team and crew members, the locations were set-up with props and lights before each shot. All the cast members were present throughout the shoot and helped in other activities like handling lights, mics and other settings when they were not a part of the scene. The shooting was completed in the stipulated time.
3. *Post-production:* It involves transferring data from the camera to the editing machine, adding music, narration and text graphics. As a part of summative evaluation, the film was

screened for an audience of 25 people whose feedback was taken with the help of pre and post-test questionnaire (refer annexure). This was done to understand the effectiveness of the film. The responses were categorized for analysis.

Results

Q1. Can mental illnesses affect anyone irrespective of age and gender?

Response	Percent (%)
Yes	100
No, Maybe, Not sure	-

Q2. Is mental illness hereditary?

Response	Percent (%)
Yes	4
No	56
Maybe	24
Not sure	16

If the percentage of defective genes do not transfer (from the parents) or are not dominant in their expression, the next generation will not go through a mental health issue during the course of their lifetime.

Q3. Is mental illness permanent?

Response	Percent (%)
Yes	-
No	72
Maybe	24
Not sure	4

Q4. What would you do if your best friend was suffering from depression?

	Pre-test	Post-test
Response	Percent (%)	
Ignore	-	-
Advise	36	60
Inform his/her parents	64	40

Q5. Who do you think is the best person to help?

Response	Percent (%)
Family	32
Friends	8
Mental health practitioner	48
Self	12

Q6. What do you think will be the chance of recovery post-treatment?

Response	Percent (%)
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Full recovery	76
Partial recovery	24
No change, worsen situation	-

Q7. Do you think a person can be treated without professional help?

	Pre-test	Post-test
Response	Percent (%)	
Yes	8	16
No	40	40
Maybe	52	44

Q8. Do you think a person suffering from mental illnesses might be violent towards other people?

	Pre-test	Post-test
Response	Percent (%)	
Very likely	12	8
Somewhat likely	64	60
Least likely	12	32
Not sure	12	-

Q9. Would you be comfortable to socialize with a depressive person?

	Pre-test	Post-test
Response	Percent (%)	
Very comfortable	36	40
Probably comfortable	48	48
Not comfortable	16	12

Q10. A problem like depression is a sign of weakness?

	Pre-test	Post-test
Response	Percent (%)	
Yes	24	32
No	56	60
Maybe	8	8
Not sure	12	-

Q11. If you were going through a mental illness, would you tell someone about it?

Response	Percent (%)
Yes	88
No	12

The sooner one accepts that there is a problem and seeks treatment, the better is the recovery.

Q12. What are your feelings towards a mentally challenged person?

Response	Percent (%)
Fear	-
Sympathy	20
Indifference	4
Acceptance	76

Q13. Was the message in the short-film easy to understand?

Response	Percent (%)
Yes	100
No	-

Q14. How effective will be the short-film in terms of message dissemination?

Response	Percent (%)
Very effective	72
Moderately effective	12
Effective	16
Not effective	-

When a viewer sees and listens to a perspective through a film, there is active participation with the content that leads to better acceptance, retention and recollection of information.

Q15. On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest), Please rate the film.

Graph 1: Film rating (1-10)

2 respondents rated the film '7', 9 respondents rated it '9' and 5 of them rated it as '10'. The audiences were glad that this subject was addressed, researched and presented to create awareness.

Discussion

One of the most common mistakes people make while referring to mental disorders is use mental health and mental illness as synonymous of each other. Mental health is a functional state of emotional, psychological and social well-being or merely a state of an absence of 'mental illness' in which every individual can cope with the normal stresses of life and work productively. Whereas, mental illness is a health condition characterized by changes in thinking, emotion, or behaviour (or a combination of these) which is often associated with a non-functional or impaired functioning of the mind that leads to distress in social, occupational and educational settings.

Recent studies have highlighted that while quite a few Indians suffer from mental health disorders (some with severe conditions leading to suicide) they do not seek professional help to overcome the same. As compared to western countries, we prefer to pretend that 'all is well' and present a rosy picture. For us 'health is wealth', but this is restricted only to physical health while mental health problems are not acknowledged. The World Health Organization states that approximately 20 percent Indians suffer from depression during their lifetime. The Indian National Mental Health Survey (2015-16) estimates that only 10-20 percent of patients get treated. This high treatment gap has resulted in excessive disease burden.

The basic focus of the short-film was to try and reduce the stigma associated with mental illnesses and encourage people to come forward and share their story. However, since I was dealing with a sensitive issue, I was not sure if people who have suffered from mental illnesses or have been victimized earlier would be comfortable to share their stories on camera. Thus, I planned to create short fictional stories based on the same theme, weave it into a story and include an expert's comment along the same lines.

