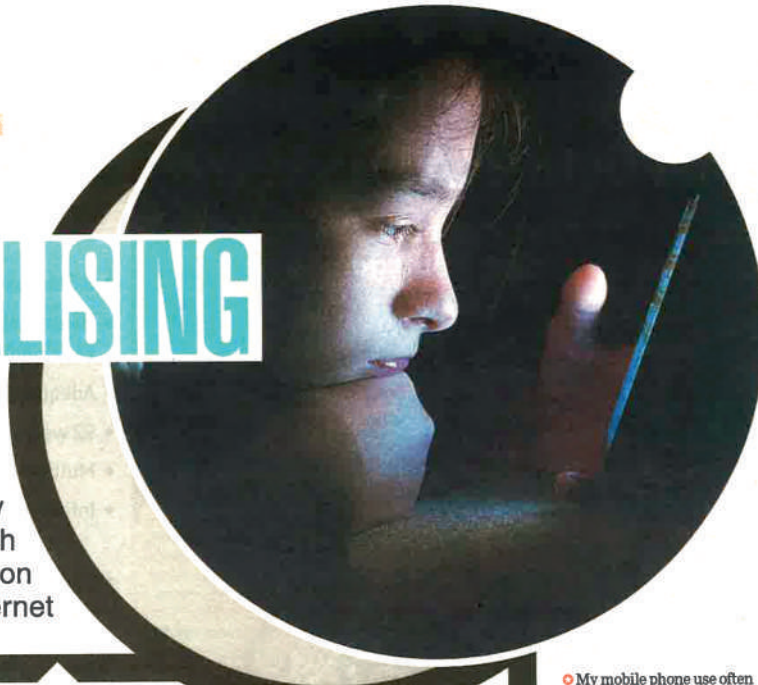


HEALTH

SMART SOCIALISING

Keep your wits about you and try not to randomly divulge too much about yourself on the Internet



Facebook, WhatsApp, Google, Internet surfing. It's now difficult to imagine life without them. There is a pressing need to check messages, comments, number of likes and notifications. We feel weird if we don't have our mobile phone on us. We also find it strange if somebody says they are not on Facebook.



MINU BUDHIA

We can't help but constantly check WhatsApp even in the company of other people. We are always taking pictures to Tweet or Instagram. Technology and social media have thus become as important as oxygen to India's Gen-Y.

However, in this technology-driven environment, it becomes imperative to understand the difference between being technology-savvy and technology-addicted.

WHAT IS TECH ADDICTION?

Technology addiction can be simply defined as excessive use of technology to gain pleasure and escape from reality. It is the compulsion to use technology in order to avoid addressing real-life problems.

WHY DO WE GET ADDICTED TO TECH?

Technological overload helps us to dissociate ourselves from the real world and find solace in the virtual world that we create. The personality that we create on the Internet becomes more valuable to us than who we are in real life.

Teenagers often have poor coping mechanism. In stressful situations they look for something to hold on to. Things like social networking and watching videos online become easy tools of distraction.

For instance, it has been reported that people who are shy, lonely, depressed or

socially insecure, tend to use Facebook more than individuals who are not. Facebook and Twitter become the perfect platform to voice opinions and ideas for people who have low self-esteem and are scared of being judged and misunderstood.

Communication through social media reduces the constraints of face-to-face communication.

IS YOUR USE OF TECH PROBLEMATIC?

If a person answers 'Yes' to three or more of these statements, it may be indicative of a problematic and/or addictive use of a mobile phone according to a study by Mark D. Griffiths, a professor at Nottingham Trent University.

- My mobile phone is the most important thing in my life.
- Conflicts have arisen between me and my family and/or my partner about the amount of time I spend on my mobile phone.

Technological overload helps us to dissociate ourselves from the real world and find solace in the virtual world that we create. The personality that we create on the Internet becomes more valuable to us than who we are in real life



○ My mobile phone use often gets in the way of other important things I should be doing, such as working or studying.

- I use my mobile phone as a way of changing my mood.
- I have lied to other people about how much I use my mobile phone.

Cecilie Schou Andreassen, professor at the Department of Clinical Psychology, University of Bergen, and her colleagues have come up with six criteria to determine the Bergen Facebook Addiction Scale (BFAS). Those taking this test have to give one of the following five responses to each statement — Very rarely, Rarely, Sometimes, Often and Very often.

- You spend a lot of time thinking about Facebook or planning how to use it.
- You feel an urge to use Facebook more and more.
- You use Facebook in order to forget about personal problems.
- You have tried to cut down on the use of Facebook without success.
- You become restless or troubled if you are prohibited from using Facebook.
- You use Facebook so much that it has had a negative impact on your job/studies.

Andreassen and colleagues suggest that scoring 'Often' or 'Very often' on at least four of the six items may suggest the respondent is addicted to Facebook.

CHATTING OR DATING ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has become another version of alternate reality. We would often 'meet' the other person online. When we get attracted to the other

person the pitfalls are serious and must be kept in mind.

- The person you might be dating might have given out wrong information about himself/herself.
- You might get attached to a person who does not exist in reality.
- The conversations you share might be used to your disadvantage.
- Another increasing trend is indulging in online sex for the sake of instant gratification. But this can be dangerous.
- Your pictures and conversations may be recorded and put up on indecent websites.
- You might be blackmailed by your partner since he contains the key to your reputation and that of your family.
- A video of yours might be shared as an MMS.

HOW TO REDUCE TECH DEPENDENCE

Understand that being on your phone or on the Internet all the time does not make you cool. Firstly, you must accept and admit to yourself that your use of technology is excessive. Here are the other things you can do:

- Turn off automatic notifications for email accounts, Facebook and so on. Avoid using your ringtone for all notifications that do not require your immediate attention.
- Learn to neglect your urge to check your phone or social networking sites. Set mental goals regarding technology use to maximise work. For instance, a student can decide to log onto Facebook once he or she has finished studying a certain number of chapters.
- Make it a rule to put your phone aside and resist the temptation to use it when you're in the physical company of other people. It's insulting to another person.
- Try to engage in outdoor activities instead of spending time on the Internet. Take up a sport, spend time enjoying an art or a craft, read a book, or pursue any hobby that you might have.
- Set a timer whenever you're surfing the Internet or playing games. You'll realise how much time gets wasted. Try to gradually reduce the time you typically spend on machines.
- Finally, don't hesitate to seek professional help if required.

Social media should be used to your advantage. You should be careful and responsible while using it. Make sure you do not divulge too much information about yourself on the Internet. Enjoy it intelligently!

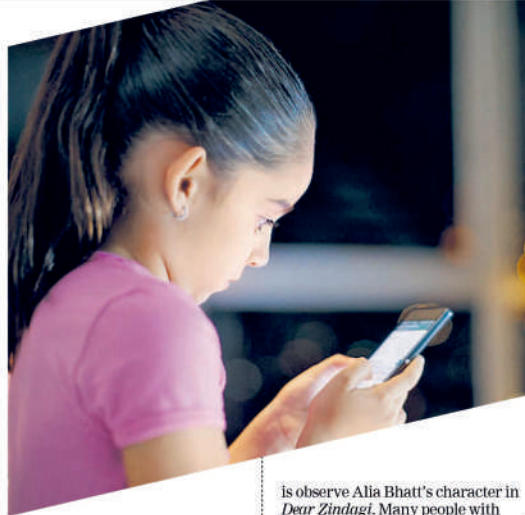
The author is a psychotherapist, counsellor, founder of Caring Minds, iCanFly, Cafe iCanFly, and a TEDx speaker. Write to askminubudhia@caringminds.co.in

HEALTH

**mind
MATTERS**



**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.

HEALTH

mind matters



MINU BUDHIA

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 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'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

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

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@caringminds.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.

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



mind matters



MINU BUDHIA

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.

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 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

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.

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.

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.

Minu Budhia, a psychotherapist, counsellor, founder of Caring Minds, I Can Fly, Cafe I Can Fly, and TEDx speaker, answers 12 queries related to mental healthcare and adolescence issues. Send your queries to askminubudhia@caringsminds.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.

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@aringminds.co.in or t2onsunday@abp.in



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

Think about your best friend and what makes them such a wonderful person. And now, in 30 seconds list five positive qualities of this best friend. Done? Great! Now, indulge me a little by thinking of, again in under 30 seconds, five things you love about yourself, things that you just wouldn't change. Not very easy, is it? If you have been able to write down all five, congratulations on knowing and loving yourself well. And if you haven't, don't worry. You're like most of us.



HEALTH
BE FLAWSOME

That's the key to feeling beautiful, says Minu Budhia

THE PROBLEM

Bombarded constantly by negative external messages that chisel away at our self-confidence and self-worth, one message at a time, we've begun to love ourselves less and less, some to the point where we'd like to change everything and become a different person entirely, just to fit in.

Sad, isn't it? That we'd give up every bit that makes us unique, makes us 'US', to conform, to blend into a crowd, and fade away? Whether it's advertisements on TV, social media, or even people who love you, we're directly or indirectly subjected to the 'Hey you, you're not good enough', or the 'Being you is not enough' rhetoric day in and day out. And body shaming occupies a huge chunk of this negative dialogue.

Look into the list of nots and you'll find we're constantly being told you're not thin enough, tall enough, fair enough, attractive enough, stylish enough, smart enough, and so on. There's no end to the list of 'not good enough' when it comes to looking beautiful.

And as if there weren't enough 'not enoughs' playing, rather preying on our insecurities, we now have underarm fairness products and creams formulated specifically for your backside to ensure that your posterior is as soft as a baby's.

This negativity, along with the perfect bodies and faces that seem to have become the norm across all types of media, makes it hard to look into the mirror, see the reflection, and then feel beautiful.

FLAWSOME

With our self-worth being tied to external validation, it is easy to forget that feeling beautiful is all about becoming your own best friend. And that comes from the acceptance of who you are.

Flawsome, a word coined by Tyra Banks, describes something that is awesome because of, not despite, its flaws. Combining two very different terms, the word brings forth a revolutionary idea — that it is perfectly possible for flaws and awesomeness to co-exist. It echoes a powerful sentiment of self-acceptance. Instead of chasing a facade of unattainable perfection in any or all aspects of your life, take a moment to realise that it is your flaws that make you uniquely you. Imperfection is beauty.

FIT, FABULOUS AND ALL THE FEELS

A common saying that has been floating around for quite some time is this — 'When you look good, you feel good, and when you feel good, you look good'. To some extent it is true. Living in a society that is obsessed with looking, being and projecting itself as perfect, if we find ourselves fitting into the approved

mould; there is no denying that it does boost one's confidence. However, it does that through external validation, and not through a true sense of confidence and self-worth.

If you're looking to get fitter to improve your strength, stamina and overall health, and losing or gaining weight will enable you to do that, you should go ahead. But this journey must be embarked upon only after consulting your doctor and a nutritionist. Any form of exercise, be it workouts at the gym, Pilates, yoga or Zumba, should always be done under the supervision of trained, certified, experienced professionals.

Each of us are unique individuals — both mentally and physically — so what worked for your colleague or cousin or friend is unlikely to work for you if you try just to copy-paste their fitness routine.

When you want to lose or gain weight, look leaner, it needs to come from a place of self-love. Do it because you genuinely care about yourself and your health, not to achieve some unattainable goal of looking like an over-airbrushed, super-photoshopped model, who looks nothing like their own magazine cover.

If you're driven by bullying, peer pressure,

body shaming and self-loathing, it can be all too easy to hurtle headlong into depression, anxiety and eating disorders like bulimia and anorexia, which not only hurt you physically, but also scar your relationship with yourself, food, friends and family.

Your relationship with yourself, with your body comes first. So let's treat ourselves right and fall in love with loving ourselves. And if you're thinking, 'No, this is selfish; I have others to take care of', remember this: You can't do any good to anyone if you're not taking care of yourself.

Love yourself, take care of yourself, and then take care of others, because if you don't care for yourself, who will? Make yourself, your physical and mental health your priority because you can't pour from an empty cup.

KINTSUGI

Kintsugi is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with lacquer dusted or mixed with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. As a philosophy, it treats breakage and repair as part of the history of an object, rather than something to disguise. There is much to be learned from this. Rather than berate and hate yourself for any physical imperfections or emotional scars, find the courage within yourself to get the help you need. Accepting yourself as you are, and being okay with it, is key to feeling beautiful.

Sometimes though, we need help and guidance to do this. Counselling is important as it provides an unbiased, non-judgmental audience who will actively help you to truly accept and love yourself. And when you have healed, remember the scars as badges of honour for having fought the battle to love yourself, to feel beautiful, just the way you are.

MY NORMAL

In some way, we're all chasing the stereotypical definition of beauty and perfection defined by society.

We're all trying to be 'normal'. Morticia Addams, the stern matriarch of *The Addams Family* film and television series, summed up the problem the word 'normal' poses when she said: "Normal is an illusion. What is normal for the spider is chaos for the fly."

Sometimes it takes a fictional character to point out something that has been staring at us in the face for ages. In our everyday hurry to overachieve, be one step ahead, be one notch better at whatever we do, we often forget that we are not all the same person. My normal may not be your normal, and that's perfectly okay.

My beautiful may not be your kind of beautiful, and that's perfectly okay as well!

KINTSUGI IS THE JAPANESE ART OF REPAIRING BROKEN POTTERY WITH LACQUER DUSTED OR MIXED WITH POWDERED GOLD, SILVER OR PLATINUM. AS A PHILOSOPHY, IT TREATS BREAKAGE AND REPAIR AS PART OF THE HISTORY OF AN OBJECT, THAN SOMETHING TO DISGUISE.... RATHER THAN BERATE AND HATE YOURSELF FOR PHYSICAL IMPERFECTIONS OR EMOTIONAL SCARS, FIND THE COURAGE WITHIN TO GET THE HELP YOU NEED



Flawsome, a word coined by Tyra Banks, describes something that is awesome because of, not despite, its flaws



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

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 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.

MD, Calcutta

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.

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.

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



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.

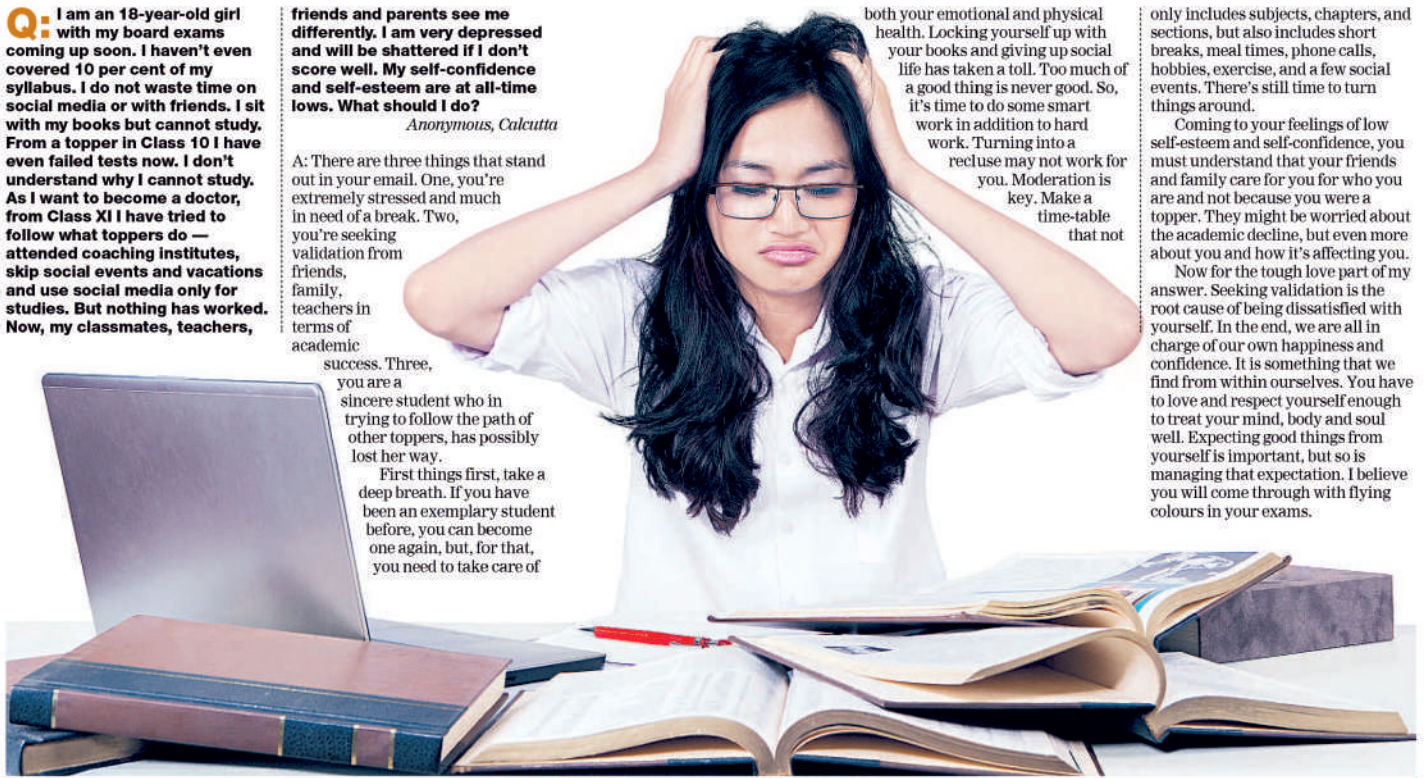
First things first, take a deep breath. If you have been an exemplary student before, you can become one again, but, for that, you need to take care of

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.** Revisit childhood favourites, nightstand trames you've put off starting 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 fulfil 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-ones or 'it's complicated' may be relationship people please.
- **Give social media a rest.** Now because you can't meet people in person, don't

overflow 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, iCanFly, Cafe iCanFly, and TEDx speaker, answers queries related to mental healthcare and adolescence issues. Send your queries to askminu-budhia@caringsminds.co.in or t2onsunday@abp.in

Picture: iStock



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

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

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.

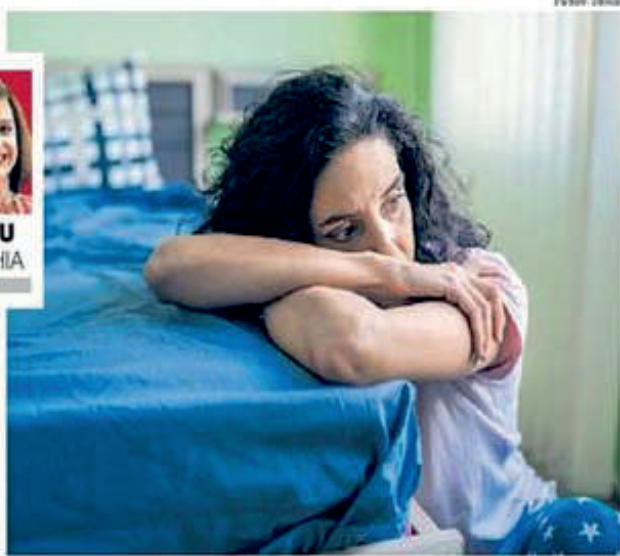
HEALTH

mind matters



MINU BUDHIA

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



Peter Dink

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 3,000 psychiatrists, or one doctor for every 100,000 people.
- One out of seven people in India suffered from mental illness between 1960 to 2017.
- More women are affected by depression than men.
- Every 40 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 29-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 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 helplessness, 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, contact 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 empty promises, 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.
- Anyone 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, Gale iCanFly, and a TEDx speaker. Write to askminubudhia@careingminds.co.in

HEALTH

mind matters



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@carryingminds.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.

Minu Budhia, a psychotherapist, counsellor, founder of Caring Minds, ICanFly, Call ICanFly, and TEDx speaker, answers 12 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

From money to peer pressure, your questions answered

How do I find a suitable career for myself? Should I run behind money or passion? Should I do what I love, which pays peanuts, or should I do what I don't love but pays really well?

It totally depends on your support system and your financial condition. If you are blessed with a family that can support you emotionally and financially, definitely do what you love, at least for a few years. If you are excellent at what you do and your work is truly valued by your company, even an initially low-paying job can turn into one which pays at least the market standards, if not more.

One more thing to remember is that you are not defined by what you do. Your job is a part of your life, but it is not your life. If you are passionate about it, it can be wonderful. However, if you are doing a job you don't like to fulfil financial commitments, that is perfectly fine too. In these uncertain times, financial security and stability play an important part in keeping anxiety or depression at bay.

If you are just finishing school or college, opt for a career counselling session. That will help you to focus better. Also try a few different internships. Practical experience in the field will give you a better idea about the kind of work you want to immerse yourself in. All the best!

For my friends' sake, I pressure my parents for money so that we can hang out in cool places with our girlfriends. I argue with them if I don't get the money and also blackmail them because if I lose my friends I lose



everything. Am I right in what I am doing?

First figure out why you feel the need to pressurise your parents. If it's only to impress your friends or girlfriends, rethink why you always need to visit expensive cafes, restaurants, and so on. Your parents are not ATM machines. Not everyone has similar disposable incomes and it may be hard for your parents to provide the amount of pocket money you want.

The fact that you used the word "pressurised" shows that you have already realised that this isn't the right thing to do. In these uncertain times, your parents may be under a lot of financial stress that you are not aware of. Rather than "blackmail" them, speak to them with an open mind and see how you can help each other. If you're in

high school or college, and are good at academics, ask them if you can give tuitions. That way you will not only be getting money, but also earning it yourself. And this will instil in you self-confidence, self-worth, and teach you the value of money.

Friendships and relationships are both important, but only when you have the right people to hang out with. Make sure you're not being used, taken for granted, or taken advantage of because they think you're trying to fit in. Hanging out at home can be fun too. Play board games or video games, rustle up a brunch or bake together, sing karaoke, watch movies or binge-watch a TV series.

There's loads of things you can do that don't necessitate burning a hole in your pocket. Given the current situation, most of you are mostly interacting online. When you do start going out socially again, try a balance between staying in and going out.

I take money from my parents' cupboard as they have given me permission to. I take out quite a lot and spend most of this on my friends. My parents are very busy with their work and have never raised any objection about the amounts I've taken. In fact, I've never been asked about what I'm spending on either. I love this freedom, but

am I stealing? I really am allowed to take the money.

More than stealing, it sounds like you're worried about how much you're spending and how you're spending it. The fact that it has rung some alarm bells in your mind means that you're not truly comfortable spending what seems to be a substantial amount. Since you have been trusted with the money, respect that trust and also recognise the privilege you have.

If you feel like your friends always expect you to pay for them, or that you're trying to impress or "buy" friends with the money, slowly stop. Money is important, but it should never be a yardstick by which your friends measure you. You should first be appreciated and accepted for who you are as a person, rather than how much you can spend.

To better understand your dilemma, try a budget journal. Write out all your expenses, no matter how small, in a diary and discuss it with your parents. Share how you're feeling and they will be able to guide you. And if you feel you are spending too much, start a rainy day fund or a holiday fund or a fund for a charitable project you can volunteer with. Learning how to save is a habit that will serve you well in future.

Two of my closest friends have started smoking. I did try, but didn't like it. They keep calling me uncool and childish since I don't want to. I love my friends but I just don't want to smoke. What should I do?

Firstly, congratulations on not giving into peer pressure. It takes a lot of strength to say no to your closest friends, and by doing this you have displayed maturity beyond your years. Friendship is definitely important, but it is more important to choose the right friends. You've already embraced self-care by making the decision not to smoke, so stay strong and please do not take up smoking.

If you must hang out with these friends, excuse yourself when they are smoking. Talk to your friends to understand why they started. It may be that they were pressured by others and couldn't say no. If, like many, they did it to feel older or to fit in with an apparently cooler crowd, you may be able to help them quit too. However, if you feel

constantly pressured to smoke, and they keep pushing, it may be time to find new friends.



Minu Budhia, a psychotherapist, counselor, 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



THERE'S LOADS OF THINGS YOU CAN DO THAT DON'T NECESSITATE BURNING A HOLE IN YOUR POCKET. GIVEN THE CURRENT SITUATION, MOST OF YOU ARE MOSTLY INTERACTING ONLINE. WHEN YOU DO START GOING OUT SOCIALLY AGAIN, TRY A BALANCE BETWEEN STAYING IN AND GOING OUT.



HEALTH

mind matters



MINU BUDHIA

From studies to negative thoughts, your questions answered

Q: In my group, all of my friends are toppers. They never get below 90 in any subject. I've tried very hard but my marks just don't go above 60-65. I feel so ashamed. How can I be better?

The first thing to do is to have faith in yourself. Academics is definitely important but it isn't everything. If you are doing your best, studying diligently, and are still having trouble with specific or all subjects, try speaking with your school counsellor.

It may be that you have a learning difficulty that you can work on either with extra help from your teachers or with a special educator. You can also try to find a tutor/mentor/friend who can help you study. Sometimes, all you need is a change of study methods or a study buddy who will help you to stay focussed on your goals.

Another thing to consider is whether you are having academic difficulties only this year, or whether this has been happening for a few

years. If it is only this year, it could be possible that a different matter is rendering you unable to focus on your studies. If something is troubling you at home, if you're having relationship troubles, if you're getting bullied, or if you've recently started losing interest in your favourite things and are feeling overwhelmed or alone, please speak with a counsellor.

