

mind
matters



HEALTH

mind matters



MINU BUDHIA

I often worry about the mistakes of my past and feel anxious about the future. Am I thinking too much?

Overthinking is often a result of wanting to control our surroundings and chasing perfection in all aspects of our lives. We want to live in the perfect house, with a perfect family, have perfect friends and enjoy a perfect lifestyle. When the reality of our lives is vastly different from what we want it to be, we are often unable to control our thoughts and think of dire and mostly improbable outcomes and consequences. One worry ends and another starts and one cannot relax when one wishes to. If it begins to hamper one's daily life, you should consider visiting a counsellor.

My spouse has been having a hard time for a while, but doesn't want to visit a psychologist. What should I do?

Stigma is one of the main reasons why people think twice about getting themselves mental healthcare that they need. They wonder what others will think if they find out, or make fun of them if they don't understand his or her problem. Another reason for people not wanting to get help is that they refuse to believe that they need help. They view it as a weakness rather than as an illness. You can have a conversation with your spouse to find out the reason. Also, you could explain that when we break a bone, have high fever, or even just a cough or a cold, we don't hesitate even once to call the doctor. In the same way, we should consult a psychologist when we haven't been feeling good emotionally.

I feel I don't fit in anywhere. I hesitate to speak up at work meetings and even have trouble voicing my opinion at home. How can I be less scared of talking in front of others?



It sounds like you're having some self-confidence issues. And if you're a shy person or an introvert, such situations can be especially difficult. The good news is, one can work on one's confidence at any stage in life. With a little bit of practice, faith in yourself, and some professional guidance, you can recognise your self-worth and build your confidence from there. Write down a list of five strengths and five weaknesses and then first look at the strengths. Then move on to the weaknesses and pick the one that scares you the most and one that scares you the least. See if there are books you can read, and workshops or classes you can attend to improve upon these two. And if it still seems too difficult on your own, you can visit a coach or a counsellor to help you in your journey to becoming a confident person.

sessions of couple counselling. This will not only help you to get better, but also help to heal the existing rift. Also, you should sit down as a couple, explain to your children what the current situation is, answer any questions they have and show them how you're working on healing yourself.

My husband is obsessed with keeping things in order and is

furious if his books, clothes, or personal items are not kept the way he wants. He's also very particular about everything being spotlessly clean. Do you think he has OCD?

Some people are very meticulous about their appearance and surroundings. Casual and blatant misuse of this term in conversation and across various types of media has led to a general misconception about what Obsessive Compulsive Disorder really is. If the person's habits start disrupting their daily schedule and prevent them from living life as usual, it is best to get

I've recently been diagnosed with depression and have started going to see a psychologist regularly. My wife is very scared and doesn't want our son and daughter to spend time with me. Please help.

Psychological issues directly or indirectly have an effect on almost every sphere of our lives. As depression influences our overall perception of our life, it also changes our attitude and decision-making skills, thereby affecting our relationship with others. As you had been dealing with a mental health issue without treatment till now, for a long time you might have been impatient, easily irritated, tired often, and disinterested in your surroundings. This may have strained your relationship with your family, so this may be a reason why your wife is having doubts. The fact that you're getting the help you need is a positive step. Explain this to her, and after discussing with your psychologist, maybe opt for a few

help. However, it is not possible to confirm a diagnosis without a psychometric test, so if you're worried, please make an appointment with a psychologist.

Minu Budhia is a psychotherapist, counsellor, founder of Caring Minds, ICanFly, Cafe ICanFly, and a TEDx speaker. Write to askminubudhia@caringsminds.co.in

mind matters



MINU BUDHIA

I'm a 30-year-old, unmarried woman. An introvert, I don't use social media. Since completing my post-graduation in HR in 2013, I've been trying for government jobs. I've appeared for exams more than 25 times, but couldn't crack any. After six years, I have no confidence left to do any job. My peers have gone way ahead of me in life and this makes me suffer from an inferiority complex. I've become a recluse, and get cold feet before any interview. I've always wanted to be an independent woman, but now it seems like a distant dream. I feel worthless, lost and devoid of any purpose in life. Am I not good enough?

First of all, you must congratulate yourself on your dedication to a goal. That you have stuck to taking the exams for six years, especially without any positive results, shows your determination to give your

best, no matter the situation. I can understand that it may seem disheartening to have not landed your dream job, but it is still not too late. The skills that you have developed while preparing for these exams are also an asset. To start, you can approach a number of exam coaching centres or tutorials that coach school students for a part-time, if not full-time position. You can also consider applying to local private schools in your area or even start giving private tuitions yourself. Even starting a micro business of your own in an area of your interest can work.

Like you, there are a very large number of students who face this same problem when they reach the cut-off age for government exams. Please do not base your self-worth on this. You are worthy of finding and having a good career and you will overcome this feeling. You just need a bit of time. Someone is always doing better than another person in life and career-wise, so do not lose heart by comparing yourself with your peers.

Give yourself the opportunity to start afresh, and you are likely to lead the independent life you have always wanted. And if you find yourself still struggling with confidence issues, visit a counsellor for a few sessions and specific guidance. Wishing you all the best for your future!

HEALTH

Over time I have noticed that I have developed some negative traits that I want to get rid of. I constantly feel fatigued, am plagued with internal conflict, fear of failure, self-criticism, self-disgust, self-neglect, and am addicted to pornography. I have poor social skills, no meaningful relationships, am indifferent to those around me, and have major trust issues. I'm a 23-year-old working in Calcutta in the IT industry and live with my parents. Sometimes my anger borders on aggression and I've nearly hit my mom. I cannot discuss my problems with my parents, but I want to get help and am open to visiting a psychologist or psychiatrist and even trying medication so my life can go back to normal. Please guide me towards a plausible solution.

In today's world of instant communication and instant gratification, we seem to have forgotten that building and nurturing relationships isn't as quick and easy as making instant noodles. Having a support system of friends and family is an essential thing in our lives. When that support is not there, it is easy to withdraw into a shell, become indifferent to the world around us, and give up on building new relationships.

Poor social skills often impact one's self-confidence and self-esteem, leading one to refrain from forming new bonds of love or friendship and developing trust issues. Negative experiences in the past can complicate matters further. And the fact that you are unable to share your fears and disappointments with someone, possibly because of the fear of being judged, fuels your social isolation. At this time, watching pornography provides you with a distraction and release from your frustration at not having a real-life meaningful relationship. And your self-criticism, self-disgust and anger issues also possibly stem from your shame at your addiction.

It is good to hear that you are open to visiting a mental professional and I advise you to do so immediately before things escalate as your frustration is leading to anger issues that are causing you to become potentially physically abusive.

I'm a girl in my late teens and I used to be an extrovert. I suddenly find myself allergic to all kinds of human interaction, no matter how short. Whenever I find myself with a lot of people, in school or at a party, I feel drained. I've become excessively rude to my loved ones. Even when I'm alone, I spend my time overthinking, dwelling on past mistakes, doubting my abilities and panicking about my future. My leisure activities have now become a nightmare. I'm physically, mentally exhausted, jaded and feel a compulsion to run away from everything and everyone I know. This is the year of my board examinations. Please help.