Films cause a significant impact on target audiences since there is a point where the viewer connects to a character on an emotional level, builds a new avenue of thinking and strengthens his/her belief system. Whereas in a printed form of media, the reader is a passive recipient and may not retain the information for a long time or share it with others. The other purpose for choosing an audio-visual format over a paper presentation was the 'reach'. The short-film could be showcased, shared among large audiences and could give a better impact as compared to a thesis, due to its usage of audio-visual codes and the narrative text.

Conclusion

Mental illnesses can affect anyone, irrespective of age, gender and ethnicity. There are several incidents that trigger or cause mental illnesses, one of the prominent ones being hereditary factors. However, this does not mean that a child whose parents are suffering from a mental illness will surely be affected. There are chances that a child too may suffer, but this depends on the genetic combination and the impact of triggering factors that may cause mental illnesses. Most people do not even talk about mental illnesses and treat it like a 'taboo', but however think that it is not right to ignore such people. They think it's best to advise them to visit a psychologist or inform their parents. Respondents believe that the best people to seek help are family, mental health practitioners and self-help.

Post-treatment a person can completely recover from mental illnesses and ensure that the condition does not relapse. Apart from professional help, a person could also be treated by other means, but the preliminary requirement is that the sufferer needs to state that he/she is going through a problem. After watching the film, most people thought that there is no harm in socializing with a person suffering from depression or any other mental illness and the fact that the person suffering from it should not be blamed, victimized and discriminated.

Post viewing, many respondents stated that they would be comfortable to share their story and that we must accept a person suffering from mental illnesses, as any other normal person. The film was easy to understand

and thus, such audio-visual forms of media should be used to disseminate messages regarding sensitive topics to change the mind-set of people, generate awareness and try to create an environment of well-being around us.

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Videos

- Alone by Eric Nguyen <https://youtu.be/f23QAm83pno>
- Stop the stigma Image by design <https://youtu.be/DWaOsPiv-gw>
- A student with mental illness by Chara Bui <https://youtu.be/eitRd2Zlvz0>
- There is Hope (music video) by Hope for Mental Health <https://youtu.be/b8C0aBdu4cg>
- It's okay to not be okay by Fixers, UK (campaign led by Jessica Jayne) <https://youtu.be/LxqOvc4-rl0>
- Silent – Mental Health Short Film by Melmulc Films <https://youtu.be/-6SwqSiBmX8>
- Depression – a spoken word poetry by Isjah Matti Maria <https://youtu.be/b7oNmr6As3E>

Mental health-in our own words by 'Mind' – the mental health charity https://youtu.be/_y97VF5UJcc
Negative stereotypes by Kati Morton <https://youtu.be/RkB38dn7XTk>
Origin of mental health stigma by 'Teachings of life' <https://youtu.be/BHSONXBZOwI>
Five mental health stigmas that need to go! Decoded by MTV <https://youtu.be/hCiSE0nIfrg>
Youth lead the fight against stigma by CHEO videos https://youtu.be/LK_WKWojwBw
Reducing the stigma by Have That Talk <https://youtu.be/eio-I8PbdDk>
No Go Britain – stigma delays in mental health by Channel 4 News <https://youtu.be/Dlgm4tg0Kc8>
What mental health looks like – end the stigma by Sarah Hawkinson <https://youtu.be/m0N6rSlyHP4>
Breaking the stigma – a short film about mental health <https://youtu.be/4dEcMsz6Bas>
Four myths about mental health in the US by AJ+ <https://youtu.be/TruDKqHZId8>
Stigmatized: Black churches and mental health by Fusion <https://youtu.be/G5dxqgps-Xs>
Mental Health Stigma, Totnes (Open your mind) by Fixers, UK <https://youtu.be/HDCAEkqG8CA>
Mental Health PSA – stop the stigma by Aggie Cain <https://youtu.be/G5iRe9jlzI4>
Snapping the chain – ending mental health stigma <https://youtu.be/ZcqtFILNSa4>
Mental Health Awareness PSA by Jaida Sandhu <https://youtu.be/jhzhcjh-RVo>
Happy: An anti-stigma film by Nottinghamshire Healthcare <https://youtu.be/gLaToGfEaOg>
Visual essay regarding mental health stigma by Christopher Bertini <https://youtu.be/V7RfJE5CUok>
Laurier Mental Health Anti-stigma story - Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo <https://youtu.be/8JtCZLtCELS>