Also, try a career counselling test that will help you understand your strengths. Once you know which subjects you are best suited for, you can concentrate your efforts on those, and plan your higher studies accordingly.

My father has left my mother for another woman. Seeing this, I'm also of the opinion that relationships should be freeing and that monogamous relationships don't work. So I have multiple girlfriends. Am I right?

Sorry to hear about your parents but there may be a lot more details and reasons for the dissolution of their marriage that you may not be privy to. And just because it didn't work out for your parents, doesn't mean a monogamous relationship won't work out for you.

Right or wrong would depend on what two consenting individuals agree to at the beginning of a relationship. If both are happy to be in open relationships with multiple partners, that's their individual choice.

Trust is key in any relationship, romantic or otherwise. When two people genuinely commit to each other, there's a certain level of security, the feeling that this person has your back. It's a promise to grow together. However, people do change over time, and sometimes they can grow apart.

If you feel that you want an open relationship or that you want to date multiple people, discuss that with your potential partners. Be clear about what you're looking for from the relationship and be respectful of their response.

However, cheating on your partner, or pretending to be monogamous while going behind their back and dating someone else, is a breach of trust.

I'm a 26-year-old man trying to maintain perfect mental and physical health via the latest advised methods. However, I tend to make up hypothetical stories in my mind where I'm the victim and enjoy thinking about the fact that people are sympathising with me! For example: Small health issues of my parents make me imagine scenarios where they have died because of the illness and people are looking at me thinking how sad my life is, how I have to struggle by myself and they offer their sympathies. It's not that I'm not concerned about my parents and want their demise, but looking closely I have realised that I tend to go through those types of thinking where I'm the victim and tend to enjoy such thoughts. However, practically, such thoughts do not seem rational to me and seem to have become my mental comfort zone. Please suggest practical exercises or techniques to come out of this.

It is a good sign that you have reached out for help as something definitely seems to be troubling you. If these thoughts are occurring very often, then you should definitely consider consulting a counsellor or psychologist to guide you via therapies that will be specifically suited to your unique situation. Till then, here are a few things to do:



Start a mood diary. Any time these thoughts surface, write down the exact scenarios, what you were feeling and doing right before these thoughts started and what you felt right after the thoughts went away. Include as many details as possible.

Start and stick to a routine for your day. Approach your health as a combination of both mental and physical health. Adopt healthy morning and night routines, make sure you're eating right and exercising, and schedule at least a call a day with a family member or a friend.

Start writing about your childhood memories. Has anything happened in your childhood that may be giving rise to such thoughts? Is there any particular negative experience that you went through and during which the sympathy of others made you feel safer? Or are you worried about a negative outcome and the worry is manifesting itself via these thoughts? Writing these down can help to bring about some clarity.



Minu Budhia, a psychotherapist, counsellor, founder of Caring Minds, I Can Fly, Cafe I Can Fly, and TEDx speaker, answers 12 queries related to mental healthcare and adolescence issues. Send your queries to askminubudhia@caringminds.co.in or t2onsunday@abp.in

HEALTH

COPE WITH HOPE

The Calcutta-based psychotherapist and counsellor recounts her experience as a Covid-19 survivor

It was a rude shock. May be it shouldn't have been, but it was. Even after all the precautions, safety measures and sanitisation, Covid-19 had invaded our home. And it was not just me that it held ransom. My husband Sanjay, my father-in-law, my mother-in-law — all began showing symptoms, and then it was like a flick of fate's finger playing dominoes.

By sharing some snippets from our journey, right from diagnosis to recovery, I'm hoping to not only give you a peek into the mind and heart of a Covid survivor, but also some tips and coping mechanisms to ride this out, should you happen to test positive too.

UNFOLDING...

Once we tested positive, we had to quarantine ourselves in our rooms to avoid any contact, and thus began a strange couple of weeks for a whole family living under one roof, with no face-to-face contact at all. One of the hardest parts of this forced separation was not meeting my younger daughter Prachi. A special child, she wondered why suddenly she was no longer allowed into her mom and dad's room. We video-called multiple times a day. During this time, my elder daughter Preeyam was our pillar of strength at every moment. With voice notes about work and everything else under the sun, she had an infectious positive outlook, and kept our spirits high.

One of our chauffeurs had been feverish for a while and he hadn't disclosed his symptoms out of fear. Upon getting to know, we had him and the whole household tested. Most of our staff were asymptomatic and only one of them had to be hospitalised. The rest were all sent to a quarantine centre to rest and recover. In such situations, you cannot be casual or indifferent. Any slip here or there can potentially infect and affect other family members, support staff, office colleagues, and anyone you come in contact with.

By God's grace, both my father-in-law and mother-in-law had a mild form of Covid-19. My father-in-law was diagnosed at the same time as I was, and my mother-in-law a week after that. Keeping their age in mind, both of them were admitted to the hospital as a precautionary measure and, thankfully, they fought this period quick and well.

Sanjay had a moderate form of the virus and the doctor recommended hospitalisation. He was released from the hospital on the 10th day and was in isolation in our own room for another seven days.

A HOME INSIDE MY ROOM

I came down with minor fever and sore throat and tested positive. I was confined to my room, completely isolated for 17 days and did not need hospitalisation. I had nausea for seven days, and this seemed to be a new symptom in Covid

patients. In terms of medication, I was prescribed anti-nausea medicine, Zincovit, paracetamol as SOS and Vitamin C. Apart from supervising the household and checking in at work remotely, I set up a schedule to deal with this temporary new normal.

The first step was creating a home inside my room. Since I now had to do everything on my own — dusting, mopping, cleaning, washing, laundry, and more — we had tools for these left outside our doors. This included a Magic Mop, cleaning solutions, dusting cloths, liquid dish soap, liquid laundry soap and toilet cleaning materials. The two most important items, however, were two

contactless foot-operated bins — one for inside the room, one kept right outside the room — and garbage bags to line the bins. Food used to be served in disposables and kept outside the room on a table. Whatever couldn't be consumed was disposed to ensure no contamination via contact.

As a part and parcel of daily life, we're running around chasing time, even trying to make more time. Ironically, this time, me-time found me. I finally could do what I wanted, how I wanted to, whenever I wanted to. But the terms and conditions of this contract mandated solitary confinement, with inanimate objects posing as shadow companions. While my mobile phone and laptop supplied a steady stream of music, movies and the occasional web series to cheer me up, it was reading *The Magic* by Rhonda Byrne and writing my journal that really got me through this time.



GRATITUDE & THANKS

Thanks to almighty God who gave us strength to sail through bravely. I must express our heartfelt gratitude to the brave Covid warriors who worked round the clock to provide the best healthcare. To the doctors, nurses, technicians, and hospital staff — you went above and beyond and your dedication and commitment has us forever indebted.

To our well-wishers and extended family — you were our rocks. Whether we were stressed, worried, anxious, or sad, we could always count on you. The love, concern, care and support we received cannot be expressed in words and a lifelong imprint of it will forever remain in our hearts.

A BRAVER TOMORROW

When someone heard I was penning down my experience, they said, "Why do you have to talk about this? No one needs to know!" I wondered why. Why should I keep this a secret? This was nothing to hide. This was a different type of "Lag kya kahenge?" — a stigma I fight on a daily basis in my journey to spread awareness about mental health.

Now, to end on a positive note. The brighter side of recovery is that once you've battled this virus and emerged victorious, you can go back to your regular routine. Whether it's going to work or to workouts, meeting friends or family, you are no longer endangering your near and dear ones. While navigating this scary new normal, remember we're also stepping into a brave new world. And now that new maps have been drawn to navigate these previously uncharted situations, it's time to take back our lives. *Veni, vidi, vici. #StayStrong #StaySafe #StaySmiling*

THE FIRST STEP WAS CREATING A HOME INSIDE MY ROOM. SINCE I NOW HAD TO DO EVERYTHING ON MY OWN — DUSTING, MOPPING, CLEANING, WASHING, LAUNDRY, AND MORE — WE HAD TOOLS FOR THESE LEFT OUTSIDE OUR DOORS.... FOOD USED TO BE SERVED IN DISPOSABLES AND KEPT OUTSIDE THE ROOM ON A TABLE



Please Note: Any medication should be taken only as per your doctor's advice and under their supervision. All the opinions expressed are that of the columnist's. The author is a psychotherapist, counsellor, founder of Caring Minds, iCanFly, Cafe iCanFly, and TEDx speaker



OUR HOME ISOLATION SURVIVAL KIT

- Respirometer
- Electric steam machine
- Blood pressure monitoring device
- Pulse oximeter — one for each family member
- Thermometer — one for each family member
- Paracetamol 650mg or 1,000mg
- Vitamin C tablets
- Zinc tablets
- Citrus fruits
- High-protein diet
- Staying hydrated (warm water)
- Breathing exercises
- Our homemade magical immunity booster drink: kada



THOUGHTS ON THINGS TO DO

- If you have a persistent or an on and off fever that spikes and subsides over the span of one week, or if you have the slightest change in your breathing patterns, connect with your doctor and arrange to go to the hospital immediately. Your body is speaking to you. Listen. Now.
- After returning from the hospital stay, observing isolation for seven days is mandatory.
- Check your fever and oxygen level every four hours.
- If a couple is positive, both can stay in one room, sharing everything and taking care of each other.
- Whether you are the patient or the caregiver, if you feel too overwhelmed, connect with a counsellor via video or telephonic consultation. This especially applies to anyone who is living alone and quarantining. Your mental health is just as important as your physical health.
- Post-diagnosis, if preventive hospitalisation is recommended at any point, keep reminding yourself of the word 'preventive'. My husband, father-in-law and mother-in-law were all hospitalised so that they could be under supervision 24x7.
- Create WhatsApp groups — one for colleagues, one for family and one for close friends. It became practical and easier to update twice a day.

My daughter's first child has Down's Syndrome, and is now two years old. She is being pressed by her in-laws to try for another baby but she is scared that the next child may also have the same thing. What should they do?

Acceptance of your first grandchild is key. If the family is looking at welcoming another baby because they are longing for a regular child to replace the one they have, it is likely to negatively affect both children. Being a parent is a commitment. Being a special needs parent is a lifelong commitment. Presently, accepting and loving the child that is in your life is essential, as it will forever influence family relationships, irrespective of the arrival of a second child.

It is hard on families, especially the mother, to realise and accept that her child will not have the same life as most regular kids. There is grief of losing the child she had imagined having and mourning for the memories she had planned on making. She may be feeling scared about her first child's future too and worried about how he/she will be treated by her in-laws.

If she is worried that her second child may also have Down's, she can go in for screening or diagnostic tests specifically designed to detect chromosomal abnormalities.

Please note, testing is only suggested if a couple already has a child with Down's or if anyone in the couple's immediate family has Down's or has a child with Down's. Please consult your doctor before taking a decision.

I would definitely suggest the couple's counselling and family counselling before your daughter and her husband make a decision. And while the family is entitled to their opinion, at the end of the day, this is a decision that solely rests with the parents.



My five-year-old son has been getting into trouble at school very often. He is a very sweet boy but very naughty. He doesn't pay attention in class and doesn't want to do his homework. Every teacher is complaining about him. I think he may have ADHD. What should I do?

There may be many reasons why a child is suddenly distracted and having trouble concentrating. Listed below are a few red flags for ADHD:

- He is easily distracted and finds it difficult to sit still for a long time.

- He makes careless mistakes quite often.
- He has trouble waiting for things, especially when taking turns in class.
- He rarely completes one activity before moving on to the next.
- He avoids not just academics but also fun activities that require concentration/mental effort.
- Despite reminders, he frequently forgets to do things.
- He frequently loses his belongings or forgets where he puts them.

If you find yourself saying yes to most of the above, I would suggest you connect with a child psychologist to discuss his behavioural issues and the types of complaints from school in detail. A specialist will be able to guide you about whether your son needs an assessment, how to go about it, and how to proceed if the diagnosis is confirmed to be ADHD.



HEALTH

mind matters



MINU BUDHIA

My three-year-old is not responding, not making eye contact, seems to be distressed by hugs, and keeps moving around in a room or from room to room on his own. My family doctor thinks he may be autistic and has asked us to visit a psychologist. Is that really necessary?

There is no harm in visiting a psychologist as he/she will carry out preliminary assessments to understand your son and his behaviour. And if it is indeed autism, the earlier you know the better, as then you can prepare his education and life journey accordingly.

Here are some red flags for children the autism spectrum disorder (ASD):

- Does not like to interact with children of his age.
- Does not respond or react to the parents' smile, laughter, frown.
- Does not initiate conversations.
- Shies away from making eye contact with

anyone.

- Used to talk before but has almost stopped talking.
- Has developed an increasing sensitivity to light or sound or touch.
- Either keeps staring or looks from where they cannot be seen.
- Constantly shakes their hands, feet, rocks back and forth, sways from side to side, flaps their hands, and so on.
- Seems to be fascinated by repetitions and patterns—does the same things or says the same things over and over again.

My 24-year-old cousin has a low IQ, gets moods swings multiple times a day, and also is violent occasionally. My aunt and uncle think that marriage will be a cure. They are not willing to admit that he may have intellectual disabilities and

Pictures: iStock



are planning to hide his issues. I don't think this is right. How do I intervene?

Due to the stigma attached with having and getting help for mental health issues, many families refuse to accept that a family member may need professional help. Stereotypically, in the past, marriage had long been suggested as a cure-all for multiple issues, especially for men. Sadly,

this mentality exists today too.

Marriage is a serious commitment that requires trust at its foundation and not telling the potential spouse and in-laws about your cousin's issues will be a grave injustice.

I would suggest that you speak with your aunt and uncle to arrange for a few counselling sessions for your cousin. Until he is assessed by a mental health expert and given a formal diagnosis, it will be difficult to say what type of a regular life he can have and whether he is at all capable of comprehending, agreeing to, and upholding marriage.

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

HEALTH

mind matters



MINU BUDHIA

I am an 18-year-old panromantic asexual female who has never been in a relationship because of my unrealistic expectations regarding what or how I want my (male) significant other to be. I developed trust issues over the years and have become choosy about my love interests. The pattern which always seems to repeat itself is this:

Whenever I try to give a relationship a chance, I get anxious about the future. If there's a trait I dislike in a potential partner, my anxiety takes over and keeps increasing till I break up, which is usually within a week. How do I get over this? I'm scared to be vulnerable or get too close to someone, and this gets worse once we are 'official'. I'm afraid at this rate, I won't ever be able to be in love with someone. What should I do?

Low self-worth, lack of self-esteem and low self-confidence often lead to overthinking and overanalysing one's relationships. Your being too choosy could be a sign of this as you're eliminating all



options instead of reducing them. Also, one of the main reasons behind your anxiety may be self-sabotaging. If you think too much into the future, it allows you to make up hypothetical scenarios in your mind, especially negative ones, and

you end up rejecting a potential partner before they have a chance to reject you. Distracting yourself from concentrating on the present potential of a relationship seems to have become a coping

mechanism or a defence mechanism.

Most of us are afraid of being vulnerable because we are scared of the potential side-effects, that is, someone may reject us, leave us, or hurt us. However, being vulnerable is part of being alive. Being vulnerable is what allows us to build meaningful relationships because it lays the foundation of trust.

And without trust one cannot have a healthy, fulfilling relationship. It is definitely natural and important to want to protect yourself from heartbreak and emotional turmoil, but taking calculated emotional risks is key. Otherwise your life will be spent existing instead of living.

Here are a few active steps to tackle your trust issues:

- Create a vision board specifically for your relationship, highlighting positive emotions, especially trust.
- Keep a trust journal to log both positive and negative trust experiences.
- When you meet someone you like, resist the urge to overshare and let them earn your trust over time.
- Before you diagnose a genuine mistake as a betrayal of trust, speak to the person to clarify any misunderstanding.
- Speak with a counsellor/psychologist regarding depression, anxiety and confidence building.

I am a class 12 student and my main question is: How can I overcome loneliness? I have friends who only contact me when they need something, but I can't share my feelings with them. I'm scared of being judged, but I'm also experiencing an immense silence all around me. My friends and family on social media seem so happy. Why can't I be as happy as them? I used to be in love with someone, but it was unrequited. This broke my heart and left me feeling very alone. Negative thoughts are constantly on my mind and I just want to give up. To make things worse, I'm unable to sleep at night, am gaining weight, and also having a hard time concentrating on my studies. When I feel low, I write in my diary, my only companion, but I want a real companion who will stay with me. I want to overcome negativity and be happy. How can I do that?

Self-love is key. And it determines the beginning, the middle, and the end of all our relationships. Our relationship with ourselves is the most important one because it influences every other relationship — friends, family, romantic relationships, work relationships and more. This is something you will have to learn and grow to accept. The first step to combating loneliness is to become your own friend because, at the end of the day, your happiness is in your own hands. And to do this, you have to practise self-kindness through the following:

- Reduce any sort of negative talk;
- Keep a gratitude/thankfulness journal;
- Make healthy food and fitness choices;
- Reduce social media usage; and
- Visit a counsellor/psychologist for counselling.

Regarding romantic relationships, unlike what most rom-coms would have you believe, you are not a jigsaw puzzle with a missing piece. There is no single 'the one' who will magically make you and your life better. A partner is one who complements us, not completes us. Also, to find a true companion you will first need to figure out what you truly want in a partner. Sit down with a notebook and write down a description of your ideal partner. Then try and divide that into two columns of what you want and what you need. Keep this notebook for over a year and do this exercise every month. This will help you to identify characteristics and traits you really value. Remember, to have a successful relationship the first person you need to fall in love with is yourself.

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



HEALTH

mind matters



MINU BUDHIA

I am a 29-year-old hoping to be a mom for the first time in two months. I had a miscarriage last year and am anxious about this pregnancy and about how and if I will be able to care for my child during this pandemic. My family and I are being very cautious and following protocols but many residents in our complex are not. I am scared about going into labour early or the lockdown being extended. Also, what if the oxygen shortage persists till then? I am plagued by these negative scenarios and have had two panic attacks already. Please help me.

Firstly, my best wishes and congratulations to you. Pregnancy is both wonderful and wonderfully stressful and it must doubly be so in the middle of a pandemic. Here are some tips to help you feel less scared and more focused on a happy new beginning.

Visualise a happy future with your child. When you wake up every morning, spend 10 minutes talking to your baby. Share your favourite things, tell the baby the plans you have for it, how much you can't wait to meet it, and how loved it will be. Think about the first day, the first week, the first month, the first year and the many, many, firsts you are looking forward to with your baby. You can even make a digital vision board or an audio diary by leaving little voice notes of your thoughts.

Speak with your gynaecologist and GP regularly. Fix a schedule for these calls over the phone or on video, and speak with them to dispel any worries you have. Also, connect with a counsellor to schedule some sessions or call a local helpline to share your feelings. Sometimes, the best thing to de-stress is to talk to a non-judgemental, unbiased stranger who is trained to help you to keep negative thoughts at bay.

Focus on what you can control, rather than on what you can't. If fellow residents are uncooperative, speak to the complex committee. Limit your family's and your exposure to them via self-imposed isolation. Walk indoors and make sure to get some fresh air from the window/balcony instead of going to the terrace.

Make a go-to-hospital checklist, a go-to-hospital bag, and a list of emergency contacts of all types — family, friends, doctors, oxygen supply, pharmacy, an ambulance, people who can drive you. Taking positive action will empower you to feel more prepared and, thereby, less scared.



I am a 14-year-old boy and have been at home and studying online since the last lockdown. My parents barely allow me to go out anywhere — only to the terrace or balcony and for weekly drives to pick up essentials. My problem is that whether I feel happy, or sad, or angry, or scared, I start feeling hungry — even if I have just had a meal. And I only want tasty salty or sweet snacks. Lots and lots of it. Sometimes I feel so sick after eating that I throw up what I've eaten. Please help me stop eating so much.

I firstly want to congratulate you for reaching out to get help. This is the toughest and the biggest step to take towards regaining good health. Sometimes, when we're incredibly stressed with no one to share our emotions with, it may feel like we're losing control over our lives. So much has changed for you personally, and this feeling of being 'stuck' is natural. And at a time like this, food can feel like a great comfort. While an occasional ice cream or brownie or French fries is fine, eating to bury your emotions (positive or negative) or fill a void is already taking its toll.

One of the first things to do is to speak with a parent. Talk to them about how you are feeling. If you feel like you're finding it difficult to open up to them, call a mental health helpline in your area.

Secondly, design a packed timetable. Fill it with not just academics, but everything you can think of — sleep, study, fitness, me-time breaks, hobbies, virtual catch-up times with friends, meals, screen time, etc. If you have something to occupy your mind from the moment you wake up to the moment you go to sleep, it will help to take your mind off food.

Thirdly, try cooking healthy but tasty snacks. YouTube is full of healthy yummy recipes and substitutes that will keep you full while providing you with nutrition. Cooking and meal planning are life skills and you can even start a YouTube channel and vlog your journey.

Fourthly, start a food and mood journal. Keep a small notebook, and each time you eat or drink something, write it down in the journal. And right next to the food name, write down how you were feeling at the moment — you can even draw happy, sad, angry or meh emojis.

Following these tips should help to curb your cravings. However, if you see that you still feel the need to throw up, even after small healthy meals, you must tell your parents and connect with a counsellor as this may be the beginning of an eating disorder. The faster you get help, the sooner you'll feel better.

Last year, both my father (in his late 60s) and I (in my early 40s) tested positive for Covid-19. I recovered and survived, but my father did not. Since then I have been consumed by grief and haven't had a good night's sleep. Now, seeing the rising number of cases, the deaths, the dire situation of those affected, I am constantly worried about my wife (late 30s) and myself (both not vaccinated) dying. We are anyway maintaining isolation, working from home, have given our domestic help leave, and I am the only one who goes out for essentials that are not available through online deliveries. However, I feel this paralysing fear overcome me when I have to step out. Please help.

I am so sorry to hear about your father. From your question, it seems that you are currently going through two things — survivor's guilt and anxiety.

To manage survivor's guilt, firstly allow yourself to feel your feelings. Losing a loved one, especially a parent, is cause for trauma. It takes time to process the complex feelings and, in your case, I would recommend grief counselling. You can do this via telephone, or on a video call from the comfort and safety of your home. We all need a shoulder to cry on or a hand to hold, and sometimes a trained professional is our best guide to find our way out of such deep grief.

To manage your fears about your wife's and your own survival, speak freely with your wife about your concerns. Any time you feel that the fear is overwhelming you, write it down in a



notebook. Also, set small achievable daily goals as positive actions will help you to feel a little in control. Ask your doctor about the vaccine options and make an informed decision. Read up on the pros and cons of each and take baby steps to get your vaccine. It will not only protect you physically, but will also give you some peace of mind. Since it also seems like you are emotionally exhausted, take a short break from work.

To help with your sleep issues, try a complete digital detox:

- Ditch the smartphone, laptop, and tablet and find non-tech solutions — listen to the news only once a day, that too on the radio, or you can even ask your wife to do so and give you the important points.
- Try your hand at a mini kitchen garden. Start small with herbs and you'll find some happiness and satisfaction from growing something with your own hands.
- Help your brain recognise bedtime by practising good sleep hygiene. Don't work, eat, or watch TV while in bed and make sure to change out of your day clothes and into a fresh set of pyjamas. Take a warm bath before going to sleep and avoid heavy meals at night or snacking right before bed.

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



mind matters



MINU BUDHIA

HEALTH

I am a 75-year-old widow living alone in my apartment. By God's grace I am fit and healthy for my age and have received both doses of the vaccine. My domestic help recently tested positive and is isolating in her home. Now that there is no one at home and I can't even visit neighbours, I feel very lonely. I listen to the radio and watch TV to pass the time, but the news of death and gloom depresses me. There is so much fear, helplessness, helplessness, and uncertainty right now and I feel like I have no control over what will happen. Two of my close friends and family members succumbed to Covid-19 recently. Will I survive this alone?

that it is okay not to be okay and that it is perfectly alright to worry about your health and future, especially since you are grieving the loss of close friends.

You are not alone, and/or services in your position, there are many home-care packages being offered by hospitals where nurses and/or domestic staff can come stay with you. You can opt for this till your own domestic help has recovered and is healthy enough to return to work. And to reduce the stress of cooking and cleaning, you can opt for a meal delivery subscription.

Regarding entertainment, if you use a smartphone or a computer, listen to music via apps, watch a couple of comedy web series, and animal and baby videos on YouTube. Avoid WhatsApp forwards

and stay off Facebook as much as possible. Also, when watching television, limit your news consumption to 30 minutes max. And if there's a long forgotten hobby like stringing, painting, or writing, resume that with new vigour.

To stay connected, video call with family, friends, and even neighbours. Whether they are one floor away or a continent away, make it a point to talk to loved ones and friends for at least an hour a day. Many of your peers may be feeling the same way that you do, and your calls to them could cheer them up too. If you have a special occasion coming up, see how you can celebrate it in a small and virtual way. Create and celebrate every moment that you are here and you will soon see that you are able to cope with hope.