Being a teenager can be quite difficult, especially your late teens where you need to make career-related decisions that will impact and influence your future. The emotions you are going through are quite natural if you're feeling like this for a short time period, especially since you are naturally stressed about your board examinations.

It could also be the result of any unfavourable event in your life that has dealt a blow to your self-confidence, making you feel like you are losing control over your life. Or maybe someone close to you has let you down. It is important to find the cause to be able to understand why you are feeling the way you do.

The feelings you have described are sometimes also part and parcel of growing into ourselves. As we mature, many of our old behaviours, lifestyle choices, and even choices in friends change. It could also be the result of anxiety surrounding the uncertainty of a new future. However, if you have suddenly lost interest in all the things you once loved, are constantly fatigued, and your eating and sleeping patterns have changed drastically, I would suggest you visit a counsellor.

This is especially important if you have been feeling low for over six to eight consecutive weeks as these may be the signs of depression, but one cannot diagnose that without carrying out the relevant tests and meeting the person.



I'm a 42 year-old man and I have a strange problem. I am extremely afraid of sleeping alone in the house. I'm constantly worried and anxious that there is a ghost or a soul around there somewhere. I've tried many things to divert my mind but have failed. Because of this problem I've had to leave many jobs which required travelling and outstation tours as I just can't sleep alone in a hotel because of my problem. Please help.

Each of us have something we are scared of and there is no shame in admitting that. The fear of being alone and the fear of what is lurking in the dark at night is quite common. Many adults have never spent a night alone in an apartment or home in their entire lives, and if that is the case with you, it may be one of the causes of your anxiety. That you are specifically scared of ghosts or souls may be the result of some childhood trauma that happened related to being left alone. It could also be a result of our rich folklore and the tales we hear and tell children to scare them into falling asleep quickly.

Since your fear is having a negative impact on your career, it is essential that you seek professional help. A counsellor or psychologist will be able to help you find the reason why you are afraid and also give you coping tools and mechanisms necessary to overcome your phobia.

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HEALTH

I am a 30-year-old state government employee, working for the past five years. I panic when I have to use a lift. I feel like I am having a major respiratory issue and may have a heart attack in no time. I don't have any heart-related issues. These symptoms have become more prominent over the last

10-12 months. I am also a bit scared to board trains for any long journey. I have been diagnosed with 'generalised anxiety disorder' and my doctor has prescribed two medicines to control anxiety disorder. But I don't know if it is helping

because I still panic if I have to stay at any other place except my house. The feelings that come to my mind are that if I have to be hospitalised, who would be there to look after me and so on... and eventually, palpitation starts. These issues are creating problems in my personal as well as professional life. Hence, I request you to advise some measures so that I can live a happy, stress-free and panic-free life.

K.C., Cooch Behar

I must congratulate you on seeking help and getting treatment for your 'generalised anxiety disorder' diagnosis. It is so good to see the stigma around getting help for mental health issues slowly and steadily decreasing. If you are already under the care of a psychiatrist and taking medication, I would advise you to speak with him/her some more about your issue, as they will already have a specific

treatment plan.

If you are under the care of your general physician for your medication, I would advise you to speak with a counsellor or psychologist who will tailor specific coping mechanisms for you.

In terms of some general things you can do, the first one would be to lower your caffeine intake. If you are used to having multiple cups of tea and coffee or energy drinks, opt for green tea instead. Also, if you feel an anxiety or a panic attack coming on, try this 5-4-3-2-1 grounding exercise.

Take a few deep, long breaths first. Then look for five things/objects you can see around you, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste. I hope this will help you. I would advise you to continue with your medication under the supervision of your doctor. It may take some time to have effect, but it will most definitely help.



I completed my BSc in 2017 and am preparing for banking and SSC examinations. Despite several attempts and much study, I have not been able to achieve any success. So I have decided to stop pursuing the dream of a government job and now want to join a private company so I can help my family financially. But I find myself unable to do so and I have no idea why. Whenever I try to take some action towards securing a private sector job, for some reason I don't know, I stop myself. I have been staying by myself in a mess/ hostel for the past two years. I really want to leave this place but due to a strong bonding with my friends here, I can't leave. I have decided to continue my preparation for these government exams till June next year and then join some skill-development courses or start applying for private jobs. I am already 23 years old and I just want to set my life in order. Please guide me.



I MUST CONGRATULATE YOU ON SEEKING HELP AND GETTING TREATMENT... IT IS SO GOOD TO SEE THE STIGMA AROUND GETTING HELP FOR MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES SLOWLY AND STEADILY DECREASING

J.J., Odisha

It takes a lot of dedication, hard work, concentrated study, and a bit of luck to crack examinations where the applicants number in hundreds of thousands if not lakhs, and where the number of open positions are in a few hundreds. The majority of those

I'm a 16-year-old girl in love with a boy who is four months younger than me. We've been in a relationship for over two years. In August he moved to Agra with his family. I managed the last few months by studying hard and even came first in class. We didn't have any contact between us, but over the past few days we're in touch again. I don't have any friends from childhood. I think I'm getting into depression. I love him and I can't leave him. Now my exams are just about to start and I'm not able to focus on my studies at all. It is too much and I just want to run away from everyone. Please help me.

T.A., Calcutta

That you have identified your problem and have asked for help is very important and shows your maturity even at this young age. As hard as this may be to hear, running away from our problems is not the solution, but the beginning of more problems. The pain from the loss of young love is one that many of us, across generations, have felt. It is natural to feel the loss of a companion who is so close to our heart and, consequently, feel distracted and dejected, but that should not stop you from living your life. It is very commendable that you are doing so well academically. It is important for your future, and you must work towards maintaining this high standard.

You've also mentioned the lack of friends from childhood. As your boyfriend was also filling your emotional need that is fulfilled by friends, I am not surprised that you feel forlorn and depressed as your attachment to him is a great one. It also seems that your self-confidence and self-esteem has taken a hit. The first friend you need to make is yourself. You are your own best friend and you must treat yourself with the same love and care as you would another.

Once you have done that, a simple way to make an attempt at making new friends would be to join a hobby class — singing, dancing, painting — whatever you like. When you are around people who like to do the same things as you, it is quite easy to make acquaintances, if not friends.

In today's time, with the advancement of communication technology, one is not only able to e-mail, text, call, one can even video call in real time. Long-distance relationships may be difficult, but are certainly not impossible. You two can keep in touch this way and see how it goes.

who appear in such examinations, when not finding a positive outcome, end up in private jobs, so don't consider this a failure. It is quite possible that you will flourish even better than you had imagined and find yourself far more successful in the traditional definition of success.

Now coming to your issue of being unable to leave your hostel. It is quite natural to form strong bonds of attachment with fellow students, especially in such high-pressure situations where it feels like they are the people who best understand what you are going through. This connection has quite possibly made your hostel a comfort zone that you do not want to leave, especially when the future seems so uncertain at this point. Another reason could be that you feel like you may betray your friends by moving forward and finding success in a different field. If the bonds of friendship you have formed are true, they will stand the test of time and distance. I wish you good luck for your forthcoming exams and wish you a bright and happy future.