Loneliness, especially now, is quite natural. So the first thing I want you to do is validate your feelings. Accept

I am 20 years old and in a long-distance relationship with a boy who is 21. We met through a letter-writing app. Both of us are from India and belong to the same community. We fell in love and, like any couple, have fights too. He is quite insecure, more than me, but we talked and sorted things out. We were even planning to meet each other, but suddenly he said that he liked another girl. His online college classes have restarted and he thinks a girl from his college is a better option than having a long distance girlfriend. He had been flirting with her, started a relationship with her, and then told me about the break-up. But he also wants to stay in contact with me and says he wants to come back

to me. I'm really confused. What should I do?

Long distance can be tough on most people, especially on young relationships, that too during these pandemic times. With lack of face to face communication, the chance of misunderstandings is always higher. While your ex-boyfriend seems to be confused between you and the other girl, you don't need to be. Since you have not met yet, you can keep in touch as friends if you want to, but pursuing a relationship right now does not seem advisable.

However, if you decide to pursue this relationship, have a frank talk with him

about what both of you are looking for. To facilitate better conversation, use a mix of text messages, phone calls and video calls. Watch movies and TV shows together, share news and music, even do the crossword. Just because you live in different places doesn't mean you can't have shared experiences. Have detailed conversations about your likes, dislikes and boundaries. The two most important pillars of any relationship are trust and respect. Since your trust has been broken, he must be patient and committed to proving himself worthy and try to earn it again.



My question is for my 56-year-old uncle. A happy-go-lucky man who used to be an extrovert, he has now not stepped out of his home in over a year. He has all the cleaning and sanitising products available on the market — gels, sanitizers, sprays, wipes, disinfectants — cleans his apartment three times a day, and wears double masks and gloves at home. Is this normal or does he have OCD? Please help.

It comes as a shock to many and it seems like your uncle is trying to deal with it in his own way. He is being extra careful and extra thorough while cleaning, which is giving him some sense of control in the middle of an uncertain new normal. Speak frankly with your uncle over a video call and call him often to check in. If he is bored or lonely, he may be cleaning just to kill time or to distract himself from the anxiety he feels.

Severely senior citizens or almost senior citizens have chosen this self-imposed isolation to reduce their chances of contracting Covid-19. It makes him feel safer, and does not affect his daily life or his sleep-wake routine cycle, there is no harm if he is cleaning three times a day. While talking, also ask about

his neighbours and family members. If someone in his home, complex, or neighbourhood has been infected or he has neighbours or family not following safety protocols, he may just be double masking and wearing gloves indoors in an attempt to keep himself safe.

Given that we are currently living in a constantly evolving world that is rapidly changing every day, the way we define 'normal' is also being impacted. It's a pandemic that's wreaking havoc in every aspect of our lives — it's not just a passing phenomenon, and different people cope differently. If you are still worried, set up an appointment with a counsellor to speak about his habits in greater detail. As your uncle is under duress, it may help him to speak with a professional and understand his worries.

The second wave of Covid-19 has

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





HEALTH

Q: I'm a 50-year-old married woman with a loving family — husband, son, daughter-in-law and grandchild. My 80-year-old ailing mother recently passed away after prolonged illness. She used to live with us and I was able to provide her with the best treatment and care I possibly could. While I loved her very much, I sometimes used to wish that she would die before me so that both of our suffering would end. When she passed, even before the grief struck, I was hit by a sense of relief. Is this normal? I am overcome by immense guilt at feeling this way.

A: Losing a loved one, especially a parent, is hard at any age and being a caregiver takes a toll on both one's mental and physical health. You are going through the process of grieving and these feelings are completely valid. Here are a few actions you can take to cope with your grief.

◆ **REST AND RECUPERATE:** You have been under a tremendous psychological strain and you need time to think about your personal needs and wants. Having put another's needs first always, constantly worrying about medical issues, and putting many aspects of your life on hold has been the norm, but now that needs to change.

Self-care and self-love are now on top of your list — a vacation, hobbies, reconnecting with friends — start with experiences that you had put on pause.

◆ **SPEAK WITH A THERAPIST:** There is no shame in asking for help to deal with grief. Connect with a counsellor and try out a few sessions. Talking with an unbiased, non-judgmental audience is sometimes exactly what you need.

◆ **WRITE A LETTER:** Pen down all your feelings, positive or negative, and ask for forgiveness in the letter. Make it as detailed as you want — add memories with her that made you happy, conversations or actions you regret, things you wanted to share with her that you couldn't. Once written, find a quiet place, read it out loud in front of her picture, say sorry for all the things you want to apologise for, and then put the letter away.

◆ **CREATE A MEMORY BOARD:** To shift your focus to more positive thoughts, make a board using both of your favourite colours, moments, things, quotes, films, songs, holidays, people and more. Keep it in the room where she stayed, or her favourite place in your house and spend 10-15 minutes in front of it, reflecting on all the happy memories you shared.

There are five stages of grief — denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance — and everyone goes through these in different timelines. While some may take months, others may take years. Do not beat yourself up. Start the process of forgiving yourself so you can start healing.

mind matters



MINU BUDHIA

Q: I'm a 43-year-old working woman. I lost my husband at 29 and delivered a child after that. My priority has always been my child and I've brought her up single-handedly. I've never neglected my office work and kept the stakeholders happy. However, I have never socialised with colleagues or networked with industry professionals, having believed that my work should do all the talking. It's disheartening to see that one needs advocates to ensure promotions or raises. I feel like I'm taken for granted at work as my bosses know that my personal situation is such that even if they do not promote me, I will work due to financial constraints. Please let me know what should be my approach, because despite all, I love my job.

A: As an empowered woman who has surmounted many difficulties and obstacles to get to where you are today, believe that you have the power to make your presence felt at work. Being taken for granted is never a good feeling at any time, especially when you have been a loyal, productive, and passionate employee. Here are a couple of things you can try:

◆ **UPDATE YOUR RESUME:** If it has been gathering dust in an old folder, it's time to give it a makeover. Incorporate new skills, highlight your achievements, reformat the presentation and edit the language. Turn it into a storytelling tool that shows the journey of your growth.

◆ **SET UP INFORMATIONAL AND ACTUAL INTERVIEWS:** Research the latest in your industry to see if you've been keeping up. This includes identifying thought leaders, successful entrepreneurs and professionals, and organisations

where you would like to work. Reach out to some of them to see if you can find a mentor or a guide or even someone who can share an insight into where your industry is headed in the next five to 10 years. And even if you have no intention of changing jobs, apply to a few to see the response you're getting. And if you do get interviews and eventual offers, you'll have a third person's perspective on how valuable your skills are.

◆ **REBRAND YOURSELF:** You are an asset at your company but you need to show them that you're not just another resource expenditure but an investment.

◆ **TAKE NETWORKING BABY STEPS:** As much as you may dislike it, this is important. You don't need to make best friends at work or constantly gossip at the water cooler, but stop approaching it as a necessary evil. Get a coffee or share lunch with approachable colleagues once a month, and you may even end up making a work friend or two.

◆ **RE-INTERVIEW WITH YOUR BOSS:** Collate all your skill sets, what you're best at, things you do that nobody else can, and more. Ask for a short meeting (15-20 minutes) to discuss your future at the organisation and then



approach it like a new interview. And at this meeting, you will not only pitch yourself, but also ask your boss to pitch why you should continue to work there, that is, how the organisation can help you achieve your career goals. Speak frankly and if a raise is not on the cards, negotiate perks that make your life easier and cost the company next to nothing.

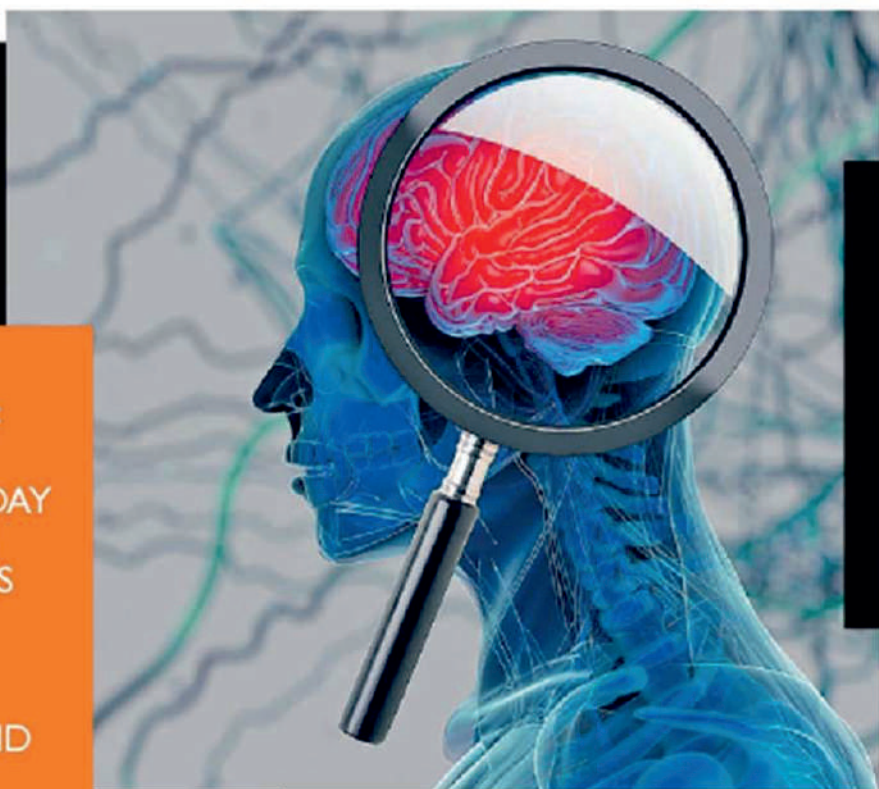
Doing these may feel scary, but it will help you to not only understand your own

value, but also enable you to get out of your comfort zone. Here's wishing you all the best.

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@aringminds.co.in or t2onsunday@abp.in



ON THE OCCASION OF WORLD ALZHEIMER'S DAY TODAY, MINU BUDHIA TALKS ABOUT DEMENTIA — THE CAUSES, SYMPTOMS AND CAREGIVING



Our brain is arguably our most important organ. It controls all our activities and enables us to think, to feel and to have memories. It keeps our other systems in order and, without it, we would simply not exist.

It is for this reason that Alzheimer's Syndrome is one of the most tragic illnesses that plagues humanity. Alzheimer's is a disorder that creeps up on the brain, snatching away its ability to think, to remember and to function. It is the leading cause of dementia.

ALZHEIMER'S VS DEMENTIA

Let us begin with differentiating between Alzheimer's and dementia. Dementia is the condition of loss of mental abilities to the point that it interferes with life. It is the general term for a group of symptoms exhibiting loss of thinking, reasoning and memory. Alzheimer's disease, on the other hand, is a specific disorder, of which dementia is a symptom. As the disorder progresses, the symptoms get more severe. The patient slowly starts to feel excessive confusion, disorientation and, eventually, may even lose their abilities to walk or to swallow.

Alzheimer's is the leading cause of dementia in the world.

While both Alzheimer's and dementia are more commonly seen in those over the age of 65, they are not a natural result of growing older. Alzheimer's has been shown to be a result of plaques and tangles in the brain and no known treatment exists

till date. It causes the loss of connections between neurons, which, in turn, causes inability to carry out functions and loss of memory and cognitive ability.

ALZHEIMER'S VS NORMAL AGING

As we grow older, our brain undergoes changes, and our memory does weaken over time. Weakening memory, however, does not always equate to dementia.

Dementia, unlike age-related memory loss, is disabling. It is characterised by a major decline in at least two intellectual abilities, such as memory, language or judgement. For example, age-related memory loss may result in a person having difficulty remembering an apt word in a conversation sometimes, but a person with dementia has trouble holding conversations altogether.

Age-related memory loss, though an inconvenience, does not disrupt life. Dementia, on the other hand, is characterised by memory loss that is so severe that it gets in the way of normal life, work and social activities.

STAGES OF ALZHEIMER'S

Changes in the brain are not apparent from the get go in a person with Alzheimer's — the symptoms make themselves visible years after the change has started.

The symptoms are progressive, that is, they get more marked as time passes. At the onset, the patient may experience occasional forgetfulness and some difficulty in concentration. This includes forgetting names and appointments, difficulty in staying organised or managing finances and misplacing valuable objects. The patient may realise these lapses, or they may not.

In the next stage, the patient faces trouble learning new things, remembering details of events, planning dinners, and increased difficulty in working with numbers and words.



As time goes on, they may start losing track of time and place. At this stage, it has been seen that they forget the names of the people close to them — but they still

recognise them. Daily activities like dressing and brushing teeth become difficult, and patients suffer from mood swings, hallucinations, paranoia and delusions. Anxiety and restlessness plague their minds, and many suffer from sleep issues.

WHO IS AT RISK?

We have yet to discover what causes a person to be affected by Alzheimer's. However, what we do know is that there are some conditions and lifestyle issues that put a person in more at risk.

Age is one of the most defining, albeit uncontrollable, factors for the syndrome. The

chances of Alzheimer's affecting a person doubles every five years after they cross the age of 65. However, even people below this age have developed the disorder and scientists have termed it Early-Onset Alzheimer's.

Genes are another factor leading to Alzheimer's. People with family history of the disease are more at risk of developing it as compared to those who do not have any genetic links to it.

The lifestyle one follows also affects their risk of Alzheimer's. Factors linked to cardiovascular issues, like smoking, high blood pressure, diabetes and obesity have shown to increase the chances of developing the disease. Moreover, people with Down's Syndrome, people suffering from depression and people living a sedentary life are also at heightened risk.

EARLY SIGNS OF ALZHEIMER'S

Timely detection of symptoms is integral in determining the quality of life a person will lead in the future. Keep an eye out for the following:

- Severe memory loss, for example, trouble remembering recently acquired information, forgetting important days and asking the same questions repeatedly.
- Inability to make and follow plans, for example, following a recipe.
- Inability to concentrate.
- Trouble holding a conversation.
- Losing things often and being unable to retrace their steps to find them.
- Making poor judgements,

including failure to groom themselves.

Again, the degree to which a person suffers from these symptoms usually determines whether the cause is Alzheimer's or normal ageing. However, it is always a good idea to consult a medical professional.

HOW CAN MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS HELP?

Alzheimer's is, as of now, untreatable. Once the gradual neurodegeneration starts, there is not much science can do to reverse it. However, a person suffering from Alzheimer's will have an army of doctors and healthcare providers with them.

Medical professionals run examinations to gauge the degree and extent to which the patient is exhibiting the symptoms. Tests help doctors rule out other causes of these signs, like head injuries and tumours, and ensure that correct treatment is provided for the patient. The results of these tests, moreover, serve as starting points to track the condition of the patient in the future.

Drugs are administered on a person suffering from Alzheimer's to slow down the degeneration and to manage other symptoms. Some medicines aim to boost cellular communication and patients have evidently benefited from these to an extent. Other drugs help combat related issues like depression, anxiety and agitation to help improve the quality of the life of the person.

ALZHEIMER'S CAREGIVERS

People suffering from Alzheimer's generally require a good degree of care, most of which is provided informally by family caregivers.

A caregiver, or a partner in care, plays a vital role in ensuring the person suffering leads a quality life, and that they stay away from institutional care as much as possible. They do everything — from helping get legal and financial affairs in order, to ensuring that the person's needs are met and they remain safe. A caregiver becomes like a constant companion. As the condition worsens, the caregiver may even need to help with basic everyday tasks like bathing and getting dressed.

ROLE OF A CAREGIVER — MEMORY LOSS

One of the biggest challenges a caregiver faces while caring for a person with Alzheimer's is tackling memory loss.

HEALTH

Losing their memory not only gets in the way of everyday life, but it also takes a toll on a person. It is scary and frustrating to not remember. It is natural to feel a loss of dignity and independence along with losing their memory and, as a caregiver, you can follow the following to help them live happier.

- ◆ Help them remember what they can patiently and compassionately.
- ◆ Make newer information easier to absorb — break down into smaller chunks.
- ◆ Make a routine to ensure the person feels comfortable and secure during their day.
- ◆ Make visual reminders of important information.
- ◆ Learn about the symptoms to avoid getting frustrated yourself.
- ◆ Reduce background noises to have the most of their attention.
- ◆ Encourage the person to record events in a diary or journal.
- ◆ Try getting back-ups of important items like keys and glasses.

A THERAPIST'S GUIDE ON ACTIVITIES

Alzheimer's gets in the way of a person's life. As their cognitive abilities decline, people suffering from it often feel like shells of their former selves. Planning activities for them to take part in becomes important — these lift their spirits and give them a sense of purpose and

accomplishment. An added bonus is that through these activities, you can make precious memories with your loved one.

A therapist can help you schedule your day and plan fun activities. Activities depend on their cognitive condition too. Some activities that can be suggested are:

- ◆ Fish out old photo albums. Alzheimer's patients often remember older information and going through old photographs and reliving them can be cathartic.
- ◆ Print a family photo or a picture of something that they love, and make a jigsaw puzzle out of it. Make sure to keep the parts big so that the game is easier.
- ◆ Make them sort out playing cards on the basis of colours, suits or numbers.
- ◆ Get a box of colourful beads, and ask them to sort the beads on the basis of colours. You could even string them together in combinations to make jewellery!
- ◆ Fold laundry. Asking them for their 'help' makes them feel that they are contributing to the house.

CAREGIVERS' BURNOUT

It is no surprise that caring for a person suffering from dementia requires serious investments — on mental, physical, financial and time levels. As caregivers are primarily family members, they need to balance work, relationships and life with



Caregiving is not easy. Most caregivers find it difficult to hit a balance. Fuelled either by guilt, societal expectations, love, desperate hope — or a mixture of them all — they end up giving too much of their energy to the patient

caregiving. Additionally, seeing their loved ones slowly lose their faculties and witnessing their frequent mood swings weighs down heavily on their hearts and shoulders.

Caregiving is not easy. Most caregivers find it difficult to hit a balance. Fuelled either by guilt, societal expectations, love, desperate hope — or a mixture of them all — they end up giving too much of their energy to the patient. It is no wonder that burnout is seen very commonly among Alzheimer's caregivers.

BEING A HEALTHY CAREGIVER

Being healthy is a human's biggest asset. While caring for a person suffering from Alzheimer's, caregivers often neglect their own health — physical, mental and emotional, and this weighs upon everyone involved. One of the first things a person

should do while providing care to a person with Alzheimer's is accept that they cannot do it all. Oftentimes, biting off more than they can chew ends up doing more harm than good. There are a lot of resources and help available, and availing them is a good idea. For example, to hit a better balance in their lives, caregivers and their patient can choose to avail at-home care facilities in which an external caregiver can help with household chores and daily needs.

Finding healthy coping mechanisms go a long way in minimising the effect of stress and exhaustion related to caregiving. It is always a good idea to maintain a healthy social life to destress. Despite their best efforts, symptoms will progress — but the aim of caregiving is never to reverse symptoms; it is, simply, to provide care.

LAST WORDS

Alzheimer's may affect anyone. Keep an eye out for any of the telltale signs and live healthily and positively. As with everything, sorrows pass and all we can do is enjoy the sun when it shines.

The author is a psychotherapist, counsellor, and founder of Caring Minds, I Can Fly, Cafe I Can Fly, and TELx speaker, answers queries on mental health and adolescence issues. Send your queries to askminubudhia@aringminds.co.in. Find her at Instagram @psychotherapistminu

HEALTH

mind matters



MINU BUDHIA

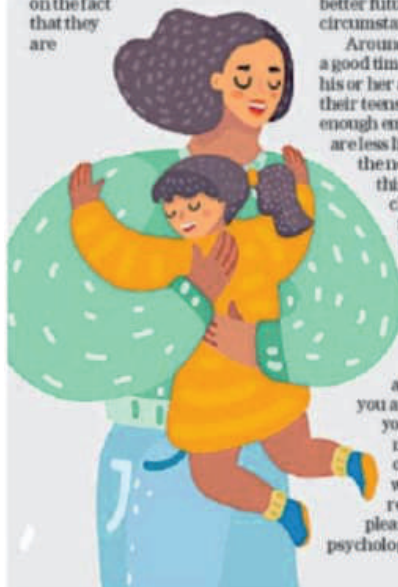
Q When and how should we break the news to our adopted child? What is the correct age? What should we do if he/she gets to know from someone other than us? Make adoption a part of the conversation at home right from the start. When telling stories about families, tell your child how there are different 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 guilt trip your child about how they should be grateful for a better future or better circumstances or a better life.

Around six-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 and are less likely to respond well to the news. The longer you hide this vital news from your child, the more he/she 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 him/her 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.



Q I'm 29, single, and a working woman doing well, both personally and professionally. However, I'm facing a daily challenge — procrastination. I can't concentrate on anything. I enrol in online courses but never finish them. I miss painting as a hobby but when I start painting (if at all) I can't focus for more than five minutes. I even skip everyday chores and spend time lying in bed, surfing the Internet, etc. I make to-do lists and mostly fail to follow them. I only do things that are an absolute must (that too at the last moment). I'm not a lazy person and I do everything with 100 per cent effort when I do anything. I just can't find the will power to get started or stay consistent. Please help.

I understand and believe you when you say you are not lazy as procrastination itself is not a problem but a red flag for other psychological issues like stress, anxiety, depression, ADHD, etc. It is a natural response to put off something that causes us stress, but delaying it worries us more and begins a vicious cycle of constant worry and panic. Over time this leads to feelings of guilt, shame, incompetence and unworthiness, making the situation worse.

While most people procrastinate sometime or the other, yours seems to be a case of chronic procrastination, where an occasional solution has become your go-to solution and is affecting every aspect of your life — personal, professional, emotional and otherwise. While low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, and imposter syndrome can fuel procrastination, it has almost nothing to do with laziness.

If you are an anxious person by nature, someone who worries about every little detail, you could be focussing on what could go wrong and thereby freeze instead of moving forward.

If you are a perfectionist or someone who likes to control their environment, you could be focussing on getting every detail

perfect to ensure you can control the response of others to your work and thereby end up missing deadlines.

If you are someone who is suffering from long-term undiagnosed depression, you could have lost all motivation to better your life, relationships or career. Even getting out of bed in the morning may be causing fatigue and avoiding the issue could seem like the easy way out rather than facing them.

If you are someone who has been living with undiagnosed ADHD, your difficulties with concentration, commitment to a task, and distractibility can all be explained.

So how can you manage this? Here are a few tips:

The first step is to congratulate yourself for reaching out to get the help you need. It is not easy to identify an issue and find the will to look for a solution. I would also encourage you to connect with a counsellor who can help you identify the root causes of your procrastination and offer customised guidance and guidelines to improve your emotional health.

The second step is to forgive

yourself. You are only human. Like you would forgive a friend who has unintentionally hurt you, grant yourself the same kindness and compassion.

Thirdly, imagine a positive "What if?" We mostly think of all the things that can go wrong, but for a change think of all the things that can go right. What if the presentation is super and you get a raise? What if you take the exam and get a distinction grade? What if you go on the date and the person turns out to be amazing? What if you try a new hobby and discover a hidden talent?

Lastly, re-imagine the way you approach time. Break any task — whether it's getting ready for a party or making a PPT — into small bite-sized tasks that will not take you more than five to 15 minutes. After completing every 15 minutes, reward yourself with something non-distracting, and after you complete the task, treat yourself to something you really love and look forward to.

Have faith in yourself — I'm sure you will overcome this issue and have a fulfilling and successful life ahead of you.



Q I am a 65-year-old widow living alone for the last 15 years as my only child is settled abroad with her family. I always feel guilty, as if I am not doing the correct thing. As I was a girl and not fair like my mother, I was treated like a second-class citizen in my own home. The same thing happened with my husband. He was very bright but I was average, so I was made to believe whatever I was doing was wrong. I have developed a tendency to please everyone and get hurt if I am ignored. How do I come out of this?

I am sorry to hear you were made to feel less than and not enough based on the opinions of others. This sort of judgement, especially when it comes from our loved ones, can emotionally scar us for life and leave us vulnerable to seeking validation for our existence.

However, it is never too late to rediscover your self-worth, improve your self-esteem, and boost your self-confidence.

In fact, this is an excellent time in your life to concentrate on yourself and find out what are the things you truly want to do. There is absolutely no need to feel guilty or ashamed about wanting to do things your way, especially since you did not have that opportunity in your early life. To live life to the fullest, and on your terms from now on, you need to concentrate on falling in love with yourself. Here are some of the things you can try on this journey:

Acceptance: You need to first accept yourself, just as you are. What you look like, your intellect, your dressing sense, your food preferences — make a list of the way you like to live your everyday life and practise it without feeling

guilty. Make sure that every day you start wearing one item of clothing/accessory you love, eat one meal that is your favourite, and



do one leisure time activity that you enjoy. All of these need to be of your personal choice — not your child's, late spouse's, or anyone else's.

Emotional Detox: You need to

let go of the opinions of others and realise that what they thought was just that — the opinion of a few individuals, and not actual fact.

Holding a grudge about how they treated you will only hinder your way forward, so find a way to forgive them. For those who have passed away, you can write them a letter and then tear and throw it away to release negative feelings. Or you can sit in front of their picture and have a conversation with their image, speaking out loud all the things you couldn't say over the years. Expressing these buried feelings will help to set you free.

Live The Present: While you cannot change your past, focus on making your present a reality that you will truly enjoy. Focus on the next 24 hours and what small things you can do to feel more fulfilled and

happy in life. If you ever had a passion project, start that and see how you can incorporate it with making an impact in the lives of others. For example, if you like reading, go to an orphanage or an old age home and read to them. You can even do this online through your phone using Facebook or WhatsApp.

Choose Happiness: At the end of the day, true happiness comes from within. Speak with your supportive friends and family daily. Have a regular weekly or monthly Seniors' Circle session to discuss similar issues. Encourage each other to share the positives in your current life and talk about individual, simple happiness tips you can adopt in your daily life. You can also find a gratitude buddy with whom you'll share three things you're grateful for every day.

All the best for your self-care and self-love journey!

Q I come from a small town and gave my 100 per cent focus to my studies with the sole intention to live a proper and happy social life after I go outside for studies. But because of the lockdown, I haven't even seen my college and my second year is about to start. I missed all the fun and life of being a fresher and the exposure I have been craving for. This is harming my mental health and I cry all night. I don't have a lot of friends and my cousins ignore me. I have been left alone and I feel sad, lonely and disheartened. Please help.

I congratulate you on your academic dedication during your school years and can understand your disappointment about your feeling of missing out on being a fresher and stepping into a new world. Shopping for college, meeting new people, learning from new teachers, fresher's parties and more — it is all about new beginnings as an adult and you feel robbed of a rightful experience.

High school and college students have faced an especially emotionally turbulent time since the lockdown. Not only did they miss out on essential in-person social interaction, but also missed out on a number of life events like

farewells and graduations, which help us to move on in life.

You need to understand and accept that you are part of an extraordinary batch of students living and studying in an extraordinary time. It is okay to feel sad and mourn this loss of experience and like you, your entire batch — not just in your college, but in your country — are facing similar emotions, so you are not alone. As things get better, you have the second and third year of college to look forward to.

Till then, take the effort to communicate with your classmates online and if your local laws and regulations permit, small groups of you can meet up at coffee shops or malls (while following all Covid

safety protocols) to get to know each other. All of you are going through a shared experience and you're bound to make one or two friends.

When it comes to feeling lonely and sad, you have to start with loving your own company. You can be alone but not lonely. Take this time to find out who you really are, what you really like, and what you want to do in life. Get to know yourself better and become your own best friend first — this will help you to make other friends later. And if you feel very alone or overwhelmed with anxiety, explore getting help from a mental health professional. Call a helpline or a mental health clinic to speak with a counsellor or a psychologist who can guide you based on a detailed understanding of your situation. I wish you all the very best for a bright and happy future!



Q I have been masturbating since I was in school. I do this excessively and because of it I suffer from a lot of medical conditions. I don't earn enough money to treat myself and I don't want to tell my parents as it will bring them shame. I just want the pain, guilt and shame that I feel every single day to stop. I really have no desire to live like this. I have been thinking of committing suicide, but can't muster up the courage to do it. Please help.

The first thing that I need you to understand is that you matter, your life matters. However troubled you may feel, it's no reason to end your life. Second, in our society there is a lot of stigma surrounding the topic of sex and sex education, there are many misconceptions surrounding the topic of masturbation. By terming something biological and natural as 'dirty', 'unspeakable', and 'shameful', elders put a stop to what should be an open conversation. As they themselves have not received any education, they are understandably uncomfortable talking to their children. This also results in a lot of wrong information being passed down to pre-teens and teens.

You have mentioned that you suffer from medical conditions. If

these are self-diagnosed, please visit your family doctor first. If that is not an option, if you have a trusted family member, speak with them, or ask them to accompany you for a doctor's visit. If you are worried about your physical health, you must discuss your issues frankly with a doctor.

About your emotional and mental health, as long as your regular life, work, and relationships are not negatively affected, you should not worry. Social conditioning and stigma are a big influence in causing these feelings of shame and guilt. You are not alone. There are many others like you who feel what you are feeling.

Given the turmoil and agony you are in, I strongly suggest that you speak with a counsellor/psychologist so you can receive continued and personalised guidance. If you feel suicidal, please contact a mental health/ suicide helpline immediately. Sometimes it is necessary to have someone hold our hand during our struggles, and there is no shame in taking help to get through a tough phase. I really hope you stay strong, seek help and wish you the very best in life.

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



MINU BUDHIA

HEALTH

2022: THE YEAR OF MANIFESTATION

It'll work best when your thoughts, actions, beliefs and emotions are aligned to your desires and goals

This year, 2022, is slated to be the Year of Manifestations and high and positive energy, but what does 'manifestation' even mean?

Manifestation is really about understanding what is it that you want for your own life experience, and then creating those outcomes. So, in its essence, manifestation is creating your life as you would like it to be, with the help of the universe and its energies.

"What you seek is what you attract", is manifestation in one single thought.

But why 2022? Why is manifestation on everybody's phone screen this year?

When a number comes in a sequence, it has a specific purpose. Every number has a significance and 2 is the number of balance. Hence, the year 2022 itself says 'Everything should be in balance', and this is exactly what the universe is trying to say. That your life is a reflection of your thoughts.

This year, the energies are going to be really high. So make sure your thought process is in a positive flow, as your belief in the end result is what manifestation is all about. You should, at no point, feel that you will not arrive at your desired result.

Law of Attraction

The law of attraction is based on the belief that thoughts are a form of energy. It suggests that positive thoughts bring positive results into a person's life, while negative thoughts bring negative outcomes. The law of attraction is constantly at work. The energies and vibrations you let out in the world are reflected in what you receive from it. For example, if you think positively and visualise yourself with enough money to live comfortably, you will attract opportunities that can make these desires a reality. Manifestation is intentionally using the law of attraction to build what you want.

Some things that you can do to incorporate the law of attraction into your own life include:

- *Being grateful
- *Visualising your goals
- *Looking for the positives in a situation
- *Learning how to identify negative thinking
- *Using positive affirmations
- *Reframing negative events in a positive way

While the law of attraction may not be an immediate solution for all of life's challenges, it can help you learn to cultivate a positive outlook in life. It may also help you stay

motivated to continue working toward your goals.

Harnessing the Law of Attraction: Manifestation

Before taking steps to manifest what you want, it is essential to make space for all the good that is to come. Remove things from the past that do not serve you. Declutter your physical

environment, delete the junk from your devices and cleanse your body and mind.

When you are ready with a fresh slate, start taking these steps:

Introspecting
It is essential that you actually figure out what your goals are so that you can properly manifest them. Be as specific as you can and go into as many details as possible.

Remember that you are allowed to change or update what you want as you go through the process.

Asking the universe for what you seek

Once you are clear about what you want, it is time to put the signals out in the universe. You can do so through meditation, visualisation or scripting. Keep repeating your requests to align all the energies towards your goals.

Visualisation and vision board: A vision board is nothing but a visual representation of your goals. Target your goals and visualise your dream life by collecting images and putting them up on your vision board.

Scripting: Not everyone is comfortable with visualisation. It is easy for our minds to get distracted while picturing what we seek and that is where scripting comes to the rescue. It is writing ('scripting') out your intentions, making it a sort of a written visualisation. Everything else remains the same — you write what you seek as if you already have it and channel the energies towards this end.

Co-creating

Manifesting your goals works best when you put in the effort to reach them. Form a plan of action that will help you get closer to what you want, and give it your energy every day. If required, get in touch with people to figure out what you can do to reach where you want to be. Take a more active part in forming your manifested reality; co-create with the universe.

Things to keep in mind while practising manifestation

Take ownership and have accountability

If you're not achieving your goals as quickly as you want, it can be extremely disheartening. Sometimes, resistance comes from external factors (Covid-19, for example), but other times it can be our own actions, or inactions, that affect our progress. Whether that be a lack of motivation or self-doubt, there are many mental and physical roadblocks that are bound to show up.

When self-doubt comes, a good defence mechanism can be writing down your daily, weekly, or monthly steps and accomplishments — whatever works for you. Not only does this allow you to take accountability for your progress, it reinforces how far you've come in achieving your goals.

Make a gratitude journal
Maintain a gratitude journal to keep a track of the good things in life. No matter how difficult life can get, things to be grateful for can always be

found. When you recognise your abundance, the universe reflects this energy and gets you closer to your goals.

Not receiving instant gratification can be really disheartening, and it is essential to celebrate small victories. Gratitude journals act as a record of the positives in your life and keep you from crumbling in the face of setbacks.

Trust and let go

Manifestation is rooted in the belief that the universe gives you what you want, and it requires putting your trust and faith in the process.

Moreover, when you trust the universe, you will have enough inner peace and security to continue walking towards what you seek. Use affirmations when you catch yourself doubting the process. Remind yourself that the universe has your back and with every passing moment, you are getting closer to your goal.

Take inspired action

An inspired action is when you do something because you feel the inner urge to do it. Like having a gut feel. Therefore, we always say: 'If you can think it, you can do it'.

Avoid coming from a place of need

The intention you have and what you seek from the universe should not be coming from a place of need. This need implies a lack within you, and that goes against the idea of manifestation. When your being is filled with gratitude, peace and joy, your manifestations will work well.

Remove resistance

A reason why manifestation may not be working for you is that you have certain blockages that resist what the universe is offering you. Doubts, anxieties, fears, low motivation, procrastination and frustrations are some shapes this resistance takes.

However, it is absolutely normal to feel these emotions. Acknowledge them and work towards eradicating them. Seek help from mental healthcare professionals if you find yourself getting stuck on an issue.

Armed with these basics, you can begin walking on the path of manifestation.

Remember: Manifestation is not just willpower and positive thinking. It works best when your thoughts, actions, beliefs and emotions are aligned to your desires and goals.

Make this year yours. Let the universe know what you seek, channel your energies towards your goals, and manifest the reality you want!

Minu Budhia is a psychotherapist, counsellor, founder of Caring Minds, I Can Fly, Cafe I Can Fly, and a TEDx speaker. Write to askminubudhia@aringminds.co.in

HEALTH

February 4 was World Cancer Day but raising awareness about the illness and how to prevent or deal with it is something that needs to be done at all times

FIGHTING THE BIG C: CANCER, MENTAL HEALTH & YOU



MINU BUDHIA

Being diagnosed with cancer is a shock. While your body fights a physical battle, your mind is fighting more. And to win the war against cancer, focusing on treating and strengthening the mind is as important as treating and nourishing the body. Also, I know it is easier said than done, but the will to thrive, not just survive, is essential for your quality of life. This is something I've learnt from seeing both my mother and a close friend fight cancer.

The focus needs to be on not only treating and curing the cancer, but on living as much of a full life as possible. Based on interactions with cancer warriors, today I'm talking about the Big C and mental healthcare's place in your treatment plans to ensure you cope with hope and live well through this difficult time of life.

Before treatment

Distract yourself as much as possible. If you are physically able, go out as much as possible and do all the things you love. Get coffee with your friends, go on a date with your partner, catch a movie at the theatre, go to an amusement park, visit a place you've always wanted to go to, or even take a staycation at your favourite fancy hotel.

Do not think 'doomsday' thoughts. The time before a diagnosis is extremely stressful — waiting for a call that can potentially change the course of your life is no simple thing. However, this is not the time to imagine a worst-case scenario.

It is natural to feel scared and start Googling side effects. And it is okay to do so, but in moderation. Fix a specific hour, and stick to it. Focus on reading survivor stories and treatment journeys with a positive outcome.

During treatment

Have a frank discussion with your doctor. It's perfectly okay to have a hundred or thousand questions. And none of these are stupid.

questions, so ask your doctor about all your queries in detail. Especially the side effects. Knowing what's coming, however daunting, will help build your mental strength. This is also not the time to be shy. If you have questions about intimacy and fertility, ask what you need to know so you can plan accordingly.

Do not alienate yourself. Navigating the unknown on your own can be frightening. You may not want to discuss it because of various reasons —

WHAT TO DO DURING TREATMENT



- ▶ Have a frank discussion with your doctor
- ▶ Do not alienate yourself. You'll need people around you
- ▶ Talk with other cancer survivors
- ▶ Explore counselling. Customised coping strategies can help
- ▶ Understand your finances. It can get stressful otherwise
- ▶ Preparing for a changed physical appearance
- ▶ Go shopping for comfortable clothes and linen
- ▶ Hold on to your hobbies
- ▶ Nourish to flourish. Work with a nutritionist to customise your diet
- ▶ Celebrate — big and small. Make every moment count
- ▶ Get a pet, or get friends to bring their's over
- ▶ Sit with your sadness, but only for a while
- ▶ Prayer, meditation, and affirmations
- ▶ Keep a healing journal if you find it calming
- ▶ Keep an appointment diary to manage your time



you think it'll be a burden, you don't want to scare your loved ones, you feel people may be judgemental. But having a support system is essential.

Whether it's family, friends, colleagues, or a support group, you will need your people to get through this. Whenever you feel well enough for company, try group activities that you love doing, even if it's only for 15 minutes. If you're too tired, just having someone who cares for

feelings and is available to mentor you in this journey makes a huge difference.

Explore counselling. While venting to your loved ones is healthy, speaking with someone who can offer you customised coping strategies to handle your emotional challenges is an option I will strongly recommend. Stress, anger, loneliness and hopelessness are feelings that will be coming up and a counsellor or psychologist will be able to guide you through this sea of negative emotions. As families and significant others will be living this with you, although in a different capacity, couples counselling and family counselling are good options to consider too.

Understand your finances. Navigating the financial side of treatment is a huge part of the stress that most patients and their families face. Thus it's a good idea to get a deep understanding of your assets and figure out which accounts will be used for medical expenses. If you've put together an emergency or rainy day fund, this is also the time to figure out if, how, and when you may need to dip into these savings. In case you need to sell assets, apply for loans, or require charitable funding, this is the time to get started.

Preparing for a changed physical appearance.

Treatments will take a toll on your appearance and the most prominent issue is hair loss. If you want to wear a wig, begin your research now. Or if you'd rather wear colourful scarves or hats, look for those too. When you first notice your hair falling, you can also choose to cut it short or shave it off completely. My friend did this and found it to be very liberating. When you feel comfortable enough, you can share your story and help thousands of others going through the same thing.

Go shopping. Light, soft, comfortable and loose clothing will keep you comfortable. Head to a store or look online for pyjama sets and lounging clothes in happy prints.



you hold your hand in silence can be immensely comforting too.

Talk with other cancer survivors. Whether it's one-to-one, in a group setting, in person, or online, connecting with people who are going through or have gone through a similar experience will be of great help. Having someone who really understands your

Cotton, linen and natural fabrics tend to be more comfortable not just for clothes, but bed linen too. Since you will be spending a lot more time in your room, you may want to redecorate it too.

Hold on to your hobbies. With different levels of fatigue and weakness, it can be tempting to put a stop to your hobbies, especially if they involve a lot of energy and movement. Instead of saying goodbye to something you love, modify it to match your comfort. If Zumba was your jam, do light exercises and stretches to the same music. If gardening makes you glad, care for succulents, air plants, or even grow microgreens and kitchen herbs in your verandah.

Nourish to flourish. What you put in your body is instrumental in helping you get better. Working with a nutritionist to customise your diet can help you meet your satiety and nutritional needs. Tailoring food according to your treatment stages and the relevant side effects will also ensure you are stronger and better prepared for battle. In addition to good food, you also need positive surroundings. For this you can redecorate your room — add bright, happy cushions, quirky quotes, abstract art, pretty curtains, positive quotes, etc. And you don't have to spend a lot either.

Celebrate — big and small. Make every moment count. Whether it's an occasion like a birthday or anniversary, the first day you didn't throw up after treatment, or the first time you could walk up a flight of stairs without feeling tired — it all deserves to be celebrated. And for any external events where you can't be there in person, join in via a video call.

Get a pet. If your family or support system can manage, you can

get a pet. Having a dog or cat around you can provide immense stress relief. If it's not possible to keep one, see if your friends can bring over any of their pets for a visit.

Sit with your sadness. It is natural for you to feel multiple stages of grief after your diagnosis — denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. And during this time, it is essential to grieve small, personal losses — a wedding you may never have, a place you may never travel to, a professional goal you can no longer achieve — to help cope with a different future. It's okay to not pretend to be strong for a day or two — you have the right to feel sad.

Prayer, meditation, and affirmations. The aim here is not to eliminate all negative thoughts, but to keep them manageable and at bay. Based on your faith, you can memorise a short prayer of strength to repeat whenever you feel low. Meditating early in the morning and right before you sleep can help you retain a positive mindset. Guided meditation audio tracks, motivation podcasts, and affirmations are great options too. For a positive mindset you can write down your affirmations on Post-its and put them all over the house — the bedroom, the study, the living room, the washroom. If visuals are more inspiring for you, you can make a vision board too.

Keep a healing journal. Journaling your journey is something that will not only help you stay calm but will also be a record of your battle against cancer. You can simply write

IT IS NATURAL FOR YOU TO FEEL MULTIPLE STAGES OF GRIEF AFTER YOUR DIAGNOSIS — DENIAL, ANGER, BARGAINING, DEPRESSION, ACCEPTANCE. AND DURING THIS TIME, IT IS ESSENTIAL TO GRIEVE SMALL, PERSONAL LOSSES — A WEDDING YOU MAY NEVER HAVE, A PLACE YOU MAY NEVER TRAVEL TO, A PROFESSIONAL GOAL YOU CAN NO LONGER ACHIEVE — TO HELP COPE WITH A DIFFERENT FUTURE. IT'S OKAY TO NOT PRETEND TO BE STRONG FOR A DAY OR TWO — YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO FEEL SAD

out your whole day in the form of a traditional "Dear diary" entry or use bullet points. It's a great idea to include trackers too. Keeping a note of your moods, water consumption, physical strength, food, etc. that will reveal patterns that can aid your recovery plan. Good sleep is also crucial to healing. So if you're having intrusive, negative thoughts that make it hard to fall asleep, or you keep waking up at night, get rid of all digital screens at least an hour before bed, and write down what's bothering you in your journal.

Keep an appointment diary. Managing your time is crucial, especially when you're this ill. In addition to writing down doctor's appointments, treatment timings,

medication timings, make sure to put down time slots for visits from friends, hobbies, celebrations, etc. Even simple and seemingly mundane things like fixing a time for watching TV, listening to music, reading books, bathing, brushing will keep your calendar full and reduce feelings of FOMO (fear of missing out).

During remission

Create a survivorship plan. Plan out your days with milestones and checks in terms of weeks, months and years. Fill your calendar with small, simple achievable goals that have a specific time frame. Get in touch with your friends and make short plans outside the house. This is also the time to consider dipping your toes back into your professional life by polishing your resume and taking on a few freelance projects to see how much you can manage. Dealing with a life-threatening diagnosis changes the way you see life, so it is natural that your approach to work and relationships will change too.

Expect emotional turmoil. After months or years of being in and out of the hospital for treatments and appointments, it may feel a little scary to have a non-medical open calendar. Also, since the treatment has been all about getting you more time, now that you have achieved this goal, you truly may not know what to do with it. All the extra time on your hands can make you worried about falling sick again, giving rise to stress and anxiety. Some people also experience cancer-related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Dealing with a terminal diagnosis

It is perfectly okay to mourn the loss of a future, to grieve a life imagined but un-lived, to have a pity party where you feel nothing but sorry for yourself. But it is important to not unpack those feelings and let them take root there. All that we need sometimes is for someone to acknowledge the vulnerability we feel. Even for those who have been diagnosed with a devastating outcome — when there is no cure — cancer doesn't have to be the centre of attention in every conversation. Every visit doesn't have to feel like navigating a field of landmines.

Talking about 'it'

Living with uncertainty can be extremely scary but talking about the possibility of death can be scarier. And while social conditioning makes us so awkward to both broach the topic or hear someone talk about it, there is a real need to ask the hard questions. We need to sit with the suffering and have the difficult conversations. If you have specific wishes about end-of-life care and your funeral, speak to your loved ones about it. It will be a distressing, disturbing conversation for all concerned, but getting this off your chest will make you feel better in the long run and your loved ones will not be caught unawares too.

For primary caregivers and family

If you're the loved one of someone diagnosed with cancer, please understand that it is okay for you to get help too. You need to care for your physical and mental health because none of us can pour from an empty cup.

Schedule ample breaks. You are only human and needing some time off is something you should not feel guilty or ashamed of. Have a friend, family member, or a professional caregiver take over for at least once a week.

Eat well. While this may seem like oversimplified advice, eating nutritious meals is key for you too. Exhaustion can have you reaching for instant, ready meals or takeaways and deliveries, but at least one meal and snack needs to be fresh — it can be as simple as a veggies and fruit salad.

Do something you loved as a child. Since you're living in a serious situation round the clock, make sure you take 30 minutes out every day to do something childish that you love. Whether it's reading a favourite book, playing music, colouring, something that reminds you of happy, carefree days will keep your spirits up.

Spend time with your friends. On the day that you've scheduled a break, not only do you need to do some solid self-care indoors, but you need to get out of the house too. And you need to do this with a friend, not alone. Visit a cafe, watch a movie, go to the salon, to keep in touch with a world outside medicines, tests, and treatments.

How can you really be a friend to someone battling cancer?

Whether you're family, a friend, or a colleague, you can be an immense source of strength and support. You don't need to be their primary caregiver, best friend or spouse to be someone who brightens their day. Here are a few things to do:

Talk to them like a person. Post a diagnosis, most of the time the disease takes the spotlight. Remember that the person is still a human and that their diagnosis is not the only thing that defines them. There are hundreds and thousands of topics under the sun — find one and talk about that instead.

Offer to help out with everyday things. Whether it's bringing them groceries or home-cooked food, doing their dishes, helping out with laundry and vacuuming, babysitting their kids, driving them to chemo, picking up medicines, pitch in where you can. The little things really matter.

Be their silent support. If your friend or colleague is having a rough day and feeling sad, just sit with them in silence. There's no need to offer advice or help or try to distract them with something funny. Just be there beside them to really be there for them.

With World Cancer Day just gone by, let us all adopt the pledge to «Close The Care Gap and cheer on these brave souls who are our everyday heroes.

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

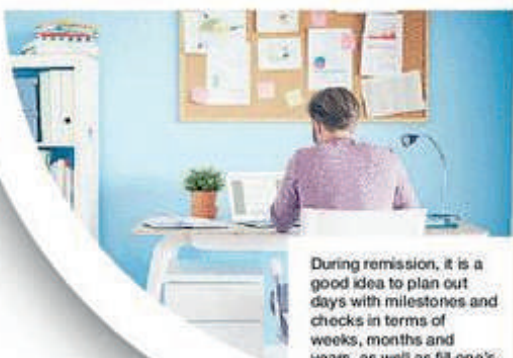
RED FLAGS FOR DEPRESSION, ANXIETY AND PTSD IN SURVIVORS

Whether you're the survivor or the caregiver, here are some common mental health red flags to watch out for:

- ▶ Feeling sad all the time, not finding joy in the thought of a future, or even talking about not wanting to live
- ▶ Feeling guilty about surviving, especially if fellow cancer warriors in your support groups have succumbed
- ▶ Having trouble falling asleep or staying asleep throughout the night
- ▶ Complete refusal to discuss anything in the future



Caregivers should make sure to take 30 minutes out a day to do something childish that they love, like colouring, that reminds of happy, carefree days, to keep their spirits up



During remission, it is a good idea to plan out days with milestones and checks in terms of weeks, months and years, as well as fill one's calendar with small, simple achievable goals



RELATIONSHIP

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Things they don't tell you about modern love, marriage and more



MINU BUDHIA

What do we talk about when we talk about love? With Bollywood, Hollywood, TV series, literature, poetry, and even childhood fairy tales glorifying great romantic love, it has shaped generations upon generations' views of what love really is. Grand gestures, oaths of undying love, searching for 'the one' and the whole 'you

complete me' idea have become an unreal everyday standard. Now, why is this a cause for concern? Because adding the stress of unrealistic romantic comedy scripts to your real-life story can do more harm than good. Especially because the happy ending of the film is where the beginning of real love starts.

Rose-tinted Love vs Real Love

To make your real love successful, we often need to take off our rose-tinted glasses and reboot this mindset by adjusting our emotional expectations. Here's how we can do this:

The first thing you need to do is realise you are not an incomplete puzzle or a half person looking for another to make them whole. More than loving someone, most of us are in love with the idea of being in love. Why? Because besides the dopamine rush, society has taught us, especially women, that we are incomplete on our own. It is time to erase this message from our lives. You are enough. Enough to love yourself, enough to make yourself happy, enough to learn to live a fulfilling life on your own. Love is an added bonus.

The second thing is to let go of the idea that you or your partner will love and accept each other unconditionally 24x7, 365 days a year. We're all just human and all of us have had days where we're physically, mentally and emotionally exhausted. On these days, it can be hard enough to love yourself, let alone another person. So expecting your partner or yourself to be actively affectionate every single day is unrealistic. On such days, instead of concentrating on what's not happening, give them their space and indulge in a little me time for yourself.