Minu Budhia, a psychotherapist, counsellor, founder of Caring Minds, iCanFly, Cafe iCanFly, and TEDx speaker, answers t2 queries related to mental healthcare and adolescence issues. Send your queries to askminubudhia@caringminds.co.in or t2onsunday@abp.in

I'm a 20-year-old girl who has, due to a mental illness, become both mentally and physically weak. My mother neither understands me, nor comforts me. Every day, we have fights and she shouts at me, swears at me, and even calls me 'an animal'. On the other hand, my father is hardly ever angry at me and we have talks on various subjects, which my mother calls 'a waste of time'. My mother has never understood me after my illness. Seeing the way my aunt treats my cousin with love, and then seeing how my mother treats me, I feel very depressed. What should I do?

Anonymous, Calcutta

A parent-child relationship is a complicated one and differs from person to person, family to family. By comparing your mother-daughter relationship with that of your aunt's and cousin's, you are doing yourself an injustice and adding to your grief. The grass always seems greener on the other side, and one never knows what truly is going on in another's relationship.

If you have once had a loving relationship with your mother, I believe you will share some of that bond again, but it may take some work and some time. There are many reasons why she may be behaving this way.

Mothers often blame themselves when their children suffer from any illness, thinking that they have failed to do their duty. Sometimes family members blame the mother. She herself may be under tremendous pressure about your illness and may be lashing out at you because she cannot do anything to control the situation, or make you better herself.

Since you have a deep bond with your father, who may be processing the situation better, she may be resenting the closeness you two share. She may also be mourning the loss of the person you were before, the loss of a future for you that she had imagined, the loss of the relationship you two previously shared. However, that doesn't justify this behaviour.

I would strongly suggest that the three of you go in for a few sessions of family counselling. It may also help if you speak with your mother in front of your psychologist/psychiatrist to tell her how you feel and to understand why she is behaving the way she is.

As you have mentioned you have a mental illness, I hope you are keeping your appointments with your psychologist or psychiatrist and meeting him/her for regular sessions. Regarding the physical weakness, I would suggest you visit your general physician to get a general check-up.

Also, if you are on any medication for your mental illness, check to ensure that you are taking them as advised and speak to your psychologist/psychiatrist if you feel it is making you feel weak. I hope you become better soon and regain at least a cordial relationship with your mother.

mind matters



MINU BUDHIA

I am a 19-year-old girl. I have passed 10+2 in 2018 from a Bengali-medium school. My parents, especially my father, always wanted me to become a doctor but I never did.

From my childhood, I have loved the sky and the space beyond. All I have wanted from my life is to become an astronaut. I had to take admission in a prominent exam preparation institute to get coaching for NEET last year, but I came home after four months.

It was a huge shock for my family because my father had already invested Rs 96,000 on it.

Then, in early 2019, I took admission in a college for BSc in biology. I gave up the preparation and my father stopped talking to me for two or three months because of this. He had told everybody that I am going to be a doctor. So, when I said I want to give up preparing for NEET, he couldn't take it. So, from July 2019, I again started preparing for NEET so that my parents are happy.

But now I've come to know that I can become a NASA astronaut by clearing the IIST exam. I don't know what I should do. Is becoming an astronaut for a middle-class girl as impossible as my parents think? I am confused and getting depressed about this. I cannot focus on my studies and my self-confidence has become very low. I am continuously thinking of ending my life and I have no real friends with whom I can share my thoughts. Please help.

AM, Calcutta

No dream is impossible. However, there are many practical aspects that one needs to consider. While I applaud your dream and determination, the field you are looking at is a very niche and highly specialised one. In addition to the academic qualifications, you need to meet multiple physical, emotional, and mental health parameters. I would advise you to find a mentor who has walked this specific path you want to walk on and speak to them about their experiences.

I am not deterring you from fulfilling your dreams, but am asking you to do all the detailed research necessary to figure out



if that is the life you really want to live and if you can commit to the amount of rigorous work and training that will be necessary.

On another note, I would also like to say that one unfulfilled dream can lead to a much better and brighter one. I myself wanted to become a doctor, but I could not as at that time where I lived, girls could only study humanities. Also, I got married very young. But my dream of helping people remained. As a doctor I could have helped people's physical health, but today, as a psychotherapist and counsellor, I am able to help people with their mental health.

So I will ask you to examine the reason why you want to become an astronaut. Once you figure that out, you will also figure out other fields related to

your dream. Your father wishes to secure your future, which is why he wants you to pursue an established field that has a higher chance of security. If you are able to show him what other backup paths you can choose in the field of your interest, it is likely that he will, over time, come to see your point of view.

I can understand that the pressure is huge, especially considering the financial investment your father has already made, but please rest assured that your parents value your life and your happiness above money. Ending one's life is not a solution, and if you feel you are depressed and are having trouble going about your daily life, please immediately visit a counsellor or a psychologist who can guide you through your present state.

I'm a 21-year-old woman pursuing post-graduation from one of the best colleges in the city. Over time, I have noticed that I am devoid of any goal and am only whiling away my time, doing nothing constructive. This restlessness is leading me to anxiety and depression. I can't help thinking too much about my future. I really want to do well in my examination and land a decent job, but maybe my desire is not strong enough. Please suggest how I can train my mind and use all my energy to change myself for the better.

PB, Calcutta

The first thing you need to realise and accept is that you cannot control the future nor can you guarantee the outcome of any path you choose. You can give your best shot for your academic and professional success by concentrating on the now. Take it one day at a time.

When you wake up, the first thing, even before checking your phone, think of three things that you are grateful for at that moment. It could be as simple as the air you breathe, having a roof over your head, knowing that you will get breakfast, or having a loving family.

Next, make your own bed, even if you have a domestic help. Waking up and completing a short and simple task will put you in a better frame of mind as you will have accomplished something.

Then make a list of three things to do that day — one academic, one hobby-related, and one family- or friends-related. For example — study two chapters, play the piano, call a friend or family member you haven't

spoken to in a long time. Tick off the three items as they are completed. This again will give you a sense of accomplishment. For now, when thinking of the bigger picture is leading to overthinking, start with taking a small step every day.

If you enjoy the subject you are studying and want to pursue an academic career by doing an MPhil or PhD, speak to seniors who have taken the same path to know how it is working out for them. It may be that your coursework is not easy for you to comprehend or possibly is quite different from what you had imagined it would be.

Consult your head of the department or any professor who you can speak to frankly to discuss your concerns. The restlessness may even stem from whether you really want to do your masters or if you are doing it because it is expected of you or you think this is the traditional way to go.