The third thing is to stop using the loaded phrase, "If you love me, you will..." all the time. While we walk into a relationship with our eyes open — well, at least half open — we are far more likely to be accepting of all the good or perfect parts that appeal to us. As for the not-so-great imperfections we perceive, we hope we can change them in our partner. Or worse, our partner will change themselves for us if they love us. True acceptance is loving your partner just as they are. Constantly asking them to prove their love by demanding they change everything about themselves is a recipe for disaster. You know how hard it is for you to change, why would you ask them to?

The fourth thing to realise is that no human being, even if they love you at a cellular level, can be a mindreader. Even if the love of your life tries to, it's quite possible they will get mixed messages or misinterpret what you want, or even if you want anything at all. Truly successful couples work at making their relationship a success by communicating their expectations, needs, wants and more. Open, direct communication is the key to real emotional intimacy, which is what keeps love alive till even the golden years of our lives.

The fifth thing is to embrace change. Ten, 15, 20 years into your relationship, you cannot expect it to be a photocopy of

what it was during the initial years. People change, grow and mature over the years, and so does a relationship. As long as your foundation is based on love, respect, and kindness, the way you'll express your love will not affect your relationship. In fact, it will evolve into a stronger, deeper bond each year. However, for those who feel or fear drifting apart, use positive statements to communicate your issues. Sometimes, all it takes is a single talk to rekindle your love.

Commitment Conundrum

People today are desperate to be loved and understood but terrified to be vulnerable and committed. And really, what's their incentive right? When you can swipe left or right and treat human connections like an online shopping experience, why would you want to work hard at something long-term when you can move onto one person and then another to fuel your temporary needs? Because love isn't fast food. If anything it's a slow-cooked, multi-course gourmet meal.

If you're looking for a deep, emotional connection with a partner for life, you have to open yourself up and understand that you are going to get hurt. That's part of the journey and very natural. Building a wall around yourself and flitting from one shallow hello to the other will leave you feeling empty if what you really want is a companion for life.

With so many "ships" — situationship, textationship, skinship — it can be hard to navigate the world of romance. To knot or not to knot is also a common question in today's emotional climate. We often get so caught up in the idea of a wedding that we forget about the whole marriage that comes after.

Whether love or arranged, marriage is a commitment that you need to enter into carefully. And before you do, there are some serious conversations you need to have with your future partner.

Culture Shock and Dating Dos

Not discussing different personal and family values is one of the key reasons for a relationship to go sour soon. Once the initial honeymoon phase is over, you should sit down and discuss lifestyles, habits, and how you envision a life together so that once you settle down, there are no rude culture shocks waiting in the wings.

While opposites attract is a nice phrase for romantic love, real love is built on solid compatibility. You can't always be emotionally, physically, socially, financially, intellectually, and politically compatible but you can

definitely make sure you're compatible on the matters that matter most to you.

VEGETARIAN/NON-VEGETARIAN: Whether it's a choice stemming from personal, health, or family reasons, the idea of making a whole household veg or non-veg has become outdated. If you are vegan/vegetarian and your spouse is eggetarian/non-vegetarian, there is absolutely no need for either of you to adopt each other's habits. A friend of mine, who is a strict vegetarian, has been happily married to a non-vegetarian for over 30 years. She still doesn't get the appeal of meat and he still doesn't get the appeal of 'ghaos poos', but what they get is each other. They have accepted the person as they are and choose to respect their love's choices.

DRINKING & SMOKING: Expecting either partner to stop or start either habit will only lead to more conflict. This is a make or break point for most people, so have this conversation as early as possible.

RELIGION & CHILDREN: If both of you follow different religions or one practises their faith while the other is an atheist, decide what everyday life and religious holidays will look like in the future. Also, it is important to decide beforehand which faith and what degree of active practice your child will follow. It is also important to have a conversation on how many children you'll want, figure out your views on adoption and surrogacy, or if you'll want children at all.

What we all need to understand is that it is completely possible to bridge cultural gaps while holding on to your individuality as a person. Establishing and keeping communication channels open is the way to a genuinely happy, successful relationship. The whole idea that one person — usually the woman — has to sacrifice their happiness to prove their love for the other is a lie most of us have been fed since childhood.

Fighting Fair

The most important thing to know regarding arguments is this — it is perfectly normal and healthy to have disagreements in a relationship. In fact, if a couple always seems to be agreeing with each other, it is possibly because one partner is not voicing their preferences or concerns. There are two things that are essential to help a relationship through cloudy, stormy, rainy periods — one is learning to "fight fair" and the other is learning how to "agree to disagree".

If something is bothering you, don't keep it bottled up inside. Express your feelings rather than letting them build up to the point of volcanic eruption.

Fix a time and place. If you know you need to address issues that will make your partner defensive, don't spring the topic on them out of the blue. Sit down with a cup of tea or coffee and calmly state your points in a non-accusatory fashion.

Respond, don't react. If you know you're about to lose your cool, take a cooling-off period. Rather than walk off in a huff or shout on top of your lungs, tell your partner that you need time to calm down and respond in a way that doesn't hurt either of your feelings and go sit in a different room.

Stick to a topic. If you're having an argument about one issue, stick to that. Don't add more issues, new or old. Not only will this make you more emotional by bringing up old hurts, it will prevent you from solving the issue at hand.

Don't label or hit below the belt. All of us have weak points and insecurities that make us vulnerable. Do not use these to push their buttons and get a reaction or to hurt them more than they have hurt you. An argument is not about who wins, but about finding mutually acceptable solutions for your relationship problems.

Don't fight in front of family, friends, or children. Your loved ones will not only be uncomfortable, but it may affect

your relationships with them too, as inevitably both of you will ask them to choose sides. Getting other people's opinions in the middle of an argument is a sure way of making things more problematic. Children should never have to see their parents or family members fight as it leaves deep psychological scars and threatens their sense of safety and security.

Do not throw things. Besides the risk of potential injury, it is childish and only displays your lack of control rather than emphasising how hurt you are. If your partner is violent or abusive, please get the help you need. Nothing justifies physical or emotional abuse in the guise of disagreements or love.

Relationship Counselling

If you've tried multiple attempts at positive conversation but there still seems to be a disconnect, it's a good idea to go in for some sessions of relationship counselling. Most couples think the time to speak with a therapist is when things get really bad — when you've practically given up on the relationship. However, the ideal time would be when the initial cracks in communication start to appear. Here are some points that will help

you decide if you two need professional help:

- # You two have been arguing with increasing frequency.
- # You feel your partner prioritises their job, family, and other things over you.
- # You feel you give more effort than your partner to maintain the relationship.
- # You stop being yourself to keep the peace in the relationship.
- # Your emotional needs are being ignored.
- # Your physical needs are not being met.

Also remember, relationship counselling is not just for marriages in trouble, but for couples across all ages during any stage of their relationship. In fact, I would definitely recommend it for couples dating seriously and exclusively as a must before they commit to marriage or moving in together.

I Will Always Love You

The most important relationship you will ever have in your life is a relationship with yourself. Whether you have a partner or not, if you do not love and accept yourself for who you are, you will continue to seek something from other people, which in reality you can only find in yourself. So, this month of love, make a promise to love yourself

unconditionally first. After all, you are your own Cupid!

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

■ SHE ■

Women's empowerment should be the norm round the year, not just on Women's Day



MINU BUDHIA

'How and why do we empower women?'

That we even have to discuss this in 2022 is not just food for thought but fuel for action. While most of us are discussing solutions that can be an answer to this question, some are unfortunately still debating the need for it. Women are intrinsically powerful beings with immense mental strength, capable of being unstoppable if they wish to be. It's just that thanks to the dictates of society, they haven't been able to wholly get in touch with their inner powerhouse. They need to get that sense of freedom, that feeling of empowerment, that aha moment that awakens the inner strength, the 'mari Shakti' that was always there, but suppressed by societal mores, conventions and stereotypes.

The heart-breaking thing is that not only do many women not know their own strength, but also there are many who do not support women blossoming to become their own person and tapping into this inner power. So what's the first step? Inspire, educate, encourage yourself and empathise with the women in your life. Be both an example and a support system. We have no idea whether someone is battling with diagnosed or undiagnosed issues like anxiety, depression, OCD or phobias.

The equality equation

For me 'equal' or 'equality' is about equal opportunities. I'm not in competition with any man and I don't want to be a man. Men and women are different — to use a cliché, from Mars and Venus. Both have different strengths and weaknesses. We do not want to be the same, but we want the same opportunities 360° and 24x7.

I feel every challenge is an opportunity and every opportunity is a challenge. This applies to both men and women. However, for women, almost every opportunity and advancement is in the form of a challenge due to gender stereotypes that follow women around like that cute little dog from Vodafone's ads.

Empowerment via self-care and mental health

An important step to empowerment is re-evaluating the way we treat ourselves. The first thing to do is to realise that you can't pour from an empty cup. There is a difference between self-care and selfishness, and we need to realise that one does not equal the other.

Women by nature are nurturers



and often tend to put self-care on the backburner. This needs to change. When trying to become financially independent, women essentially end up working 24x7 — at the office and at home. Burnout isn't going to do you or your loved ones any good, so make yourself and your health a priority. And this includes your mental health as you can't achieve your potential if you're exhausted and stressed round the clock.

We women are also great at criticising ourselves, ignoring our mental health needs. Monitor and edit your internal dialogue, try to focus on what you do well. You don't have to be perfect.

Every step counts — simple self-love steps

All change begins from within. And it begins with self-love. Because when you truly love and value yourself, that's when you stop the negative self-talk and start implementing positive solutions. Here are a few non-cliche, easily doable micro-happiness steps to make yourself a priority without feeling selfish about it:

- # Go on a holiday with your female friends only. Solo trips are also super fun.
- # Every day, make one food item that you really love, not just your family's favourites.
- # Don't try to be a superwoman.
- # Don't feel guilty when you have opted to work while your children are young.
- # Don't let that fancy table mat, crockery, cutlery wait for any special occasion. Every day is special. Celebrate LIFE.
- # Dress to please yourself, not others.
- # You may have ups and downs in your mood or energy levels — it is perfectly ok not to be ok.
- # Don't stop loving yourself, even for a single day.
- # Train your son like a daughter and your daughter like a son. Expect daughters to prove themselves in life,

SHE:
FOR
YOU,
WITH
YOU

just the way we expect from our sons

- # Take care of yourself the way you care for your family. Don't postpone that important health check-up.
- # Make time for ME time.
- # Check items off your bucket list.
- # Confidence is the sexiest accessory you can wear.
- # Watch a film, visit a new cafe, have brunch, go on a long drive with your favourite classic songs playing, read at a library, go on a staycation/vacation and more — all by yourself. This helps you realise that alone and lonely are not the same thing.
- # Every morning as you wake up, list three of your strengths.
- # Every night, right before you go to bed, list three physical attributes that you think make you beautiful.
- # Every year, make sure you learn one new SKILL.

Micro entrepreneurs

Whenever I visit exhibitions across the country, especially smaller ones, I'm amazed by the innately enterprising nature of women. With whatever little that they have, in terms of both materials and training, they create beauty out of next to nothing at all. Running micro businesses from their homes, they are found across cities and towns, in every nook and corner. These women, mostly homemakers, are trying to carve out an identity for themselves. And many of these women are doing so at a later stage in their life to cope with empty nest syndrome. Now that's what I consider empowerment.

The case for working

A friend of mine, like me, got married right out of school and soon after had her first child. She then completed college and soon after had her second child. A happy homemaker from a traditional joint family background, a couple of years later she decided to get a job. When I asked her why, she shared the story of a random

conversation when she asked her husband for a few thousand rupees and the reply was, 'do you even know the true value of this amount; what it takes to earn this amount?' And while he said it nicely, it was at that moment she realised the value of financial independence and how undervalued her non-monetary contribution at home was.

Homemaker is a profession

A young colleague of mine, who is engaged to be married, was discussing her future plans with me. When she said she was going to take a two-year break, I asked if she was being pressured by the in-laws and how she would cope with 'doing nothing' all day.

The answer surprised me. She said it was completely her own choice. She had been working for over a decade, right out of college, and wanted to take some time off to enjoy herself, reconnect with her hobbies, travel, and nourish her relationships. Plus, she also sweetly reminded me that being a homemaker is a profession too — just as demanding as a job, just with no official pay. And the support that a homemaker gives to their spouse is priceless, so she is equally, though indirectly, aiding in the family income and thus entitled to a part of the income as a right and not a favour from her spouse.

Invest time in investing — literally

An entrepreneur cousin of mine and I recently ended up talking about investments. While she runs her own business, she said she finds the idea of investing a headache and has no interest in it as her husband or brother take care of it. I feel financial independence and empowerment does not stop at just actively earning money. We need to learn to manage it. And just saving money doesn't count. Investing is an essential life skill as you must have a passive source of income too. You need to spend 15 minutes every day reading or watching videos to understand the basics of investment. Also, it's never too late to start.

How to be her REAL man: tips for men

- # Be a partner not a husband.
- # All she wants from her partner, dear men, is to be respected and valued.
- # She has been raised as the apple of her family's eyes with much support and love. Yet after marriage, she is expected to manage the home and office equally. Understand and feel this.
- # She is expected to compromise — whether coming home early, doing chores, giving up her friends — and most do — without any fuss. Realise this.

- # Behind a successful woman there can be a man too.
- # Surprise her with bed tea / dinner dates / a whole day out.
- # Celebrate her birthday the way she likes.
- # Actively listen to how she spent her day.
- # Take an interest in her activities.
- # When she shares a problem, sometimes she just wants you to listen — not solve it.
- # Plan couple dinners with her friends too.
- # Respect her family as you do yours.
- # Value her each day, because she is worth it.

Workplace equality

When you look at the many reasons that women do not join, or opt out, or do not return to the world of business and commerce, it's not a lack of ambition, but a variety of obstacles that cause women to distance themselves from the workplace. When faced with daily obstacles to their advancement, many women lose their confidence and belief that they can achieve their goals.

Obvious and not so obvious gender biases linger in the workplace — whether it's the lack of positive mentor/mentee relationships, sexist language, off-colour jokes, exclusion from important meetings or discussions, sexual advances, unsupportive bosses who have a hard time believing that women know how to do their job,

reporting managers who block opportunities as they feel threatened or insecure, mansplaining, or a strong, ambitious woman being labelled as headstrong — the prevalence of bias is undeniable.

What women are looking for is equal opportunity — not only an equal chance to compete for a corner office or a C-suite title, but also the equal opportunity to be able to give their careers their best shot, to give it their 100 per cent without feeling guilty, to work without emotional baggage or emotional blackmail.

Empowered women empower women

Every drop in the ocean counts, and the change begins with women supporting the women in their lives. Encourage women you know to achieve their life and career goals. Work together and not against fellow women to get a seat at the table. And in the workplace, root for the women with ambition and drive. Cheer for them when they succeed. Don't give into jealousy or insecurity. And on your way up the corporate ladder to break glass ceilings, don't forget to mentor young women trying to do the same. And this is especially important for female entrepreneurs. As a leader who is uniquely qualified to understand her female employees, uplift them by providing equal opportunities and turning their



EVERY DROP IN THE OCEAN COUNTS, AND THE CHANGE BEGINS WITH WOMEN SUPPORTING THE WOMEN IN THEIR LIVES. ENCOURAGE WOMEN YOU KNOW TO ACHIEVE THEIR LIFE AND CAREER GOALS. WORK TOGETHER AND NOT AGAINST FELLOW WOMEN...

perceived weaknesses into strengths.

Reconnect with your true self

Indian women are raised to be good daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, grandmothers. Our whole identity is based on our relationships with the loved ones in our lives. We've never been taught to be good to ourselves, or to answer the question "Who am I?" or "What do I want?"

An excellent example of a woman identifying her self-worth, reconnecting with herself, and regaining her self-confidence can be found in the film *English Vinglish*. As Sridevi's character

grows before our eyes, two things played important roles. One, she took charge of a problem and decided to take positive action by enrolling in a class. Two, she had supportive people who believed in her — like her mother-in-law, her younger niece, and her English teacher, who termed her an "entrepreneur" and uplifted her in her own eyes.

Why do I share this example? Because Sridevi's character finds her true identity and her *Ikigai* — her true purpose or her reason for being. I share it to ask you to be a proactive woman who recognises her own value and self-worth, even when others don't see it.

#BreakTheBias

Women comprise multitudes within themselves and do not always have the opportunity to be themselves unapologetically. This year's theme for Women's Day is *#BreakTheBias* and I want to encourage you to not only challenge external bias but also internal bias. Challenge yourself to

do better not for yourself, but for the girl you were as a child. Dedicate this day to realising your dreams. Join me in dedicating this day to yourself. Because the day we understand, accept, and assert ourselves by believing in ourselves and channelling our true power, half the battle will be won.

I dedicate this day to the 18-year-old me who had stars in her eyes... to the me in my 30s who lost her spark for a little while... and to the me today who has fire in her soul, hope in her heart, and determination in her veins. I am more beautiful for having been BROKEN. It has been quite the ride and I cannot wait for what comes next. I wish you all the confidence and support to make each day your very own Women's Day. You deserve to celebrate yourself not just on one official day, but every day of the year. Happy Women's Day!

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



**MINU
BUDHIA**

It is that time of the year again when the students of the city are gearing up for the board examinations or their annual examinations.

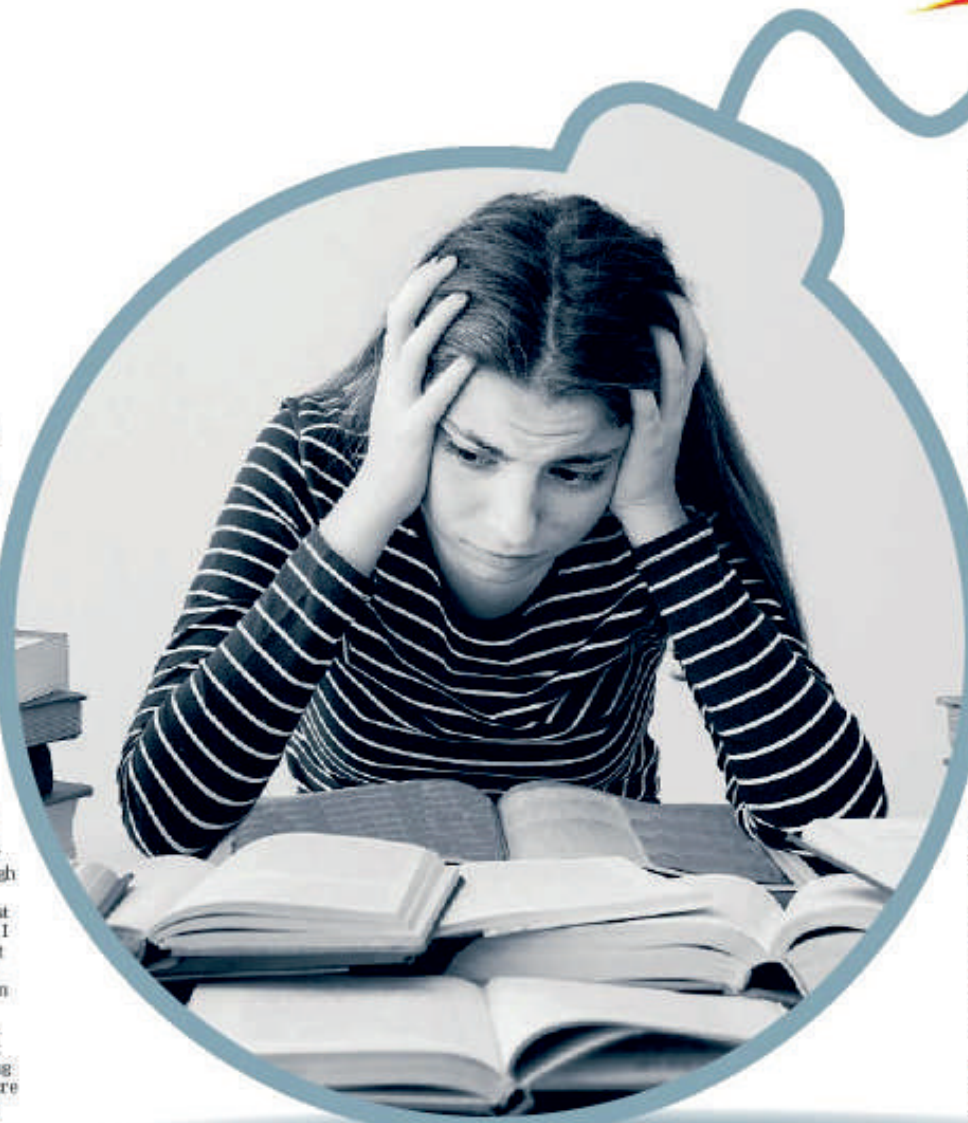
Even today, when anyone mentions exams, I get very, very anxious. Just the thought of it sends my heart racing and my palms begin to sweat. As a child I had severe exam phobia — I would barely eat anything and couldn't sleep for more than three-four hours at night. On the nights when I would go to sleep on time, I would ask my mom to wake me up after a couple of hours. During non-exam times I even had nightmares about giving exams!

I must say, I'm quite lucky that my parents never placed any sort of pressure on me to score high marks. As long as we studied regularly at home and did our best at school, they were okay. In fact, I think this lack of pressure is what inspired me to study hard and always get second or third place in my class.

An established phenomenon, exam stress is not something that only affects a handful of struggling students. From toppers to mediocre students to those barely passing, the pressure to perform academically and score good marks affects all. And it's not just students, even parents have reported rising levels of anxiety during their child's examination time.

However, while a certain degree of stress and fear about performance can have a motivating impact, often one gets to hear of cases where exam stress has become extreme. While in some situations it disrupts routine activities, it has even resulted in irreparable damage. The fear of parental reaction to failure or bad marks, the feelings of guilt and shame at not having lived up to exceptionally high expectations, or the fear of not being prepared have even caused the loss of lives. Even Bollywood has shed light on this matter — in the film *3 Idiots* an engineering student Joy Lobo dies by suicide after the college dean refuses to extend the project's deadline for submission.

There is usually a rise in the number of children, adolescent, and college student suicides during exam seasons. In 2019, at least one student died by suicide every hour in India. At least 4,000 children in the age group of 14-18 years died by



Feeling anxious before a big exam may always be a part of student life, but letting that anxiety turn into stress does not have to be. An essential part of understanding how to deal with exam stress is to first figure out why you feel it. So, what actually causes stress?

THE MOST COMMON REASONS STUDENTS CITE FOR EXAM STRESS ARE:

- Parents and teachers expectations. Do your best. You can't pluck stars.
- Your own expectations. Don't be so hard on yourself. Take it easy.
- The desire to get into a particular stream or course of study after the examination. Getting anxious will lead you nowhere.
- The feeling of being under-prepared.
- Comparison.
- Fear of forgetting everything during the exams. If you are stressed you will definitely forget, so RELAX!

• If anything else is worrying you, keep that worry in a different compartment of the brain, so that you can deal with it later.

Think about these reasons... Which of them apply particularly to you?

Sometimes experiencing exam stress gets in the way of actual, productive studies, resulting in a huge waste of time. Here are ways to not only study hard, but STUDY SMART!

SMART SUCCESS — TIPS FOR STUDENTS

- **Learn to recognise when you're stressing out.** A break or a chat with someone who knows the pressure you're under will help put things into perspective.
- **Avoid comparing your abilities with your classmates.** Those "Oh my God I've only read the chapter three times!" conversations are such a wind-up. Everyone approaches revision in different ways, so just make sure you've chosen the method that works best for you. Make a realistic timetable and stick to it.
- **Sleep well.** Wind down before bed and don't revise under the blanket. Your bed is a place of rest, not a desk. Get your sleep, even if it is three-four hours as it improves memory and concentration. Taking power naps can help too.
- **Tea and coffee are good for concentration but not in large amounts.** Eat one nutritious meal and one comfort meal of your choice.

HEALTH

END EXAM ANXIETY

The way to deal with the fear of examinations is to recognise the stress build-up and tackle it sensibly

suicide after they failed to clear academic examinations between 2017 and 2019. And going back a few years, between January 1, 1995 and December 31, 2015, India lost more than 1.7 lakh students to suicide!

STRESS, SYMPTOMS AND SOLUTIONS

A little bit of stress is a good thing. In addition to keeping you on your toes, it is actually known to improve cognitive function, which helps you study better. In fact, learning to manage low amounts of stress helps children become well-adjusted adults both at work and at home.

Acknowledging and accepting the fact that you will feel some kind of stress is key to staying healthy during exams. The key here is to not let your stress levels get to the point where even the thought of exams induces panic. Thus it's important to be aware of some physical and psychological symptoms which crop up in our lives during extended periods of duress. (See box 'Symptoms of Stress')

★ **Find out which is the best time for you.** Morning or evening? Are you a night bird or a morning person? Study during that time of the day.

★ **Don't rush during the exam.** Concentrate on and tackle the questions you know the best. If there's a question you're not so sure about, attempt it last.

★ **Steer clear of any exam 'post-mortem'.** It doesn't matter what your classmate wrote for Question 3(b), it's too late to go back and change your answers. Plus it will just make you worry even more. Once you are out of the hall, forget about what you just wrote and concentrate on the next exam you have.

★ **Take deep breaths.** Before starting your exam, take 30 seconds to calm down. Inhale and exhale consciously and repeat a positive phrase or a prayer in your mind.

★ **Fix a place to study.** Creating a positive, motivating study space is essential. Find the quietest room in the house, away from all distractions, and set up a table there.

★ **The 3Ps — Preparation, Practice, Positivity.** To prevent last-minute panic, you've got to prepare a detailed plan of action in advance. Include information such as 'reading for the first time', 'written practice', 'third revision' etc. To stay positive and motivated, put up posters, quotes or good wishes from your loved ones in your study area.

★ **The 3Rs — Ritual, Rest, Review.** Have a fixed method or process of studying that works for you. Whether it's reading out loud, writing it down, quizzing with another person — adopt your own style. When making your timetable, schedule study slots, revision slots, breaks and sleep time.

★ **Use the Pomodoro Technique.** An excellent time management tool, this method helps break large tasks into smaller chunks. For example, when you start a chapter, set a timer for 25 minutes and start studying. When the timer rings, take a five-minute break. Repeat this pattern four times and then take a 30-minute break.

PRACTICAL PATH: DO & DON'T FOR PARENTS

★ **Do watch out for signs of stress.** You don't have to be a helicopter parent, but keep a track of your child's sleep and eating habits during the prep months, and especially during the last couple of weeks leading up to the exams.

Have one meal of their choice at least with your kid and discuss simple, everyday things that make them happy.

★ **Compliment them for small things so that their self-esteem remains high.** No criticism at this time.

★ **Do create a fear-free conversation zone.** Have regular conversations with your child or teen where you motivate them to do their best but also reassure them that a bad score does not mean they are a bad child. Instead of talking about high expectations, talk about both positive and negative outcomes and how you'll deal with both as a supportive family. Re-emphasise that you always have their back, no matter what.

★ **Do consider getting your child professional help.** A child might have panic attacks, fainting, vomiting, he may refuse to give exams.

★ **Some red flags:** hyperactivity, short attention span, having difficulty in reading,

writing or maths despite trying hard. You might have to consult a doctor. But beware of over diagnosing.

★ **Do let your child choose their academic stream or career.**

★ **Play a small board game or a sport together to destress.**

★ **Don't force your child to study every day.** At the end of the day, your child's exam is their responsibility.

★ **Don't compare your child with other children.** "Your elder brother got 98 per cent." This depletes their self-confidence.

★ **Don't lose sight of the fact that there is life beyond and after exams.** Things might seem intense right now, but it won't last forever. This exam is not the end of the world.

I'd like to end by telling students to have faith in yourself. It's just another exam, it's just another day. I wanted to be a doctor when I was in school. Today, I'm a psychotherapist and social entrepreneur instead and I'm still impacting lives. My dream of healing people is one I am living — only the path has changed.

You are unique and the best!
All the very best!

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



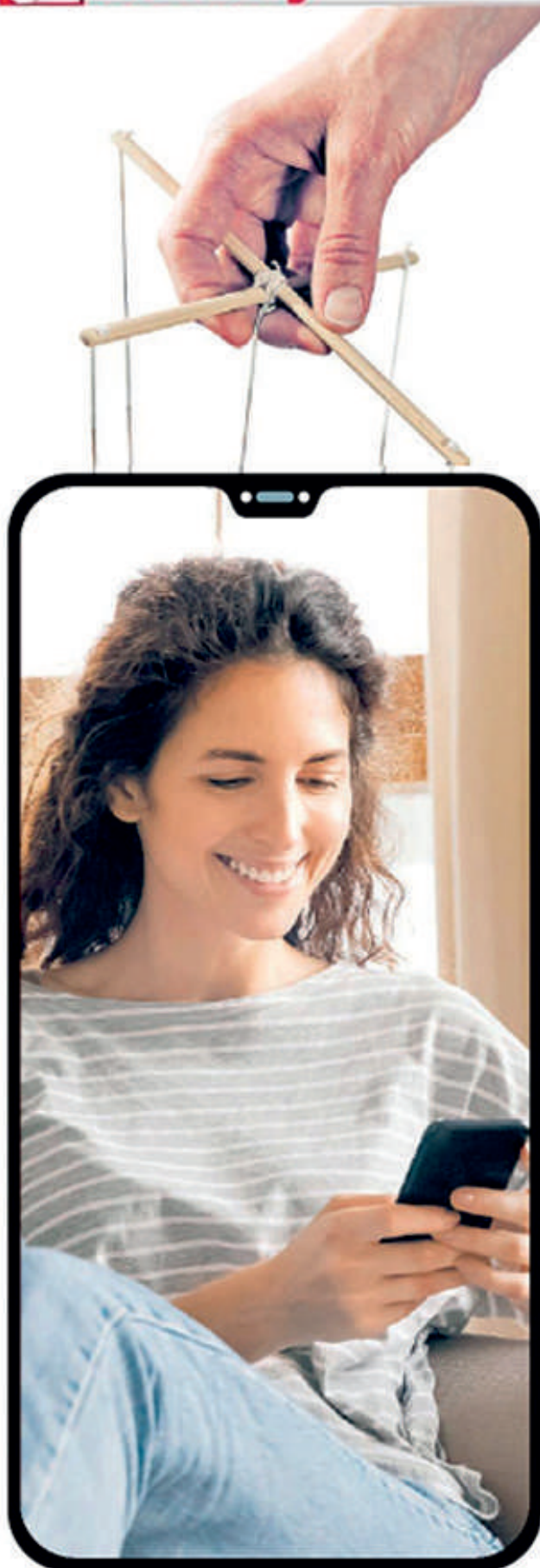
SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Physical:

- ★ Headache
- ★ Stomach cramps
- ★ Loss of appetite
- ★ Loss of sleep

Psychological:

- ★ Feeling low
- ★ Being snappy and irritable
- ★ Having a short temper
- ★ Worrying about trivial issues
- ★ Low concentration
- ★ Low self-esteem



HEALTH

THE MODERN GENIE

Either you control your Internet presence and social media, or you can be sure that it will control you



MINU BUDHIA

While smartphone overuse and social media have been getting a bad rap over the years, today I'm choosing to focus on the good rather than the bad or the ugly. The key thing is to use the apps for yourself, instead of getting used by them. Change why and how you use your phone and it can be a wonderful, positive experience.

A part and parcel of our daily lives, each and every one of us has a smartphone — from company CEOs to janitors, from homemakers to domestic helps, from senior citizens to schoolgoing pre-teens. If there was ever a time for “*haro dandya maathi nashe*”, it is now.

With the smartphone interface and a majority of apps being available not just in English, but a number of Indian languages, this piece of technology is breaking socio-economic and cultural barriers every second. Now that even the most basic smartphones have decent quality cameras, good audio, and access to innumerable apps, everyone now has a chance at equal opportunities.

THANDA MATLAB COOL COOL APPS...

• **TOGETHER FOR TOMORROW.** By allowing us to go paperless (no printing, no diaries, no sticky notes), apps can help us save the environment and battle climate change. By

using Google Drive you can share the same document with hundreds of people without wasting a single piece of paper, without printing a single word. By using Google Calendar as a diary, you can share your schedule with relevant people and keep updating it.

• **ZERO BUDGET, ZERO WASTE.** Using apps such as Swiggy Genie, BigBasket, Blinkit, Tata 1mg, and Nykaa make our lives easier by bringing the shops to us and saving our time. When you can't find something locally, or want to send a gift abroad, there's always Amazon and Flipkart.

• **LET'S MAKE MONEY SIMPLE.** Banking apps from individual banks and UPI payments (GPay, PayTM, and so on) enable cashless payments, reduce trips to the bank, and help you keep an eye on every transaction too, making you more financially responsible. **WARNING:** However, you need to be quite alert and careful while making online transactions as you can be cheated easily.

• **MUSKURATE RAHO.** Using smart CCTVs can keep your loved ones and your homes safe. By accessing the real-time or recorded visuals through apps, you can keep an eye on the support staff caring for your children or seniors at home.

• **LIGHTING UP LIVES.** Never get lost, never be late. If you're terrible at directions, there are several apps such as Google Maps that will help you reach your destination easily and on time.

• **BADI BHI, BADIYA BHI.** Whether it's grocery lists, life schedule calendars, work spreadsheets, wedding planners, or financial habit trackers, there are apps to help you manage your time, boost your productivity, and add a touch of organisation to a world of chaos. With sticky notes, highlighters, and pomodoros now on apps, there's no excuse not to be organised.

PEOPLE SPEAKING IN REGIONAL DIALECTS, NOT JUST ENGLISH OR HINDI, ARE GETTING VERIFIED BLUE TICKS! ONLINE CREATORS FROM NOT JUST THE CITY, BUT TOWNS AND VILLAGES TOO ARE SHARING THEIR SLICE OF LIFE, THEIR CULTURE, THEIR FOOD, THEIR STYLE. AND IT IS NOT ONLY THE RURAL POPULATION THAT IS FINDING ITS VOICE ON SOCIAL MEDIA. THE GLITZ AND GLAM OF INSTAGRAM IS NOT JUST FOR HIG INDIVIDUALS ANYMORE — MIGS AND LIGS ARE ALSO CREATING CONTENT AND HAVE ACCESS TO THE WHOLE WORLD ONLINE

• **BE MORE.** Cheap internet, free apps, and smartphone technology encourage and unleash creativity and freedom of expression. Whether digital or print, for food, fashion or products, you can produce content, advertisements, and a variety of marketing materials—all from your phone. Using Adobe Creative Cloud Apps, Snapseed, Grammarly, and more help create professional-looking results. Formal training in photography, videography, design, or even writing is no longer necessary to unleash your creativity.

• **ENGLISH VINGLISH.** In addition to educational apps for children, you can learn about any subject from your smartphone, academic or otherwise, that too in any language. There is a tutorial on YouTube about anything and everything. Some cool apps to check out include Sunrise, Basmo, and Clue.

The Smart Social... be cool not a fool on social media

Social media has become more than just a place to network. Giving one and all the space to showcase their hobbies and unique talents, it has become a platform for people to achieve their dreams.

People speaking in regional dialects, not just English or Hindi, are getting verified blue ticks! Online creators from not just the city, but towns and villages too are sharing their slice of life, their culture, their food, their style. And it is not only the rural population that is finding its voice on social media. The glitz and glam of Instagram is not just for HKG individuals anymore—MIGs and LIGs are also creating content and have access to the whole world online.

• **HUM SATH SATH HAIN.** Facebook has allowed us to reconnect and meet with childhood friends. Especially for parents with children who have just moved to a new city or country, video calls bring great peace of mind and reduce loneliness. Video calls were the only relationship saviours during Covid. **WARNING:** However, family time should not be replaced by too much smartphone usage. Always keep smartphones off/on silent mode during family time.

• **WE UNDERSTAND YOUR WORLD.** Today, a single social media app is a one-stop solution for all communication needs and apps like YouTube and Instagram provide hours and hours of content to help battle loneliness in the elderly. I know a cool grandma who went from watching cooking videos to starting her own channel where she shares new recipes weekly!

• **CONNECTING ASPIRATIONS.** There are so many new professions coming up—new jobs that can be done from anywhere in the world. Becoming an 'Influencer' is a glamorous, on-camera job giving freedom to many.

• **VAADA NAHI, DAAVA!** Social media provides cost-effective, targeted, easy-to-use advertising. The ads themselves are easy to create and you get to analyse easy-to-understand reports on your ad performance.

• **HUM HAI NA.** News is not only easily available in real time, it can be shared at the click of a button.

• **LOVE, SEX, AND DHOKA.** It breaks social stigmas and stereotypes. Basics of sex education are being imparted by medical professionals and specialists who are giving people access to scientific knowledge instead of old wives tales and unrealistic pornographic content. Doctors talking about gynaecological health issues and a awareness about menstruation are breaking generational barriers. Mental health



The overuse of technology in general has given rise to behavioural issues in children and adults alike—difficulty with impulse control and unregulated emotions. We're accustomed to using apps to switch on the AC from the car, dim the lights, or watch the hottest web series on OTT platforms.

While the tips above can point you in the right direction, you or someone you know may be struggling with tech addiction without realising it. So when do you get professional help? When it starts interfering with your daily life.

Here are some red flags based on the Internet Addiction Test (IAT) by Dr Kimberly Young. Answer each of the questions below using the following scoring table.

- 0 - Does not apply
 - 1 - Rarely
 - 2 - Occasionally
 - 3 - Frequently
 - 4 - Often
 - 5 - Always
- 1 How often do you find that you stay online longer than you intended?
 - 2 How often do you neglect household chores to spend more time online?
 - 3 How often do you prefer the excitement of the internet to intimacy with your partner?
 - 4 How often do you become defensive or secretive when anyone asks you what you do online?
 - 5 How often do you snap, yell, or act annoyed if someone bothers you while you are online?
 - 6 How often does your job performance or productivity suffer because of the internet?
 - 7 How often do you lose sleep due to late-night log-ins?
 - 8 How often do you try to hide how long you've been online?
 - 9 How often do you choose to spend more time online over going out with others?
 - 10 How often do you feel depressed, moody, or nervous when you are offline, which goes away once you are back online?

The higher your total score, the greater your level of addiction.

awareness is also being shared in a light, fun way.

• **BADHTI KA NAAM GAADI.** It helps build resilience. Dealing with some trolling or negative comments helps to develop a positive coping mechanism as well as a thick hide. The world is not always sweet and nice, and ignoring the rubbish or standing up for yourself are both essential skills that help in real-world interactions.

• **POWERED BY INTELLECT, DRIVEN BY VALUES.** Gathers people to support a cause.

• **TOMORROW IS YOURS.** Boosts small businesses, mompreneurs and solopreneurs.

Taming Technology

Technology is a good thing, and too much of any good thing is bound to have a negative effect on our lives. However, don't blame the smartphone or the apps here. After all, it is just a tool. And it's your job to not be a fool. The most useful thing also has side effects if done in excess.

The power lies within you to become its master instead of becoming its slave. Think of your smartphone as a super intelligent and manipulative digital genie that grants you unlimited wishes. But you have to be very, very specific about what you want. And if you don't rub the lamp, the genie can't make an appearance! You are in control.

Are apps on your smartphone designed to lure you into a literal, invisible digital web? Yes. Do they have 'spiders' crawling through your phone collecting your usage data which

—she lip-syncs to the stillest, funniest songs on reels to take a break from her daily life. There's another friend whose Instagram account is all about curly hair.

Protect yourself

• **WHEREVER YOU GO, OUR NETWORK FOLLOWS!** In today's digital world, your privacy is no longer yours. All the terms and conditions that you click are essentially giving away most of your rights to your own information or regulating how your information can be used without your consent.

One thing we really need to be clear about to ourselves is this—any information that you share with an app, not just social media, is as good as public information. However secure and however well-renowned the app company, anyone can be hacked and all your information can be leaked. So if you don't want the world to know something publicly, don't put it on your phone.

Even if you use screenshots, screen recording disabled apps and messengers with disappearing videos, text and voice messages, please be aware that anyone can capture that information from a different device.

• **DIL HAI KI MAANTA NAHI.** In this aspect I do have to say that I am not for any dating or wedding apps—talking with complete strangers who are not who they say they are, getting emotionally involved, catfished, blackmailed, even stalked are all too scary realities. Romance is best left for the real world, according to me.

• **A POINT TO PONDER.** Children as

ONE THING WE REALLY NEED TO BE CLEAR ABOUT TO OURSELVES IS THIS — ANY INFORMATION THAT YOU SHARE WITH AN APP, NOT JUST SOCIAL MEDIA, IS AS GOOD AS PUBLIC INFORMATION. HOWEVER SECURE AND HOWEVER WELL-RENOUNDED THE APP COMPANY, ANYONE CAN BE HACKED

neuroscientists and behavioural scientists analyse to keep you hooked? Yes. So are you completely helpless to this socially acceptable addiction? Absolutely not.

Let's take a look at some practical ways in which you can become a ringmaster of this digital circus in your pocket.

• **STICK TO A MAXIMUM OF TWO-THREE HOURS OF SCREEN TIME PER DAY.** Reduce doom-scrolling. Set timers to keep around bedtime and turn off all notifications.

• **USE A BEDTIME/ GREYSCALE MODE ON YOUR PHONE AT NIGHT.** Today's smartphones provide you with tools such as 'Bedtime Mode', which turns your screen to greyscale after a pre-set time.

• **SET THE HIGHEST PRIVACY SETTINGS.** Understand the privacy settings on all apps you are using and keep your social media accounts private. Also use a password that is not easily guessable and enable two-factor authentication.

• **DON'T SHARE YOUR REGULAR PERSONAL LIFE ON SOCIAL MEDIA.** Unless you're a lifestyle blogger, or even if you are, keep your private life private. Don't share images of your home, your parties, your vacations, your favourite hangout spots.

• **USE SOCIAL MEDIA FOR GOOD.** Use it to build a brand, for your business/career, for a cause, to show off a talent, practice a hobby, teach a skill, etc. You can even curate a page on any topic you are passionate about—movies, music, films and more.

Have a friend who uses reels to de-stress

young as two are exposed to their parents' smartphones. While there are many apps that use multisensory learning and target-specific skill development (rhymes, attention and memory training games), it is the parents' responsibility to not use their smartphones as a passive distraction. Just placing a screen in front of them or in their hands because you need a break will only fuel tech addiction issues in the future. Children should always be supervised by adults and internet use should be restricted to fixed timings and appropriate content.

Today, whether they are five or 16, there are many children who have shot to fame on social media. For the ones who have never seen a world without a smartphone or social media, it is a part of their daily lives—growing up while sharing their life with 600 or 600,000 doesn't faze them.

It is essential for parents to show children what is logical or illogical behaviour when they're online. Empower your child by giving them age-appropriate information and real-life examples of consequences to create healthy and balanced awareness about smartphone and social media usage.

This topic of children embracing the social media limelight as influencers is one that usually elicits polar opposite responses—people tend to look at it as a bane or a boon, something in black or white. What we need to do is comprehend and navigate the greys. Write in to share your views!

Minu Budhia is a psychotherapist, counsellor, founder of Caring Minds, iCanFly, Café iCanFly, and a TEDx speaker. Follow her on Facebook and Instagram @psychotherapist.minu. Email to askminubudhia@caringminds.co.in



LIFESTYLE

PEOPLE, IF A MOM DIDN'T SPECIFICALLY ASK YOU FOR ADVICE, PLEASE DON'T GIVE IT TO HER. EVEN IF YOU'VE RAISED SEVEN KIDS. AND ESPECIALLY IF YOU'RE NOT A PARENT, JUST BOTTLE THE 'GYAN' AND DON'T SHAME HER FOR HER CHOICES

child. And that's my professional opinion.

SPECIFIC SHAME SPIRALS

Like we're not hard enough on ourselves, there's unnecessary, unwanted advice and suggestions from not just family, but even a cousin's sister-in-law's father-in-law who the grapevines said was an absent parent. People, if a mom didn't specifically ask you for advice, please don't give it to her. Even if you've raised seven kids. And especially if you're not a parent, just bottle the 'gyan' and don't shame her for her choices.

This is also an announcement to husbands everywhere. What worked during your grandma's time will not work now and just because your mom made your favourite pickle from scratch and your wife buys a jar, it doesn't make her any less of a mom. So no slight 'baanans' or sarcastic comments followed by 'just kidding, yaar'.

Of course, I'm not going to forget to address the most dangerous and hypocritical form of judgement — moms judging other moms. If you're a stay-at-home mom who handcrafts everything your child wears, feeds them veggies from your organic kitchen garden, and is always home when kids are out of school, that's great. But that doesn't make you superior to a working mom who is in office 10 hours a day, takes work calls at home, puts her child in daycare, and has the domestic help do the cooking and the cleaning. Vice versa, working moms need to stop labelling and looking down on moms who choose to stay home as women who 'have it easier' and 'just chill and do nothing'.

And the final pet peeve that's close to my heart. Stop judging special needs moms for having a life beyond their special child. Stop trying to make her feel ashamed for laughing, having a social life, and wanting to look good. Just because she is battling an especially difficult motherhood doesn't mean she has to be sad and in tears all the time. I once had a special mother tell me she felt guilty for buying and wearing bright red lipstick. Apparently a relative had questioned how a good mother could want to concentrate on her looks instead of caring for and curing her child!

A MOTHERHOOD REALITY CHECK

One needs to accept the fact that she is human and not a 'super'-being who is perfect in every respect



MINU BUDHIA

Take a look at this vacancy and tell me if you would ever apply for this job:

Job requirements: Must be a skilled and experienced manager, chauffeur, chef, counsellor, babysitter, teacher, maid, personal assistant. Can work in a fast-paced dynamic environment, juggle multiple tasks, and constantly upgrade skills.

Job timings: 18-year contract minimum; on call 24x7; 1 leave per year.

Designation and remuneration: Volunteer; no pay.

Benefits: The satisfaction of having helped society, sometimes love and appreciation.

You wouldn't even interview, let alone take this job, would you? Yet, this is a job that women have been doing for decades. The job title? Supermom!

Speaking from personal experience, earlier when people used to call me a 'superwoman', especially 'supermom', I used to take it as a huge compliment. I

mean why not, right? Everyone likes to be recognised for their hard work.

I've always been super hands-on at home and work. I make sure my household runs smoothly so that my daughters, husband, and in-laws have easy access to everything they require. I manage my three entrepreneurship ventures from each of the offices every single day, once in the morning and once in the evening.

Each afternoon, I'm back home before my younger daughter (a special needs child) returns from school. We have lunch, spend one-on-one quality time for at least two hours, and then I head back to work. And in between I fit in social visits and some me-time. However, while I felt like I was successfully juggling my little universe with imaginary 10 hands, without even realising it, I was slowly beginning to burn out.

It was only when I suddenly started losing interest in the little things in life and didn't feel like going to work at all that the light bulb switched on. I'm not a goddess, not a juggler, I wasn't

born on Krypton and I definitely don't have superpowers from any radioactive bites!

Overloading myself, even if it was with home or office work I loved, was taking its toll on me. And that got me thinking. Why is it that I thought I had to balance everything every day to be good enough as a mom and as a boss? Why is it that working mothers must exhaust themselves to the bone? Why is it that the expectations of society and our own cultural and generational bias is

keeping us from gender equality in 2022?

Today, if someone tries to call me 'super' anything, my response is 'Thanks, but no thanks!'. I'm happy to be a super, awesome, fabulous but happy mom instead of a superhero. I'm happy to be taken off the pedestal and recognised as a human being who is capable of finite things. I'm happy to give up chasing the mirage of perfection and embrace my imperfectly perfect, flawsome self. Because a happy mom is the best mom for any

OVERLOADING MYSELF, EVEN IF IT WAS WITH HOME OR OFFICE WORK I LOVED, WAS TAKING ITS TOLL ON ME. AND THAT GOT ME THINKING. WHY IS IT THAT I THOUGHT I HAD TO BALANCE EVERYTHING EVERY DAY TO BE GOOD ENOUGH AS A MOM AND AS A BOSS? WHY IS IT THAT WORKING MOTHERS MUST EXHAUST THEMSELVES TO THE BONE? WHY IS IT THAT THE EXPECTATIONS OF SOCIETY AND OUR OWN CULTURAL AND GENERATIONAL BIAS IS KEEPING US FROM GENDER EQUALITY IN 2022?

SHOO THE STEREOTYPES!

Let's look at generational myths standing like insurmountable barriers in the way of moms and their positive mental health.

MYTH: You're a stay-at-home mom so every day is like a holiday for you.

REALITY: There's cooking, cleaning, groceries, laundry, food, supervising school-work, ferrying children to and from school, taking them to sports and hobby classes, and much more. Remember that dad is only able to work peacefully at the office because his wife is taking care of everything.

MYTH: You're a new mom, so your life will only revolve around the baby.

REALITY: A biological mom is not a milk-producing, feeding and cleaning machine. And however much she loves her child, all mothers need some time to themselves. Some new moms also suffer from postpartum depression, a mental health issue that prevents them from bonding or wanting to spend time with their baby. And they feel guilty about it enough, so stop adding to her guilt, and reserve your judgement.

MYTH: You have to sacrifice your career and personal life to be a good mom.

REALITY: A happy mom is a good mom. A working mom is more financially independent, has a professional network, and has the self-confidence that comes from not being completely dependent on their spouse. Seeing the hard work she does teaches her kids positive values, a good work ethic, the importance of self-respect, and that life is made up of challenges that can be overcome. Teaching these lessons to her kids makes her a good mom. A job is also a potential safeguard and a way to protect the children if the husband ever abuses the mom or the kids.

MYTH: If the child is struggling at school, the mom has to quit her job to concentrate on the kid full time.