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I WILL ASK YOU TO EXAMINE THE REASON WHY YOU WANT TO BECOME AN ASTRONAUT. ONCE YOU FIGURE THAT OUT, YOU WILL ALSO FIGURE OUT OTHER FIELDS RELATED TO YOUR DREAM

HEALTH

mind matters



MINU BUDHIA

Q: I am a 20-year-old college student suffering from severe OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder). I've had it for five years and it's getting way worse every day and affecting everything from religious matters to studies. I cannot concentrate on my studies and waste time thinking about it. When I try to ignore them I get anxious and start doing certain rituals. How can I stop this and focus on my studies?

BR

A: Dear BR, I hope you have been diagnosed with OCD by a professional. If not, please visit a psychologist for a psychometric assessment to confirm or refute the diagnosis.

I say this as sometimes severe anxiety may result in OCD-like symptoms and would need a completely different treatment plan. And if a psychologist has confirmed OCD, you must continue to visit him or her to chalk out a treatment and management plan. Cognitive

Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is what works best for such situations.

But you must understand a couple of things. You must accept that you have an invisible chronic illness and come to terms with the fact that it can be managed, but not cured.

The second is the nature of OCD. While compulsions (rituals) are something you can train yourself to control, obsessions are thoughts. The more you try not to think about the elephant in the room, the more you think of it. Obsessions primarily stem from fear and compulsions from the feeling that doing a particular action in a particular way will keep one safe. The first thing to do is dig deep and find the root cause of this fear.

Third, medication is an option, but it is not a quick fix. You would still need to combine it with therapy. Finally, you have to understand that the treatment will take time. So, you'll have to be patient.

I can empathise with your situation. The need to complete 'specific rituals' can become a major



hindrance to our daily activities. Unfortunately, OCD is taken lightly and, mostly, incorrectly. So friends and family may not consider it a severe issue. But you must explain, at least to your family, your particular set of issues.

If you are not confident that you can, take them to your counselling session where your psychologist would be able to help. As it is affecting your studies, I suggest you speak to your professor to get their cooperation. I wish you all the best.

Q: I am a 15-year-old girl and was in a relationship with a boy in my class for two years. I lost my sense of self for him, but wonder whether I am right in breaking up with him. It feels suffocating. I've lost interest in my studies. I am going to appear for my first board exams this year. I used to top my class, but from Class IX my scores have been falling. My teachers think I have lost my way and my friends are betraying me. I want to get high marks, but I can't think clearly. I have even thought of ending my life. I am afraid to tell my mom about this. I just want to do well in my studies as everyone has some expectations from me. Please help.

MD, Calcutta

A: Dear MD, being a teenager is difficult. Throw in relationship problems, difficulties with studies and unsupportive friends, and you can feel overwhelmed and out of control. So, the first thing is to tell someone — an elder sibling or cousin, an aunt or uncle, or even a family friend. Although you're scared of telling your mother, it may actually help to share your feelings with her instead of

dealing with these intense emotions all on your own.

If you are feeling suicidal, please call a helpline immediately and find a counsellor. If speaking with your school counsellor is intimidating, connect with a psychological wellness facility to speak with a counsellor or a psychologist. Sometimes, all you need is an unbiased person to reveal all your anxieties to.

About the relationship issue, you're still quite young to be so heavily invested. Since you specifically mentioned feeling suffocated everywhere and are feeling like you have lost yourself, I will say this: If you feel you are facing emotional abuse, or are being gaslighted, please get help. Your grades slipping are a by-product of all the stress and anxiety you seem to be under, so first you need to take care of that. Your full concentration now should be on your emotional wellness. And those who have your best interests at heart, will support you irrespective of your academic achievements.



Q: I am an 18-year-old girl with my board exams coming up soon. I haven't even covered 10 per cent of my syllabus. I do not waste time on social media or with friends. I sit with my books but cannot study. From a topper in Class 10 I have even failed tests now. I don't understand why I cannot study. As I want to become a doctor, from Class XI I have tried to follow what toppers do — attended coaching institutes, skip social events and vacations and use social media only for studies. But nothing has worked. Now, my classmates, teachers,

friends and parents see me differently. I am very depressed and will be shattered if I don't score well. My self-confidence and self-esteem are at all-time lows. What should I do?

Anonymous, Calcutta

A: There are three things that stand out in your email. One, you're extremely stressed and much in need of a break. Two, you're seeking validation from friends, family, teachers in terms of academic

success. Three, you are a sincere student who in trying to follow the path of other toppers, has possibly lost her way.

First things first, take a deep breath. If you have been an exemplary student before, you can become one again, but, for that, you need to take care of

both your emotional and physical health. Locking yourself up with your books and giving up social life has taken a toll. Too much of a good thing is never good. So, it's time to do some smart work in addition to hard work. Turning into a recluse may not work for you. Moderation is key. Make a time-table that not

only includes subjects, chapters, and sections, but also includes short breaks, meal times, phone calls, hobbies, exercise, and a few social events. There's still time to turn things around.

Coming to your feelings of low self-esteem and self-confidence, you must understand that your friends and family care for you for who you are and not because you were a topper. They might be worried about the academic decline, but even more about you and how it's affecting you.

Now for the tough love part of my answer. Seeking validation is the root cause of being dissatisfied with yourself. In the end, we are all in charge of our own happiness and confidence. It is something that we find from within ourselves. You have to love and respect yourself enough to treat your mind, body and soul well. Expecting good things from yourself is important, but so is managing that expectation. I believe you will come through with flying colours in your exams.





A guide to surviving social distancing and work from home

HEALTH

mind matters



MINU BUDHIA

As social distancing becomes a necessary precaution to combat Covid-19, most of our familiar routines have been disrupted and many of us have been jolted out of our comfort zones. While worry and stress are quite natural reactions, it is not uncommon for many of you to be experiencing high levels of anxiety or the beginning stages of depression. The current climate of uncertainty may be a trigger for some of you, especially those who are already battling mental health issues. So, for starters, please know that it is okay not to be okay and that you are not alone.

If you're a professional who is suddenly facing an indefinite period of work from home, or someone in self-quarantine, embracing the philosophy of JOMO — the Joy of Missing Out — might be just what you need right now. Here are a few things you can do and keep in mind to take care of your emotional wellness and maintain a positive outlook.

BE THANKFUL

- First and foremost, recognise that you are lucky enough to have a job that can be done from home.
- Second, be thankful that your manager or boss realises that, trusts you, and cares enough for your wellbeing to sanction a WFH.
- Third, appreciate the little things like no rush-hour traffic, no facetime with that one toxic co-worker, and lunches that you can actually have at lunchtime instead of a hurried four o'clock.
- And don't forget the joys of a non-existent commute — not only are you saving a bit on fuel or cab fare, the planet also has the chance to breathe a little greener.

WORKDAYS AND WORK HOURS

- **Stick to your usual work routine.** Yes, this includes slipping on work-appropriate attire. There's no need to be suited and booted, but get out of your PJs. Smart casuals should do it. Also, pick a relatively quieter spot at home with a table or desk. Stay away from working on your laptop on your bed.
- **Set boundaries.** This applies to both your family and your office people. Let your family know that you are not to be disturbed

between X to Y hours and stick to that. Likewise, let your co-workers know the same. WFH works best when you can be reached during mutually agreed-upon hours. This ensures that neither are you goofing off, nor are you burning yourself out by overworking.