REALITY: There's an excellent example of this in the film *Tamhari Sulu*. When the son gets in trouble at school, and is about to be suspended, the mom is blamed for working and the kind of job she does is frowned upon. Not once is the same accusation raised at the father. When she is shown getting ready to go to work after the school fiasco, her sisters and family question her dedication as a mother and ask her to quit her job. No one tells the father to do the same. It's 2022 people. It's high time to accept that a child is equally both parents' responsibility.

MYTH: Getting counselling if you're struggling as a mom means you're a failure.

REALITY: There's a common misconception that counselling is only for those suffering from anxiety, depression, or other severe mental health issues. Counselling is for anyone who is feeling overwhelmed, struggling with their emotions, and having a tough time living their usual life. So if you're a new mom or a mother facing an

empty nest, remember, getting help doesn't mean you're a failure. It means you're a mom who cares enough about her kids to take care of herself.

SHARE THE LOAD: HOUSEHOLD PARTNERSHIP

Like a popular washing powder campaign said, let's *Share The Load*, let's focus on an equal household fuelled by the strength of a partnership—that of parents. Not only does it enable moms to be regular, fallible human beings, it also sets an excellent example of gender equality for the next generation.

SO, WHAT ARE SOME OF

THE RULES OF THIS DOMESTIC PARTNERSHIP? READ ON:

Solving the price vs value conundrum. Realising the actual price of the work a mom does can help the spouse/family understand her economic contribution. The value of her unpaid labour is what subsidises the services required to keep the household running like a well-oiled machine. Think of anything a mom does that can be outsourced for a cost and add it up. Now you'll realise the true worth of her time!

De-gender domestic work. Household work has long been considered a woman's "duty"—whether it's fetching firewood or water in villages or making the pesthouse apartment look Instagram. It's high time we took

gender out of the equation and divided the chores based on each partner's capabilities and schedules. Remember the golden words: 'sharing is caring'.

Add a touch of corporate to the home. While bringing work back home isn't good for your mental health, management tools can work wonders to tame organised chaos. Use an actual Excel sheet to maintain lists of the smallest tasks that need to be done and the information that both parents should have access to. Put all to-do lists on an app/the cloud so it reduces mom's cognitive load—birthdays, grocery lists, medicines, contacts, and more. Then set specific, achievable domestic goals and create a time table that works for you and your partner.

Real vs reel life. Don't compare your parenting skills or your family's routine with your neighbours' Pinterest-perfect pictures or your relative's rocking Reels. No real, lived-in home looks like a movie set. It's perfectly okay to find a stray sock under the sofa, a squeaky toy on the dining table, used dishes in the sink, and the cat perched on top of the refrigerator. Also, nobody said laundry can't be done at 11pm or you can't supervise/check homework at 8am.

Raise a team. While children need our help and we want to spoil them silly, it's never too young to teach children the value of teamwork, especially for team "family". Even a five-year-old can be taught to take their dishes into the kitchen or help while making their bed. It not only equips them with valuable life skills, but also makes them better spouses in the future.

DITCH THE GUILT

Dear moms, stop feeling guilty or remorseful for:

- Feeding your kids ready-to-eat or takeaway food once or twice a week.
- Feeding your baby formula instead of breast milk.
- Asking your husband to change diapers and do feeds in the middle of the night because you need sleep.
- Wanting to spend

a specific amount of time without your kids, every day.

- Wanting to go back to work before your child is a year old.
- Changing your mind about parenting styles.
- Taking external help, whether domestic staff, grandparents, friends, or daycare, doesn't make you any less of a mother.
- Saying no to your spouse or family member or friends.
- Telling your children "no".
- Emphasising that your time is just as valuable as your partner's—this is applicable for both working and stay-at-home moms.
- Telling your husband to take the day off from work and stay at home with your kid when he/she is sick.
- Reminding your husband that taking care of your kid is not called "babysitting".
- Not attending a PTA meeting or a performance or a school event and sending your husband instead.
- Letting go of unrealistic expectations and impossible standards—you are not a bad mom if you don't push yourself to the point of exhaustion.
- Putting yourself first sometimes, treating yourself well, and pampering yourself like your best friend.
- Using technology to your advantage—CCTVs and nanny cams will help to keep a watch on your kids instead of requiring you to be physically home 24/7.

Also, it's time for society to accept that marriage is first of all a partnership where each spouse needs to play to their strengths. Giving into gender stereotypes such as the man must be the breadwinner while the mom has to stay at home will not just negatively affect the couple's relationship but the family dynamics as well.

What children need are happy parents and which parent does what will rarely matter to the child if you bring them with gender-neutral work values. I know a gentleman who is a stay-at-home dad while his wife is an educator at a school. She is the only breadwinner and he supervises the running of the household and the kids' schedules. And why not? If the mom is capable of earning more, why not? She can still be a successful parent.

While a tinge of guilt, like a bit of stress, now and then keeps you on track, mothers need to actively deprogramme 24/7 mommy guilt they carry with them. It's neither good for you, nor your children. It is quite regular for parents to make mistakes, especially new parents. We need to let moms off the hook for learning through trial and error rather than parenting books and society's gaze—it's only human to make mistakes.

So take a deep breath. Inhale a new beginning and exhale all external expectations. It's time to set yourself free and fly—minus the cape of course!

Minu Budhia is a psychotherapist, counsellor, founder of Caring Minds, iCanFly, Café iCanFly, and a TEDx speaker. Follow her on Facebook and Instagram @psychotherapist.minu. Email to askminubudhia@caringsminds.co.in

IF YOU'RE A STAY-AT-HOME MOM WHO HANDCRAFTS EVERYTHING YOUR CHILD WEARS, FEEDS THEM VEGGIES FROM YOUR ORGANIC KITCHEN GARDEN, AND IS ALWAYS HOME WHEN KIDS ARE OUT OF SCHOOL, THAT'S GREAT. BUT THAT DOESN'T MAKE YOU SUPERIOR TO A WORKING MOM WHO IS IN THE OFFICE 10 HOURS A DAY, TAKES WORK CALLS AT HOME, PUTS HER CHILD IN DAYCARE, AND HAS THE DOMESTIC HELP DO THE COOKING AND THE CLEANING



HEALTH

PARENTING THE PARENT

Looking after your elderly father and mother needs to be handled with care and sensibility



MINU BUDHIA

As children living in a bubble of love, we grow up seeing our parents as our superheroes. And when the reality of life knocks on our doors, we are forced to realise they are only human. Humans who did their very best to not only provide us with the basics of a safe home, nutritious food, and a good education, but also a carefree childhood filled with warmth, love, comfort and support. Humans, who, as age takes its toll, become frail, fallible, and need someone to hold their hand — literally and metaphorically.

It can be a bit overwhelming to witness this role reversal, to suddenly find that the loving hearts and beautiful minds you depended on to guide you are now looking to you for guidance. So today I'm going to walk you through the roller coaster ride called parenting your parents.

First things first, let's look at the two types of caregivers. One is the caregiver who lives with the senior parent or parent-in-law, and the second is the caregiver who lives in a different home in the same city or a different city, or in a different country. Both will face a variety of challenges — some similar, some unique.

Before you embark on the journey of taking care of your parents, forgive them. Whether they couldn't attend your school concert, were not there for your PTAs, didn't allow trips with friends, didn't let you study abroad, imposed their choice of career or spouse on you, or even let you down

when you needed their support — forgive them their flaws and mistakes. This is not as much for them as it is for you. Letting go of these pent-up feelings will help you restart this relationship with a clean slate.

In any conversation you have with them, never point out their "dependence" or "inabilities" as personal failures, but talk about how natural it is to age and face age-related issues. Rephrase your

words and emphasise how they are the one making the choices while you are there to make their life smoother. Reassure them of how by allowing you to care for them your parents are giving you a gift — a chance to say thank you for all they have done, a chance to express your love and respect for them. As proud independent individuals, most parents will appreciate this approach.

A special note for those caregiving for their parents from afar is this — let go of your guilt for not having your parents live with you. We each have a number of situations that prevent living together and you are doing your best. Sometimes, it's the parent who doesn't want to give up their independence of living in their own home. To deal with this, during vacations, visit them often and have them visit you too. Video call, send photos, and leave them voice notes about how your day is going or how something reminded you of them or how you're missing them. Also maintain detailed communication with their domestic/nursing staff to make sure you get to know about small, simple needs your parents may not be sharing with you. Just because you live far away does not mean you can't share your life with them.

CREATING A CARE PLAN

What every adult taking care of an ageing parent needs is a 'care plan'. Whether you're an only child or have siblings, whether you're

married or single, whether you're financially comfortable or not — a

care plan is a must to meet your parents' daily needs, prevent chaos, and retain your sanity while juggling a potpourri of responsibilities.

• **Make a care planner.** Based on your preference, it can be a digital or a hard copy one. Make a hard copy one for your parents.

• **List the care team.** From you to the household help to the medicine delivery to close friends/family who will visit regularly. Put their photos, names, contact numbers, and any other specific information.

• **Create a care schedule.** Make to-do lists to cover daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly and annual tasks. From taking baths to taking medicines, to regular health checks, to medical tests, to buying groceries, to paying phone/electricity/gas bills, to vacations — schedule everything.

• **Do a safety check.** Look over the house to replace sharp corners, add lights, reposition or remove objects they may trip over, and with their permission add

CCTV cameras. Special focus must be placed on making the bathroom

easily accessible and usable as majority elder falls happen there. Railings need to be installed on the stairs, in the bath area, on either side of the commode. An emergency bell/button should also be installed near their bedside area and bathroom — this will help them to call for help in case of falls.

• **Make financial issues transparent.** Add the budget, and list all income sources and expenditures here. Clarity in this department will put both your parents' and your mind at ease.

• **Legal documents checklist.** Make a list of all legal documents (will, deeds, power of attorney, last rites wishes) related to your parents and note where these documents have been kept.

• **Latest medical reports.** The results of the latest annual check-up reports and the current medication prescribed by the doctor/s should always be easily available.

• **Emergency contacts.** In addition to friends and family who you know for sure will respond and

their physician, add numbers of the nearest hospitals, ambulances, oxygen supply, blood banks, etc.

• **List favourite and 'unfavourite' things.** While keeping their current favourites in mind is a must, remembering what they don't like is equally important, especially in terms of food, clothing, and yes, people. Incorporating their small favourites in everyday life, such as colour, TV soaps, things to do, preferred way of doing things will make them feel loved and cared for.

COMMON ISSUES TO BE AWARE OF AND HOW TO DEAL WITH THEM

Let's take a look at some examples of issues you may face and the solutions. The core formula for caring for ageing parents is 'Love + Respect + Compassion'. And the basic solution, which can be tailored to handle most issues, is this.

Tell them that you understand that they don't want to do something particular at that time. Next, inquire about the reason to understand why they don't want to do something. Then give them options or a time window when they would like to do the activity, so they get to exercise their choice and have a feeling of being in control.

MEDICATION MANAGEMENT

Whether the medication simply got over, or they're facing some side-effects, or they're fed up with managing the number of medicines they need to take, seniors often just stop their medication. On the other side, if they feel they have small health issues such as headaches, indigestion, or body pain, they take over-the-counter medication. We need to explain to them that both are big 'no no's. They should never stop old medicines or start new medicines by themselves without talking to you and their doctor because the side-effects may be drastic.

I know someone who saw their BP was low over a few days, so they just stopped their BP medication. When they began feeling weaker, the family checked and found out they had stopped the diabetes medicine instead of the BP meds. Thankfully, they caught this error in time!

To reduce chances of such situations, create a chart with the name of the medicine, its colour, and what the medicine is used for. You can also use pill boxes to segregate their medicines by doses and time of the day. If you live with them, they can just ask you regarding their medication change or if you live elsewhere, assure them that you'll just call away. Even for small signs and symptoms, for example fevers, stomach upsets, they should always let you know and check in with their doctor. When they do inform you, treat it seriously and respectfully — don't brush it off — because they should never feel shy or uncomfortable to call you.

YOU MUST BE VIGILANT ABOUT KEEPING THEM ACTIVE. ENCOURAGE THEM TO MAKE NEW FRIENDS, NEW HOBBIES, CALL FRIENDS OVER OR VISIT FRIENDS, PLAY CARDS, LUDO, ETC. IF THEY ARE A COUPLE, THEY CAN FIND COMPANY IN EACH OTHER BY DOING THESE ACTIVITIES TOGETHER, ESPECIALLY IF MOST OF THEIR FRIENDS ARE NO MORE. YOU CAN ALSO SET UP NETFLIX/AMAZON PRIME FOR THEM AND SHOW THEM HOW TO NAVIGATE IT

THE PROBLEM

Caregiving, while something done out of love, a sense of duty, or both, can be overwhelming. Often, we do our duty at the cost of neglecting our own physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs, leading to caregiver fatigue and then caregiver burnout. This is a state when due to mental and physical exhaustion you cannot function effectively and your relationship with your parents starts suffering. While we do our best to care for our parents, it is essential to not put our own needs on the back burner. Here are some warning signs that you're getting drained and need to take a pause before a caregiver burnout happens:

- You feel constantly guilty and frustrated at not being able to do more to help your parent.
- You feel a lack of control in your own life because you've put your personal life or career on a complete hold.
- You're irritable and often anxious, and panic when you are unable to reach your parents.
- You feel lonely, isolated and start withdrawing from your family and friends.
- Your physical and mental health is deteriorating.
- You are financially stressed round the clock.
- Your sleep patterns are disrupted.

THE SOLUTION

To cope with caregiver burnout, you need to do a few things.

- **Let go of the wish to be the 'perfect' child.** Just the way your parents learnt parenting while raising you, so will you learn while caregiving for them. Also, even as adult children, our craving for validation from the parents doesn't go away. Learn to let go of the need to get a 'pat on the head' for everything you do right — we are flawed, imperfect humans after all.
- **Be honest with yourself.** Accept that you

have chosen the caregiving role — out of love or duty — and the good, bad, and ugly that comes with it are part and parcel of the experience. Also, sometimes we have unrealistic expectations of ourselves and thus give in to some unreasonable demands too. Figure out what you can actually cope with and get help with the rest.

- **Learn to ask for help.** This doesn't mean that you are any less good at taking care of your folks, just that you are human. Getting support is essential for not only your health but also for ensuring that you can give quality care for your parents. Whether this is in terms of hiring staff, getting siblings or family to pitch in, or having your friends take care of you, all of this is okay.

- **Find your tribe.** Whether online or offline, find a community of caregivers to talk to. They are the ones who you can vent to and get excellent advice from to manage everyday issues.

- **Schedule regular breaks.** Take 30-45 minutes of alone time every single day. Whether you laze on the sofa watching OTT soaps, go for a run, read a book with a glass of wine, meet a friend for coffee, or just take a nap — this is an act of self-care you must do for yourself. And even if it may seem impossible, along with these mini breaks, schedule fortnightly days off and short vacations too.

- **Give yourself permission to feel your feelings.** It is natural to get overwhelmed, to feel lost or lonely, or angry. Let these feelings out by first accepting that you feel them, acknowledging that it is not "wrong" to feel these, and then journal to get them off your chest. And if things keep getting tougher, please reach out to a mental health professional.



CAREGIVER BURNOUT

help to take care of both themselves and you by managing their affairs. Call their trusted friend to help with this difficult conversation and have their trusted legal representative answer any and every question they may have.

REFUSAL TO ACCEPT EXTERNAL CAREGIVING

Extremely independent individuals, those who have worked all their lives, or run the household with an iron fist, may have issues with asking for help, especially from their children. Whether it's something big or small, they may hesitate to ask, or even hide issues. Parents concerned about medical expenses or worried about their favourite food being stopped may hide stomach upsets, pains, and aches.

For example, if your parent was an excellent driver and now refuses to give up driving, find out why they insist on driving. Is it because they feel incompetent? Is it because they don't want to burden you? Is it because they love long drives and don't want to give that up? Take them on long drives as family quality time. Keep a chauffeur who can help them get around. Reassure that their safety will bring you peace, that they are being responsible citizens by not putting others in harm's way, and shape stopping the driving as a request.

TIMELESS GRIEF

Grieving a loved one is a very personal matter and everyone has their own process and timeline. Losing a spouse at any age is traumatic, but for seniors especially, it is extremely difficult. Not only do they feel an inexplicable loneliness, it reminds them of their own mortality. When they are grieving their spouse, please do not interfere or hurry their grief. Sometimes it may take a year, sometimes they may take their whole life to grieve. With my parents, when my father passed

away, I was pushing my mom to start new hobbies and do old things she likes very early on in her grieving period — I did not understand that she needs more time to come out of her grief.

Today I understand that it was wrong on my part and we should not have tried to hurry her healing. Also, when I was coming back to Calcutta, I called my aunt to stay with her. This too didn't give her the downtime she needed. A grieving person needs some alone time too to feel their feelings and let out their grief — they need their privacy to cry, or remember their spouse in their own way. A respectful, caring distance is also important.

RED FLAGS FOR ELDER DEPRESSION

An often overlooked aspect of elder care is their daily mental health and elder depression has such subtle signs that it is often mistaken for symptoms or side-effects of physical issues. Loneliness, fear of death, a history of depression, and hormonal issues can be some of the causes. Some of the red flags to watch out for include:

- Sudden weight loss, loss of appetite, not wanting to eat their favourite foods.
- Becoming less social than usual, not wanting to meet their closest friends and family, not having conversations longer than two-three minutes.
- When a usually active person spends all day in bed.
- Excessive sleepiness, sleep disturbances, insomnia.
- Increased talk of death and feelings of despair, hopelessness, helplessness.

If you see any of these symptoms persist for over 21 days, please get in touch with a mental health professional.

To ensure their best care, like Mary Poppins, you have to be firm but kind. But always with respect. The priority of elder care is to keep them healthy, comfortable, safe, and happy. And some non-negotiables you'll need to incorporate always while navigating this new relationship are respect, empathy, compassion, kindness, and self-awareness.

While you are taking care of them in several ways, 'parenting' them, remember your parents are still people with a wealth of knowledge and respect. When things get challenging, and they will, remember that these are the people who have loved you unconditionally — even when you behaved in unlovable ways, and we all have. They are our Solar System. They took pride in each of our achievements. We can never repay what they have done for us. Remember the core formula is always LOVE + RESPECT + COMPASSION.

Mini Budhia is a psychotherapist, counsellor, founder of Caring Minds, I Can Fly, Cafe I Can Fly, and a TEDx speaker. Follow her on Facebook and Instagram @psychotherapist.mini. Email to askminibudhia@caringminds.co.in

BATTLING BOREDOM

With age, loneliness creeping into a senior's life is quite expected. And a lot of their loneliness have its roots in boredom. And with nothing to do, they start seeking attention from their children. And if you don't make their wish your command, they begin to think their children are too busy. The truth is most children are busy managing their own households, careers, relationships, and don't have as much free time as their senior parents.

Parents, however, don't always realise this and feel like they are being neglected. This is why you must be vigilant about keeping them active. Encourage them to make new friends, new hobbies, call friends over or visit friends, play cards, Ludo, etc. If they are a couple, they can find company in each other by doing these activities together, especially if most of their friends are no more. You can also set up Netflix/Amazon Prime for them and show them how to navigate it.

However, suggest but don't impose activities. It's quite possible they may not feel comfortable doing what you are saying. At the end of the day, let them do what they like. You can try once or twice, but ultimately, it actually helps to let them get bored on their own. I had tried to engage my mom in several hobbies, new and old, but she just didn't want to. But recently I heard she is choosing to go for drives again. Why? Because when my mom got too bored, she herself started doing things she enjoys. Give them the space for their positivity to resurface, for them to want to do things for themselves.

FOOD FIASCOS

They only want to eat for taste. This is one of the most common issues you will find. If meals aren't tickling their taste buds, or the same sabzi is repeated for a few days, if a health drink comes in a flavour they don't like, or salt/sugar/oils are regulated for medical reasons, they may flat out refuse to eat. In such cases, ensure that every day at least one meal and one snack is prepared the way they like. Show them how they benefit from eating healthy. Also ensure to have their relevant stats monitored — say blood sugar, blood pressure, sodium and potassium levels, etc. and use supplements/medicines as prescribed by their physician.

HYGIENE HOOPLA

Habits change with age and you may find that a parent who used to bathe at the crack of dawn and after returning from office now refuses to even bathe once a day or even change their clothes. Inquire if anything in the bathroom would make their lives easier — handles, a chair, a hand-held shower. Ask them if they would prefer a sponge bath in their room.

Gently suggest if they would want someone to help with the bath — may be their spouse or you. Once, my mom kept insisting on sponge baths rather than showers, so I asked her why. She said she felt colder when taking showers — a simple solution adopted was to have someone regulate the heat according to her preference before she took her shower. Always politely enquire about the reason — after all, they are not children.

If a parent has incontinence issues and is refusing help to clean up after soiling themselves, don't start making a huge issue. Remind yourself that these are the people who changed your dirty diapers. Parents may consider adult diapers demeaning, so while at home find alternate solutions. Also incentivise diapers by highlighting how they will be able to lead a full life outside and go to their favourite places freely.

MUDDLED MONEY MATTERS

Since financial well-being dictates our lives and our independence more than we'd like to admit, parents may have a hard time sharing or relinquishing control. When the staff salaries are handed out, ask your dad to hand over the envelopes. Highlight how expensive jewellery and a lot of cash lying around in the house threatens their safety. This is especially for those with ageing parents who live alone, only with staff. They are an easy target for break-ins and robberies so when visiting them, ensure that their valuables are kept in the bank and minimum cash is kept at home. This ensures that there is no temptation for the helping staff too and prevents them from slowly and steadily removing valuables from the home.

While some suddenly become extremely miserly, some parents begin overspending like there's no tomorrow. Some may even refuse to settle their affairs — property, assets, cash, jewellery — by making a will. Shine a light on how they will

HEALTH

SET YOUR BOUNDARIES

That's the key to maintain a healthy mind



MINU BUDHIA

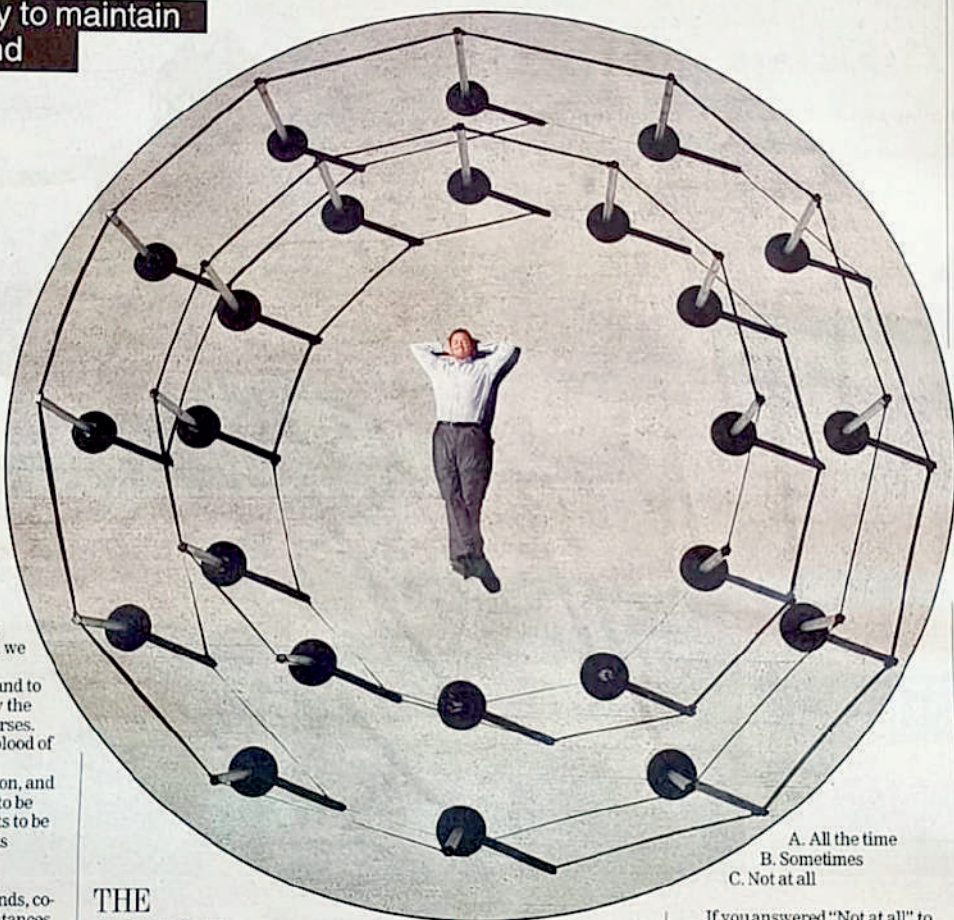
With October being the month for mental health awareness, I wanted to write on a theme that would inspire each and every one of us — irrespective of age, location, socio-economic background — to take positive action and make mental healthcare a part of our everyday lives. What is it that we all want? At our core, we all want to be loved, to be understood, to be respected, and to be accepted for who we are by the people in our own little universes.