- **Stay connected.** Miss team briefings or talking to your favourite co-workers? Schedule short and sweet conference calls or video-calls at the beginning or the end of the workday to make sure everyone's on the same page. And if need be, check in with the work WhatsApp group when logging in and logging out.

WEEKLY OFFS AND EVENINGS

- **Read and Write.** Reread childhood favourites, nightstand tomes you've put off stating lack of time as an excuse, or start writing that book you've secretly wanted to. Other options include journaling or even writing letters. Yes, actual letters. You know, the kind that can be posted. Put pen to paper, literally.
- **Learn something fun.** Try your hand at a new hobby or resume an old one. Origami, gardening, knitting, a new language, baking. There's loads to learn with YouTube at your fingertips.
- **Upskill.** Being a

lifelong student has never been more important. Explore the latest developments in your industry and sign up for free or paid online courses. And while you're at it, update your resume by polishing it or giving it a complete makeover. Think about the career goals you'd like to fulfill in the next one, three, and five years. In fact, why not try making a career vision board? Learn a new language which you have been thinking for long.

- **Practise genuine self-care.** This doesn't just mean bubble baths or face masks, though they're always welcome. This is the perfect time to rest well and sleep better. Go ahead and establish a pre-sleep routine and a bedtime. Yes, these exist. Even for adults. Also, don't forget to continue exercising. Some movement will be necessary to offset a couple of inevitable couch potato days spent watching reruns.
- **Connect and reconnect.** Make phone calls, video calls and reconnect with friends and family you haven't spoken with in ages. The people you always mean to call, but don't because it gets buried under your to-do list. Grandparents make it to the top of the list. No exes or 'it's complicated' maybe relationship people please.
- **Give social media a rest.** Now because you can't meet people in person, don't

overdo the social media. Just because you can look at it all day doesn't mean you should.

A SPECIAL NOTE...

...For Working Parents with Young Children or Special Needs Children. The major change in your child or children's regular routine — schools closing temporarily — will affect each child differently. While shy children may feel safer and happier to be at home, special needs children or regular children habituated to activity-packed routines (attending multiple hobby and/or sports classes) may have a harder time. As a parent, too, you're suddenly finding yourself spending a lot more than the usual facetime with them, especially if you and other family members are working from home. While this is a wonderful opportunity for you and your family to bond with your child in new ways, this may also lead to increased stress.

Thus it is vital to proactively monitor the words and the body language of people at home or those in regular contact with your child. Keep children away from adult conversations where the family may be venting to express their fears and frustrations.

Your child's home is their safe space, so please do not let them hear words, see gestures, or be at the receiving end of any behaviour that makes them feel like a burden or an inconvenience. Read to them, watch television with them, play with them, or even just sit with them while they do their own thing.

At the end of the day, all children — yes, even your sullen teenagers who don't seem to want to exchange two sentences — ultimately just want to feel safe and loved.

To end, this is a difficult time where we all need to support each other. If you know someone who has mental health issues, call and check on them. And if you're feeling too overwhelmed, reach out. Remember, there's no shame in asking for help. You are not alone.

Minu Budhia, a psychotherapist, counsellor, founder of Caring Minds, iCanFlyy, Cafe iCanFlyy, and TEDx speaker, answers queries related to mental healthcare and adolescence issues. Send your queries to askminu-budhia@aringminds.co.in or t2onsunday@abp.in

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We've gone from voluntary social distancing to mandatory social isolation and each one of us is embracing this time period in a different way. With our usual life goals being driven by our desire to thrive and not just survive, to live and not just exist, switching to this survival mode that we're all currently in is more than likely to exacerbate or cause overwhelming stress, crippling anxiety and debilitating depression.

While it may seem like the world is out to get you, it is not. Life as we know it is no longer the same, and it is okay to feel sad about it. When the only thing that seems certain right now is the uncertainty that looms over our every day, we're all slowly realising that the control we think we have on our lives is, after all, just an illusion. Trust yourself to be able to overcome this stressful period. Inhale. Exhale. This too shall pass. And till it does, here are some ways to get through it.

FEEL YOUR FEELINGS

While it is wonderful if you are embracing the lockdown days positively and using this time to learn new things, it is also perfectly okay not to. It is a scary time and you have every right to feel your feelings. Emotions are okay. Crying is okay. Feeling vulnerable is okay. Feeling scared is okay. It is okay not to be okay.

This is not the time for us to be keeping up with the Joneses. Just because your neighbour is posting workout videos, your cousin is cooking up a storm, your friend is learning a new language or your colleagues are preparing to launch their side hustle, doesn't mean that you have to do the same. This time is not a rat race. It is time to pause and reflect. It is time to focus on your relationships. It is time to focus on your mental health.



Picture: Getty Images

REDEFINE IMPORTANT

It has been so easy till now, in the hustle and bustle of daily life, to blur the lines between important and urgent. The daily to-do lists in our head or on paper, at home or at work, have driven us to choose urgent over important. Most of the time this sense of urgency has had a say in, or even dictated, what we define as priority in our lives.

With life as usual at a standstill and replaced with a new normal, we are compelled to reflect upon and redefine what we consider important. And here self-care and mental wellness top the list. Why? Because if you do not take care of yourself, you will not be able to take care of your loved ones. If you're stressed, anxious and depressed, and have no healthy coping mechanisms, how will you help loved ones who may be facing the same or other mental health issues?

Being cooped up in one specific location for weeks, with or without family, is bound to put us under pressure and affect our mental health. While we adapt to a new, temporary, collective normal, it has never been more important to pay attention to our emotions and relationships.

mind matters

around the same people 24x7 for an extended period of time may well be giving you cabin fever. Every family will have its own unique set of challenges. What about family disagreements? Articulate your issues, do not mimic escalating behaviour like shouting, agree to disagree if possible, don't be confrontational, and always be

respectful, even when you're arguing. Especially since you can't slam the door and go outside.



MINU BUDHIA

TIES WITH CHILDREN: Whether you have young children or teenagers, schedule some

FOCUS ON YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

RELATIONSHIP WITH YOURSELF: This is the time when we realise that each day counts. Each moment counts. It is an opportunity to build and rebuild our relationships, to repair and restore what has been broken, to make a fresh start. And you need to start with yourself.

Who are you? A parent, a sibling, a child, a friend, a spouse, a partner, an employee, a boss, a caregiver... the list goes on.

While the roles you play in your life are of course important, don't limit yourself within them. Remember you do have an identity beyond the social, familial, and professional roles you play. Set aside some me time to introspect daily. What is your usual internal monologue? Are you being your own best friend? Spend some much-needed time alone with your thoughts.

RELATIONSHIP WITH FAMILY: We love our families but being

time to just talk to them. Activities are of course fun and good for bonding, but your children just want to be heard. Listen attentively and you may well become their trusted friend too.

RELATIONSHIP WITH SPOUSE: The crumbling of usual routines may have resulted in both you and your partner working from home. To make this sudden transition to being co-workers and sharing a co-working space easier, set up a work schedule with a fixed start and stop time. And don't forget to pencil in coffee breaks.

RELATIONSHIP WITH ELDERLY PARENTS: When it comes to elderly parents, understand that they may be out of their depth and quite out of their comfort zone, so don't trivialise their concerns. Don't dismiss them or what they have to say. Encourage them to express their feelings and assuage any fears you can. This is even more important for seniors with Alzheimer's and dementia.

HEALTH

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MINU BUDHIA

It is okay not to be okay. And there is no shame in asking for help. Let's try to demystify depression

Hiding behind smiles or tears, success or failure, wealth or poverty, depression is a silent, invisible, and serious mental health issue that often gets swept under the carpet and locked behind closed doors. It is also a silent killer as depression is one of the leading causes of suicide.

The World Health Organisation describes depression as "...an illness characterised by persistent sadness and a loss of interest in activities that you normally enjoy, accompanied by an inability to carry out daily activities, for at least two weeks". Let's look at some facts on depression and suicide from WHO.

- India has 9,000 psychiatrists, or one doctor for every 100,000 people
- One out of seven people in India suffered from mental illness between 1990 to 2017.
- More women are affected by depression than men.
- Every 46 seconds, someone, somewhere in the world, commits suicide.
- For each suicide, there are more than 20 suicide attempts.
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death in 15 to 25-year-olds.

What are the signs of depression?

Identifying indicators of depression is key to understanding whether a loved one is feeling depressed or has depression. While you need to visit a psychologist and undergo assessment for a confirmed diagnosis, here are a few red flags that you should watch out for...

- Sleeping too much, too little, or restless sleep.
- Eating too much, too little or binge eating.
- Feeling empty, fatigued, hopeless, helpless, anxious, discontent and guilty.
- Losing interest in favourite things — activities, hobbies, food and friends.
- Falling concentration levels, slower than usual in performing tasks.
- Withdrawing from friends and family.
- Thinking suicidal thoughts or attempting suicide.

Please note Having only one or two symptoms consistently or all symptoms inconsistently may not necessarily indicate depression. You must visit a mental health professional for a formal diagnosis.

When does a person need professional help?

If you think you, a friend, or a family member has been showing signs of depression consistently for six to eight weeks, it is time to speak with a mental health professional.

Is depression hereditary?

Anybody from any walk of life can have depression. Whether you're rich or poor, old or young, successful or not, an introvert or an extrovert, man, woman, or child — you can get depression. And while some mental health issues can be hereditary and genetic, many are not. A mix of situational, emotional, biological, environmental and socio-economic factors play an important role.

Is depression treatable?

Get help. Give help. Every person with the same health issue reacts to it differently and uniquely. It is the same for depression. While some may take longer than others to respond, most people do get better with regular therapy and/or medication.

I don't want to take medicines to treat my depression as I've heard it is habit forming, but my psychiatrist is recommending it. What should I do?

If you can't take long-term medication to control physical health issues like diabetes, blood pressure, cholesterol, why would you avoid medicine that can help your mind and improve your quality of life? Each person reacts to medicines differently, and an expert psychiatrist will be able to guide and adjust dosages for the best outcome.

Can children be depressed too?

Anyone, at any age, can get depression. Children are susceptible to it too, especially after encountering any severe physical trauma, emotional trauma or abuse. Some common signs of depression in children are

- Withdrawing from friends and family.
- Losing interest in favourite games, foods, hobbies and classes.
- Drastic social behavioural

changes.

- Drastic changes in appetite.
 - Not wanting to go to school.
 - Emotional outbursts including anger, constant crying, picking fights.
 - Self-harm or substance abuse.
 - Taking up smoking or drinking.
- If you think your child, tween, or teen is exhibiting any of these behaviours, please contact a mental health professional immediately.

What are things we can do as parents to create a stress-free environment?

We have to understand and accept that many things that cause stress in our children's lives are situations we have not experienced ourselves. We need to keep an open mind and create a friendly rapport where our children can feel free to discuss any topic under the sun with us.

From a young age, do not shame children for asking questions you may not feel comfortable answering. While many children need encouragement to reach their true potential, give them the freedom to make academic, sports, and cultural hobby choices. Just because you scored 100 per cent in mathematics, loved to play football and played the piano like a prodigy does not mean your child needs to adopt the same path. Also, do not pass judgement on their friends who you do not like or approve of. Monitor the interactions and step in only when an issue seems serious. Keep an open door and an open heart policy when talking to your children and you will be able to help reduce some of their stress.

If I think that my child is having some problems but not sharing them with me, how should I approach them?

Approach your child in a calm and collected manner. You can tell them that you have had a feeling that they may be stressed or sad about something, and if they want to share it with you, you are there to listen. If your child immediately does not share anything, do not get hyper. Tell them you are happy to give them their space and will talk whenever they feel comfortable.

Also reassure them that no matter what, you are there for them. Try this a few times and your child is likely to open up.

Do not cry, do not try emotional blackmail, and do not try to make them feel guilty. Most children are afraid of potential consequences after sharing their problems. If you can make them feel safe, loved and not judged while talking to you, you can build a life-long healthy parent-child relationship.

What is postnatal depression?

Postnatal depression is the depression experienced by new mothers after childbirth. As per WHO, it affects one in six women who have given birth. Some of the signs of this depression include an inability to bond with the baby, not wanting to take care of the baby, feeling overwhelmed all the time, fearing one's own capability of being a good parent, crying spells for no specific reason, and thoughts of harming oneself.

I feel that if I talk about my problems, my family might feel that I am a mental patient. How do I deal with this fear?

The first step to treating a problem is accepting it, which you have done. The second step is asking for help, which you want to do, but you are scared of being rejected and labelled. Here, education and awareness is key. Your family loves you and wants the best for you, but they may still believe in stereotypes and myths that surround mental healthcare. Help break the stigma by educating them about the importance of mental wellness and talk to them about how you feel. Once they understand, they are unlikely to be judgemental.

You can also speak with an open-minded family friend or a relative with whom you share a close bond. They can help you to communicate with your family. And if you are already in counselling, you can try a couple of family counselling sessions with your therapist.

When does one contemplate suicide?

Feelings of hopelessness, loneliness

and worthlessness can cause a person to consistently replay disturbing, negative thoughts and events in their mind. When someone is overwhelmed and overwrought to the point where they feel that their family, their friends and the whole world would be better off without them, they may contemplate suicide.

Are all suicidal threats real?

Suicide threats should never be taken lightly. Inform an immediate family member or call a crisis hotline. However, some manipulative abusers use this as a tactic to keep abuse victims trapped in toxic relationships and marriages. If you feel this is the case, connect with a mental health professional to get help.

Can suicide be preventable?

Getting someone the right help at the right time is crucial to preventing suicide. Most people can be helped if we become truly aware about the emotions of the people in our lives, practise empathy, and lend a patient ear or shoulder to cry on.

How can one help a person suffering from depression and/or suicidal thoughts? If a friend or family member calls and says he/she is feeling extremely low and wants to die, what should I do immediately?

Talk to them and truly listen. Don't pass judgement, don't give examples from your life, don't start listing solutions — just be there for the person and show them how they are loved and valued. Let them express themselves, uninterrupted. At low points in our lives, more than someone telling us, "It will all be okay", we need someone to say, "It's okay not to be okay". Sometimes all we need is someone to talk to. Sometimes all we need is to be heard.

However, if you think they are so distraught that they may harm themselves, do not leave this person alone. Remove all sharp objects, poisonous pesticides/ cleaning solutions, any potentially harmful medication. Also, call a crisis hotline or an emergency mental health clinic or a mental health professional. If this person has been undergoing therapy, contact their psychologist or psychiatrist.

How do I know that my loved one might be suicidal?

- A failed suicide attempt.
 - Someone keeps talking about death, or death as a solution to their problems.
 - Patients with chronic pain or illnesses.
 - Someone who is undergoing severe emotional distress — death of a loved one, dissolution of a marriage, compounding financial debt, extended caregiving for terminal/sick loved ones.
 - Survivors of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse.
- Someone who is suicidal will almost always give a signal or a call for help.

Minu Budhia is a psychotherapist, counsellor, founder of Caring Minds, iCanFly, Cafe iCanFly, and a TEDx speaker. Write to askminubudhia@caringminds.co.in



Photo: iStock

HEALTH

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MINU BUDHIA



My daughter-in-law had her baby three months ago. She had an easy, normal delivery and is breastfeeding the baby. We also have a dedicated domestic help to help with the baby and the whole family pitches in too. Both mother and child are healthy, but my daughter-in-law doesn't seem to want to be around the child, or interact or play with her. Also, she barely interacts with the rest of the family beyond the usual pleasantries and no longer dines with us at the table, preferring to eat in her room. I have heard about postnatal depression and was wondering if she is suffering from it...

First, let me congratulate you on the birth of your grandchild and for being a sensitive and concerned parent-in-law. Postnatal depression is quite common and unfortunately one of the most ignored forms of depression. The social isolation due to the lockdown has been hard on everyone emotionally, and could be an especially rough time for a new mom. If she is unable to meet or connect with people who are her

support system, it may be adding to her emotional burden.

While it is common for many new mothers to feel exhausted and be withdrawn and worried till a couple of weeks after childbirth, it would be a good idea to speak with her physician and a mental health professional since it has been a few months since her delivery. Here are some things you can do as a family to help her feel better.

• Do not keep asking her why she's not fussing about her baby round the clock. What you may be asking

out of concern may sound accusatory and may make her feel worse.

• Offer to turn a parent-child activity into a group one. Sing lullabies, pick out outfits, read together, etc.

• Don't judge and give her some space. She is already possibly feeling guilty about not wanting to spend time with her child. Check in on how she's doing and bring her all her favourite things, but do so without the expectation of a response.

I live in an emotionally chaotic, toxic household and the atmosphere is stressful 24x7. The person who means the most to me is not supportive and I want to learn how to not let that bother my daily life. How do I do that?

The simplest, easiest answer is self-care. When our self-esteem, self-worth, or self-confidence is low, we are more vulnerable in a toxic atmosphere. We have to begin with ourselves. While a supportive family is a wonderful thing, do not let an unsupportive one hold you back. There is often friction in a family if multiple members feel unheard or judged, or misunderstood. If you feel like discussing your life with an unbiased, non-judgemental person to help you navigate your emotional wellness journey,

connect with a counsellor. Until then, here are a few things you can try.

• Try a temporary time out. Take some time to introspect and make a list of your goals, things you want to do, places you want to go, what you want out of life. Also practise responding over reacting.

• Don't feel guilty. Accept that not everyone will understand your needs or accept who you are, even if they are family. Don't blame yourself for being a cause or for not being a solution for the family conflict.

• Build your tribe. Try to build a support system outside of your immediate family. Cousins, friends, even colleagues can be a part of this.

My son had gone to the US for his PhD and after getting a job offer decided to stay on. Over a period of time, he withdrew from family, relatives, friends and rarely is in touch with anyone. We've tried to get through to him via calls and messages, but in vain. After a long time, we were able to speak with him in the first week of April. He told us his physical and mental health are not well. We've been continuously trying to reach him after that, but there's been no reply. Please advise us on how to handle this situation and get him back home.

Connect with any friends or colleagues he has in the US and reach out to them for help. If his workplace has an Indian office, speak with them. Also reach out to the US Embassy here or Indian Embassy there to know how to move forward to help

your son. The fact that your son has told you that he is physically and mentally unwell is a signal for help. He may actually want to come back home, but is worried he may be seen as a failure for doing so. Assure him of how happy the whole family would be to have him home.

Though he may not be replying to calls and messages, keep sending him audio, video, and text messages asking about general things. Ask his friends and favourite cousins to try and reconnect. Don't exclusively make his illness the sole point of conversation. Tell him about positive things happening back home, share photos and videos. In addition to this, please connect with a psychologist or psychiatrist to understand the way forward.

When and how should we break the news to our adopted child? What is the correct age? What should we do if he/she gets to know from someone else?

Make adoption a part of the conversation at home right from the start. When telling stories about families, tell your child how there are different types of families. If any family members or friends have adopted children and they openly talk about it, have your child spend time with their children. Talk about celebrities who have adopted children. Stress on the fact that they are family, that they were chosen to be part of the family, and that they are loved for who they are.

Most parents are scared that their child will feel hurt, or stop loving them, or want to search for their birth parents. It is quite natural for a child to want to learn about their biological background. If you do have any information, share it when it is

age appropriate. They may also have questions about why you chose adoption. It may be difficult to talk about, but please do.

Getting angry is a very natural reaction, so don't chastise them for their feelings. Also, please do not give a guilt trip to your child about how they should be grateful for a better future or better circumstances or a better life.

Around six to eight years of age is a good time to broach the topic of his or her adoption. Do not wait for their teens as teenagers have enough emotional turbulence at that age and are less likely to respond well to the news.

The longer you hide this vital news from your child, the more they will feel that adoption is something to be ashamed of, or a secret. In case your child does find out from someone else, do not deny it. Give your child space to process this, and reassure them that you are there for them. And if you feel the conversation may be too hard to have on your own, or

are worried about an extreme reaction from your child, please consult a counsellor or psychologist to help you with this.

My 20-year-old son has been behaving quite differently over the past few months. He is an easy-going, talkative, cheerful person by nature, but he has become withdrawn and irritable. He often picks verbal fights over little things, rarely plays his guitar and sleeps at odd hours of the day. Is he displaying signs of depression or is he just seeking attention?

When someone is troubled, or themselves feel they are depressed but don't know how to ask for help, they will behave in ways that are often labelled as 'attention-seeking behaviour'. A certain amount of positive attention is something we all crave as humans. For some, a reduction in the amount of attention they are used to may



negatively impact their emotional wellness. It is possible that the lack of social interaction during the lockdown is affecting him. If he is someone who prefers in-person interaction over digital

interaction, this is even more likely.

The fact that his sleeping schedule has altered, he's irritable, and he's not playing his guitar can be considered red flags, but are not grounds for a diagnosis. I would suggest you speak with him calmly and in a non-judgmental way. Mention that you've noticed he seems to be having a hard time and that you are there to listen with an open mind. If he opens up, listen patiently and resist the urge to offer solutions immediately. And if you are still worried, please contact a psychologist or counsellor for a video or telephonic consultation.

Minu Budhia, a psychotherapist, counsellor, founder of Caring Minds, iCanFly, Cate iCanFly, and TEDx speaker, answers t2 queries related to mental healthcare and adolescence issues. Send your queries to askminubudhia@caringsminds.co.in or t2onsunday@abp.in

HEALTH

mind matters



MINU BUDHIA

I've been having suicidal thoughts periodically over many years. I no longer go up to my terrace. I feel overwhelmed pretty much all the time and there's a feeling of tiredness that won't go away, no matter how much I sleep. Is there some way to stop feeling like this?

The first thing I want you to understand is that you matter. You are important. Even if you feel like you have nothing more to look forward to, or nothing more to give. That you have written to me is a positive sign, a sign of hope. Please hold on to that and connect with a counsellor or psychologist who can help you understand in specific detail why you've been feeling this way and how



you can feel better.

And till before your counselling sessions start, please call a helpline. It may seem like a big step to reach out and ask for help, but please do.

Not for anybody else, but for yourself. Because you deserve not to feel this way. Because feeling this way is not your fault. Because you deserve to be happy.

A friend of mine lost her mother about six months back and has been depressed since. As friends, we've tried to help and asked her to go for counselling,

but she's quite headstrong and stubborn, and refuses to take suggestions from anyone. What can we do to help?

The loss of a loved one, especially a parent, can cause immense, immeasurable grief. And everyone experiences and processes grief differently. While some may be able to go back to work the next week, some can't get out of bed for months. Some extroverts drastically decrease their social interaction while some introverts may increase communication with friends and family.

Coming to what you can do to help your friend, try the following:

- **Keep reaching out.** Stay in touch and touch base via messages, calls and texts, but don't expect immediate or enthusiastic replies. Remember, you're doing this to let her know you're there for her. And don't just send messages related to her loss. Send music or video links, comic panels, quotes, e-books — anything that might be of interest to her.
- **Don't ask her to snap out of it.** There are five stages of grief — denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Different people spend different amounts of time in the various stages, and she may be in the fourth stage at the moment. Instead of giving direct practical solutions/suggestions, reassure her that her friends are there for her.
- **Show that you care without**

talking. Sometimes what helps is not a conversation but someone taking care of the daily essentials. Send her groceries, or home-cooked meals, help pay bills online, send a card, arrange for someone to do the daily chores, like washing up, laundry, etc.

If your friend is still going to work or attending school/college classes, has not drastically changed her eating or sleeping patterns, is communicating with friends or family, it may be that she just needs more time to grieve. From your question I can gather that she has not been formally diagnosed with depression. She may, in fact, not have depression, but may definitely need to speak to a counsellor to guide her through her grieving process.

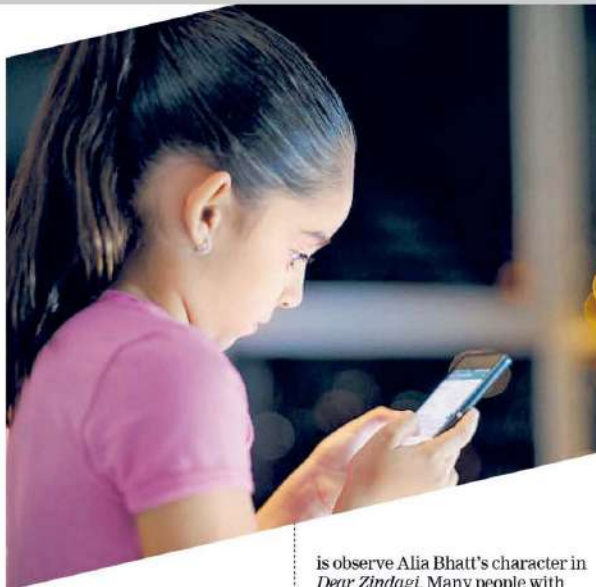
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MINU BUDHIA



My son is 14. He has lost interest in his hobbies, his friends, wants to stay alone, and is frequently rude and angry. Please suggest how to handle this situation.

It is usual for teenagers to undergo a number of physical, mental, and emotional changes that make them feel awkward, frustrated, unattractive, and misunderstood, leading to low self-esteem and low self-confidence. Lashing out and wanting to stay alone for a small period of time is part of growing up, but if this behaviour has been getting worse for over a month, a positive action to take would be to visit a counsellor.

My 11-year-old daughter is glued to the screen. She won't eat, sleep, or do anything without my phone. She even cries, hits out and throws tantrums in public when I don't give

the phone. What should I do?

Children today are given phones and tabs from their diaper days. While parents often do this to keep them quiet, still, entertained, and safe in one place, it has undesirable side effects. The ideal way to go about it is to slowly reduce the screen time. Make a routine covering each day of the week and have fixed times where she can use the phone under supervision. Explain that screen time is a privilege and not a 24x7 affair. At all other times keep your Internet disconnected or password protected. Children mimic the behaviour of their parents. So actively limit your own time using the phone to set a positive example. When she does follow what you say, reward her with positive experiences instead of material things or food.

My girlfriend just started going to a counsellor. Our

friends found out and are making fun of her. She says she's depressed, but she never looks sad and enjoys hanging out with our group. What do I do?

In a country where the stigma associated with mental health issues is very high, the way her friends are reacting is sadly very common. Awareness is the best way to de-stigmatise mental healthcare. Educate your friends by sharing correct information and videos with them about depression and mental health. A simple way to understand

is observe Alia Bhatt's character in *Dear Zindagi*. Many people with depression are good at hiding it, and outwardly go about their daily lives like they have no care in the world. She has shown excellent judgement in getting the help she needs and should not be made fun of for it. Continue to support your girlfriend by being there for her and being okay with talking or not talking about what she's going through.

All of us tried drugs at a school friend's party. Everyone was trying, so I did it too, but I didn't want to. There's a party next week. How do I say no without looking uncool?

Our friends play a very important

role in our lives, often influencing us both for the good and the dangerous. Peer pressure can be difficult to stand up to, but you have shown a lot of courage and self-care by sending in your question. People who force you to try anything that is life-threatening, or even something you don't want to do, are not real friends. In fact, they are the uncool ones. At the party, explain that you're not interested in doing drugs, but are not judging them. However, if you think you might be forced, for this time, make up a good excuse to bunk this party. It might be time to find some new friends.

My classmates say I'm stupid and laugh at everything I say or do. I hate myself. I want to change. Please help.

You are important. You are valued. You are loved. It is very important you understand this. We love our family and friends, but forget to love ourselves. If your classmates are making fun of low grades because you're having trouble with your academics, sports or extracurricular activities, speak with your parents or a trusted teacher. A little bit of extra help is all you might need to improve your grades.

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