Relationships are the lifeblood of human lives. We thrive on interaction and communication, and however much we may want to be alone sometimes, no one wants to be lonely. Thus we do whatever is necessary to nurture our relationships — with parents, spouses, children, family, friends, co-workers, neighbours, acquaintances — the list goes on. However, one relationship we often forget about is the one with ourselves. And to keep our relationships alive, more often than not, we make sacrifices — big and small — on a daily basis.

We've all been told that the key to any healthy relationship is communication. What to say, what not to say, how to say it, when to say it — it has all been discussed. But something that's fallen through the cracks is communication with ourselves. While we've adopted mindfulness, gratitude, yoga, journaling, as part of our self-care, there's one important thing that we're apprehensive about, and that's setting boundaries.

As a part of our culture and our upbringing we are taught to put ourselves last, but it's time to change this narrative. If someone's behaviour is toxic and affecting your well-being, you have every right to set boundaries. In fact, not creating boundaries is a type of slow, emotional self-harm.

In today's column, I wanted to try something new — to bring the feel of a self-guided workshop so you not only read, but actively participate while going through this article. Let's get started!



A. All the time
B. Sometimes
C. Not at all

THE HEALTHY BOUNDARY TEST

The first thing we're going to do is to figure out your current comfort level with setting boundaries.

1. Do you have trouble saying "no" and feel guilty when you say "no" to requests you don't want to do?

- A. All the time
- B. Sometimes
- C. Not at all

2. Do you over-explain yourself when you say "no" to something you don't want to do?

- A. All the time
- B. Sometimes
- C. Not at all

3. How often do you give in and say "yes" when someone ignores your boundary and guilt-trips you?

- A. All the time
- B. Sometimes
- C. Not at all

4. When someone gets upset with you because of your boundaries, do you feel scared you'll lose

them?
A. All the time
B. Sometimes
C. Not at all

5. Do you base your self-worth on how people treat you?

As a part of our culture and our upbringing, we are taught to put ourselves last, but it's time to change this narrative. If someone's behaviour is toxic and affecting your well-being, you have every right to set boundaries. In fact, not creating boundaries is a type of slow, emotional self-harm

If you answered "Not at all" to more than three of the questions, congratulations! You're already prioritising your mental health and are comfortable setting and maintaining boundaries.

If you answered "Sometimes" to more than 3 of the questions, you're trying to set boundaries, but need help with tools for sticking to them and not feeling guilty.

If you answered "All the time" to more than 3 of the questions, your self-worth and self-esteem seem to be low, so that's the first thing to work on.

DEBUNKING MYTHS

Now that we know your comfort level with setting healthy boundaries, we're going to bust some myths before we start learning how to set them. Why? Because till we change our mindset about boundaries from negative to positive, you're going to keep feeling guilty, and the chance of sticking to your boundaries will be less. Think of this as stretching your muscles before you start your workout.

MYTH: Setting boundaries is selfish.
REALITY: Boundaries are the most important and the most underrated tool for taking care of your mental health. And self-care is not selfish. If you feel overwhelmed, anxious, unappreciated, unloved, disrespected, taken for granted, etc., it is your right to make positive changes to your life to feel better. An excellent example for explaining why boundaries are important is this — setting boundaries is similar to putting on your own oxygen mask in an aeroplane before you do it for others — after all, if you can't help yourself, how will you help the relationship? A simple exercise to know whether you need to set a boundary is this — would you let your best friend or your child put up with the behaviour you are accepting? If not, you probably need to set a boundary.

MYTH: Setting boundaries means you don't care about the person/relationship.

REALITY: In reality, boundaries save relationships from unexpressed resentment. It is actually easy for people to cut-off relationships actively (no contact/ghosting) or passively (absolute bare minimum contact) rather than work on making it better. If someone is communicating a boundary, it means they care enough about both the people and the relationship to help nurture and grow rather than wither and die a natural death. Don't be hurt when someone tries to say your boundary means you don't care about them. If they respect you, then they'll respect your boundaries.

MYTH: Setting boundaries is about telling other people what to do.

REALITY: It's often a common misconception that boundaries are about getting other people to change their behaviour. It's about communicating a change you are making in your life. So when you're setting your boundary, use I-statements rather than You-statements. For example, instead of saying "You should stop yelling and screaming during arguments — it's rude and tacky behaviour" rephrase it to "I feel disrespected, unloved, and unsafe when I'm shouted or yelled at. If that happens in our conversation, I will remove myself and get back when both of us can talk calmly."

MYTH: You can't change your boundaries.

REALITY: As you evolve, your boundaries are constantly evolving with you. If up until a year back you were a night-owl, but now you've been waking up early for better health, it is absolutely okay to tell people to not call you after 10pm. If you were babysitting your nieces/nephews every Sunday out of love, but no longer want to do so because you feel like it's being taken for granted, it's okay to not continue.

FROM P40

If you used to be a workaholic working beyond office hours, always available on call, but now your priorities have changed to focussing on work-life balance, it's okay to communicate that. If you realise someone you were close friends with is actually a "frenemy" or bullies you into doing what they want, it's okay to communicate that and put some distance between yourselves.

DO AND DON'T OF SETTING BOUNDARIES

Two things as equally important as setting boundaries is how you communicate them and how you honour them. Let's take a look at what to do and what to avoid.

DO

→ **Do set your boundary when you are calm.** Speak in a neutral tone. Stating your boundary in the heat of an argument or when either party is extremely upset will take away its gravity.

→ **Communicate your boundary in simple language, short sentences.** If you feel nervous, write it down beforehand and practice what you'll say.

→ **State the consequences of not respecting the boundary.** Clearly, politely and again briefly, state what will happen when the boundary is not respected.

→ **Stick to your boundaries.**

When you state a boundary, you need to stick to it no matter what. Have the courage to be disliked — don't give in the moment someone pushes back or tries to manipulate you with emotions.

→ **Give the other person some space after setting the boundary.** Since the boundary is new and potentially upsetting information for them, they may need some time to process too.

DON'T

→ **Don't overexplain your boundaries.** You can set the context for it, but you don't need to justify, give too many details to convince the other person to respect your boundary.

→ **Don't apologise for setting boundaries.** Since this is essential for your mental health, you should not feel guilty or ashamed for taking care of yourself.

→ **Don't expect the other person to immediately respect your boundary.** Expect people to react negatively — prepare to deal with anger, hurt sentiments, denial.

→ **Don't tolerate people violating your boundaries over and over again.**

Depending on the type of boundary, it may take people a short while to get used to it. However, you should not have to restate the boundary more than thrice.

→ **Don't do this alone if you have tried but it feels too overwhelming.** Setting boundaries, especially if you have been a people-pleaser and

One of the main reasons we do not want to set boundaries is because we think others will leave us. The people who have the best intentions for you will not go anywhere. The ones who will leave are the manipulative people who were profiting from your lack of boundaries. These people are the ones who only care about how you and others meet their needs. So the moment you talk about your needs and the status quo changes, they disappear

thrive on validation, can be difficult on your own. You can always connect with a therapist for a few sessions to get the right guidance and support.

EFFECTIVE MICRO-BOUNDARIES FOR EVERYDAY SITUATIONS

One of the main reasons we do not want to set boundaries is because we think others will leave us. The people who have the best intentions for you will not go anywhere. The ones who will leave are the manipulative people who were profiting from your lack of boundaries. These people are the ones who only care about how you and others meet their needs. So the moment you talk about your needs and the status quo changes, they disappear. But not before they try to guilt-trip or shame you into thinking you

are a bad, uncaring person. Don't fall into this trap. Sometimes, people disappearing from our lives is a blessing in disguise. Let's take a look at some common situations and how we can respond with boundaries.

Situation 1: When a friend/family member/co-worker confuses you with Instant Noodles

They think you are available at their beck and call 24x7 and expect their messages and calls to be answered immediately, even if you have to drop everything you are doing. These people call a number of times in a row, or repeatedly send message after message, and then ask "why aren't you answering", often followed with "?????????". Some things you can say here are:

"If I don't answer, know that I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

"I'm on a digital detox and have reduced my digital device usage hours. Hence it may take more time than earlier for me to respond."

"I'm on vacation and won't be responding to calls and texts. Will revert when I'm back."

Situation 2: A colleague often stops by your desk for long chats at your busiest hour or constantly keeps asking you for help.

Whether it's the office gossip king/queen, your work bestie, or just a talkative colleague, it's important to maintain a rapport without letting it affect your work schedule. And for that one person who seems to need help all the time, it's time to point them in another direction — sometime's corporate jargon can be a blessing too.

"Can't talk right now as I've got to concentrate on this assignment. Let's do a quick catch up at lunch instead."

"Hey, I'm at my mental capacity today and need to get done with work first. I'll check in with you once I'm finished."

"I'm quite tied up with my current project and have no bandwidth at all. You could check in with _____ to see how to get the additional support required."

Situation 3: A mild argument with your partner is escalating.

What started off as a mild disagreement is beginning to change shape. You can see that they are getting agitated and angrier; their volume is reaching "yelling", the conversation has moved from logical to emotional, and basically nothing good is going to come out of this potential shouting match. State that you are taking a break from the conversation, assure that the issue will be addressed, and add an "us" element.

"Darling, I'm not quite comfortable discussing this anymore right now. We're both getting stressed out. Let's take a short break and talk about it a couple of hours later."

"Honey, I need a pause as it's getting too overwhelming to talk about this right now. We can continue after some time. Let's connect later when we're both not getting angry."

Situation 4: Your child/teen/sibling reacts negatively the moment you make contact in-person or over call.

The moment you say "hi", you're met with a snappy, sarcastic reply and/or irritated body language — eye-rolling, frowns, etc. The best thing to do is to show support, offer an option and then remove yourself from the situation.

"Looks like you're having a rough time right now. Let me know if you want to talk, or call me later at a better time. Take care."

"Hey, Sounds like I caught

you in a bad mood. Drop me a text or call when it's a good time for you."

SETTING MINI BOUNDARIES FOR YOURSELF

Sometimes the person we need to set boundaries with is none other than "my, myself, and I" — after all, the change begins with us. For a better balanced life, here are some mini boundaries to try out:

- **Don't take your phone to bed or to the bathroom** — you have enough distractions throughout the day.
- **Stop using "maybe" as a response** — to reduce stress, a black and white "yes" or "no" is essential.
- **Pause before you reply** — taking a beat allows you to respond, instead of reacting, thereby giving more control over your communications.
- **Make time for literally "nothing"** — add 10-20 minutes of absolute free time to just be and think happy thoughts or imagine your ideal future or daydream to your heart's content.
- **Notice and respect how your body responds** — focusing on whether you feel happy, calm, anxious, or distressed when you speak to different people will help unearth the "why" and help set boundaries with them.
- **Make strict deep work time slots** — having tunnel vision and ignoring people and notifications for fixed short periods of time throughout your workday helps you work without interruption and thereby perform better.

I completely understand that setting boundaries can be hard. When thinking about setting boundaries it is absolutely normal to feel awkward, or think it's rude, or that you don't want to upset the other person. In fact, the number one reason I've heard from people not setting boundaries is "...but I love them". And it is also perfectly okay to feel anxious after communicating a boundary — intrusive thoughts like "Are they mad at me?", "Will they hate me?", "Am I a bad person?". So how should you cope with this? By building emotional resilience. Firstly, admit that setting boundaries is hard. Secondly, expect to feel guilty. When you do, just remind yourself this is an intrusive thought, not reality, and shoo it away. Thirdly, repeat three self-love affirmations to remind yourself of your self-worth and trust yourself to do the right thing for you.

So here's wishing you all the best on your boundary journey. It's one I'm exploring myself and I look forward to hearing from you all about your experiences too. Write in and do stay tuned for more on this topic as I'll be back with Boundaries 2.0 — focussing specifically on setting boundaries at work and in a relationship.

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





MINU BUDHIA

HEALTH | **LOVE YOU ZINDAGI!**

At the end of a difficult day, or when we're going through a challenging time, sometimes all we want is a kind, patient person to share our feelings. Someone who will not just hear, but truly listen to us. Someone who will not judge us. Someone who can empathise without bias.

While our favourite family members or best friends are the people we vent to, sometimes what we need is a person who doesn't know us at all and hears what we have to say for the first time. Just the act of summarising our life, recounting our feelings to a new person can itself give us a lot of clarity. One of the best and possibly only Bollywood movies to focus on counselling was *Dear Zindagi*.

An important reality check it brings up is this: "*Kabhi kabhi hum mushkil rasta sirf is liye chunte hai kyun ki humein lagta hai important cheezin paane ke liye humein mushkil rasta apnana chahiye. Apne aap ko punish karna bahut zaroori samajhte hai. But why? Aasaan rasta kyun nahi chun sakte?*"

Did you know?

- One in every eight people in the world lives with a mental disorder (WHO).
- Depression, anxiety and behavioural disorders are among the leading causes of illness and disability among adolescents (WHO).
- Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among 15-29 year-olds (WHO).
- Only 41 per cent of the 15-24 years age group in India said it is good to get support for mental health problems.

What exactly is counselling?

To put it very simply, counselling is a process of talk therapy where any individual, couple, or family meet with a trained and certified mental health professional to share their issues and work on developing coping tools with the guidance of their counsellor.

What counselling offers:

- A safe, 100 per cent confidential, unbiased, non-

judgmental, empathetic environment to talk about your issues/challenges.

- Clear guidance from mental health experts to empower you to take action.
- Practical tools and tips to make positive changes in your life.

What counselling doesn't offer:

- Magical or miraculous cures.
- Instant fixes in one session.
- Overnight feelings of happiness.

Who can avail counselling?

"*Safe feel karne ke liye pehle saare dar mitana zaroori hai!*"

Anyone and everyone can go for counselling. A counsellor can help:

- Individuals across all ages, genders, relationship status, socio-economic backgrounds.
- Children/teens: Those struggling academically or socially in school, or with behavioural issues at home.
- An adult dealing with challenging relationships, marital issues/ divorce or toxic workplaces.
- The elderly: Seniors facing

post-retirement, empty nest, or grief issues.

- Parents: New parents, mothers with postpartum blues, couples dealing with infertility or miscarriages, or the adoption process.
 - Individuals with mental health issues and disorders.
- So, what can counselling help you with if you don't have a diagnosis?
- Counselling can empower you by teaching you how to:
- Beat stress,
 - Manage conflict,
 - Handle criticism,
 - Improve relationships,
 - Have difficult

Seeking help for mental health issues continues to have some social stigma attached to it. Here's what you need to know about counselling to address your problems

- conversations,
 - Set boundaries,
 - Cope with grief/setbacks,
 - Control overthinking,
 - Overcome phobias,
 - Assist professional growth, and
 - Encourage personal growth
- Counselling can especially help students with:
- Bullying, ragging, peer pressure,
 - Exam stress and anxiety,
 - Career planning, and
 - Internet addiction.

Counselling directly cannot help:

- Very young children and
- Individuals with intellectual disabilities.

For them, play therapy is ideal.

Also, an important thing to note is that to start counselling is to start a journey of change. Counselling will only work for those who are actively committed to taking charge of their life and are open to change.

Quiz time

How will I know I need professional help?

- When your emotions are overwhelming, disrupting, or deraiding your regular life each day and you are unable to cope in a healthy way, it's time to get help. Reach out to a counsellor if you notice that:
- A particular issue is affecting every aspect of your life in a negative way.
 - You are unable to perform in your social, professional, personal life
 - Your issue is consistent for four to six weeks.

"*Agar hum apni zindagi ka steering wheel apne haath mein nahi lenge na, toh koi doosra driver seat par baith jayega.*"

You can actually take this mini quiz right now to see if you could benefit from talking to a mental health professional. Ask yourself the following questions and tick those to which you answer 'yes':

- Are you your own worst critic, blaming yourself/judging yourself harshly for your unhappiness?
- Do you set goals, have trouble achieving them or get discouraged easily?
- Do you feel hopeless due to family/ marital/ work pressure issues?
- Do you struggle with smoking, drinking, self-harm, binge eating, compulsive shopping?
- Do you constantly feel tired, fatigued, frustrated, irritated, angry, helpless?
- Do you have aches and pains that seem to have no physical reason?
- Have you been eating/sleeping too much or too little recently?
- Have you been thinking about death or having suicidal thoughts?

If you answer 'yes' three or more of the above, then counselling may well be of great help.

WHO SHOULD SEEK COUNSELLING?

Anyone and everyone can go for counselling. A counsellor can help:

- Individuals across all ages, genders, relationship status, socio-economic backgrounds
- Children/teens: Those struggling academically or socially in school, or with behavioural issues at home
- An adult dealing with challenging relationships, marital issues/ divorce or toxic workplaces
- The elderly: Seniors facing post-retirement, empty nest, or grief issues
- Parents: New parents, mothers with postpartum blues, couples dealing with infertility or miscarriages, or the adoption process
- Individuals with mental health issues and disorders

FROM P8

Counselling FAQs

Will I have to take medicines to get cured?
While certain disorders like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, or severe cases of depression, or OCD may require medication, it is not a must for all issues. Modern psychiatric medicine has come a long way. If we don't hesitate to take medicines for blood pressure, diabetes, and heart issues, why hesitate for our brain?

What is the difference between a psychologist and a psychiatrist?
Only a psychiatrist — an MBBS doctor who has specialised in psychiatry at the MD/PG level — can prescribe medication. Psychologists have an MA or MPhil in psychology, use tests, counsel using therapy methods, but by law they cannot prescribe medication.

Can I get counselling for more than one disorder at the same time?
It is actually quite common for someone to have two different issues — this is called comorbidity — and it can get treated at the same time. For example, if you have depression and OCD, or chronic stress and anxiety, your counsellor will guide you on a tailored approach based on which one is affecting your life the most and to what degree.

How long does it take for counselling to work?

Counselling, like I've said before, is not like instant noodles. It takes at least four to six sessions to get an understanding of the impact it is having in your life.

Can I change my counsellor after the first or second session?
It is important for you to feel comfortable, understood, and heard. If you're uncomfortable or feel judged or feel like you can't relate, you can definitely change your counsellor. However, as the first two sessions are mostly exploratory and focus on history taking — which is bound to bring up uncomfortable feelings — it is ideal you wait till the end of the third session. If after this you feel frustrated, it's okay to find a new counsellor to help you.

How should I prepare for my first counselling session?
● Be proud of yourself for taking this important self-care step. It takes courage and you are breaking the stigma surrounding mental healthcare.
● Schedule some undisturbed me-time before and after your first session. This allows you to calm down. This time also can be utilised for making notes/ journaling your therapy journey.
● Make a list of questions. To feel less nervous, write a list of questions



● Schedule some undisturbed me-time before and after your first session. This allows you to calm down. This time also can be utilised for making notes/ journaling your therapy journey.

● Make a list of questions. To feel less nervous, write a list of questions and points you want to discuss during the first session. Do this the day before the appointment.

and points you want to discuss during the first session. Do this the day before your appointment.
● Manage your expectations. Remember that this is the first of many sessions. Your therapist and you are just getting to know each other.

What questions should I ask my therapist during the first session?
Some questions you can ask are:
● What can I expect during our first session?
● How many sessions do you think I'll need?
● How frequently do I need to meet with you?
● How long will our sessions be?
● How can I schedule/reschedule appointments?
● How can I reach you for an emergency session?

What issues should I discuss with my therapist during the first session?
The simplest answer is this — whatever is bothering you most at the moment. Other topics include:
● Challenges you are currently facing.
● Any issues you have faced for many years.
● Recent major changes in your life/habits.
● Things you have already tried to feel better.
● Any concerns your family and friends have shared about you.

Can I still get counselling if my parents/spouse doesn't allow?
Yes, you do not need permission to get counselling, but you must sign a consent form and list an emergency contact.

Are counsellors obligated to share what I say with my parents/spouse/family?
Counselling sessions are 100 per cent confidential with two exceptions. If the counsellor is convinced that you may harm yourself or harm another person, then by law they are obligated to inform your emergency contact.

You matter. Your mind matters. More than 'log kya kahenge?'

While the conversation has changed a lot over the past decade, we still have a long way to go. Even today,

with 2023 right around the corner, every day I encounter people being super uncomfortable when the words 'counsellor', 'counselling', 'psychologist' and 'mental health clinic' are mentioned.
● "Arre, itni kya problem hai tumhare life mein?"
● "Paagal ho kya ke tum clinic jaogi? Kisi ne dekh liya toh?"
● "Sirf ek stranger se baat karke kuch nahi hoga. Bekaar mat jao!"
While I've mentioned this before, I'm happy to repeat this till each and every one of us feels empowered to seek counselling without shame, guilt, and fear of judgement — it's high time we break the stigma of 'log kya kahenge?' If you can have your own go-to person or consultant for everything — nutritionists, fitness trainers, travel consultants, image consultants, financial planners, even personal assistants, why can't you have your own counsellor to help you navigate your life and emotions.

With today's column I hope I've been able to demystify counselling for a lot of you. And if you haven't already, I'm sure many of you will soon get the help you need to fall in love with yourself and your life. If you have any questions related to learning more about counselling, please feel free to connect with me on Instagram at @psychotherapist.minu

Minu Budhia is a psychotherapist, counsellor, founder of Caring Minds, iCanFly, CafeiCanFly, and a TEDx speaker. Write to her at askminubudhia@caringsminds.co.in

HEALTH **2023** **RETHINKING RESOLUTIONS IN THE NEW YEAR**



MINU BUDHIA

Hello, my readers! I am so glad to be wishing you a happy 2023. To start off on a positive note, here are 23 of my favourite resolutions to set you on the journey to happiness:

1. DON'T BE TOO HARD ON YOURSELF.

SRK's character in *Dear Zindagi* says that there is no reason to choose a difficult path for ourselves when we can manage with an easier one. I too believe that reaching a goal without much struggle isn't unworthy.

2. SET NANO GOALS INSTEAD OF MAJOR RESOLUTIONS.

Consistently achieving small goals every day/ week will boost your self-confidence and increase the chances of you meeting your bigger goals later. For example, I make it a point to eat a bowl of seasonal fruits every day.

3. IDENTIFY AND CREATE MICRO-MOMENTS OF HAPPINESS.

I do this by giving gratitude for what I have and by giving compliments to others daily. Putting a smile on someone's face will put a smile on yours too. Something I do is to compliment a quality, not appearance. For example, if someone is wearing a sari, instead of saying what a beautiful sari, I'll say, you have an excellent eye for choosing saris, or, you carry saris so

gracefully.

Also, I believe in sending gifts to near and dear ones at least once a year — they're usually thoughtful tokens with personalised messages.

4. RECOGNISE, ACKNOWLEDGE, AND ACCEPT YOUR FEARS.

Any time before giving a speech, when I feel nervous about a large crowd or conscious about how I'll pronounce certain English words, I remind myself that it's good to be a little nervous, because that makes me prepare well. Also, I ensure that most of my speech (80 per cent) is in a language I'm more fluent and comfortable in — Hindi. After all, English is not my mother tongue.

5. BE MINDFUL ABOUT THE PEOPLE AROUND YOU.

When I'm visiting others, I'm

mindful to carry appropriate, and personalised gifts. When meeting someone new or a guest is coming over, I make it a priority to find out about their food preferences/ allergies, their near and dear ones, and any causes important to them. Why? So we can have a meaningful interaction instead of superficial 'hi hellos' and small talk.

6. EVOLVE AS A PERSON — CHANGE IS CONSTANT, SO WHY NOT CHANGE FOR THE BETTER?

I am learning to challenge my beliefs, practices, and traditions to be a more empathetic and less judgmental person. For example, I used to like taking my children to zoos but now I realise it's so cruel to cage these animals who are born free.

7. ACCEPT AND

LOVE YOUR BODY.

Don't constantly criticise every aspect of yourself or what you eat. For example, I have a bit of a patch and used to be very self-conscious about it. I also felt bad about the clothes I couldn't wear. Now I've accepted it and am happy shopping for flattering fits and cuts. I'm so happy that body positivity is changing the conversation from earlier days when being slim, "fair and lovely" was important for girls. Today how you carry yourself, your style, your attitude, and your intellect matters more.

Masaba in *Masaba Masaba* encouraged a teen who was plus-size and low in confidence. She made her a showstopper in her fashion show, giving her a platform to be comfortable and confident in her own skin.

8. REDEFINE YOUR EVERYDAY 'NORMAL' BY

ASKING THE 'WHY' BEHIND YOUR ACTIONS AND INACTION.

I am inspired by my younger daughter Prachi to work hard and share awareness about mental health through my clinic. But when suddenly I didn't feel like going to work, I started thinking about the reason. I realised I was experiencing burnout. Too many calls and visits were overwhelming at work, so I communicated my preferred method of communication to my colleagues — voice notes first, then texts, and only if necessary, visits by appointment.

9. FORGIVE YOURSELF AND OTHERS FOR YOUR EMOTIONAL HEALTH.

Life is too short to hold grudges against people who are not even sorry for hurting you or don't care about causing you pain. Forgiveness doesn't mean they were right, and you don't have to tell them that you forgive them either. The act of forgiveness sets you free.

10. ACKNOWLEDGE IT IS OKAY AND HUMAN TO FEEL NEGATIVE EMOTIONS.

Practise letting go of people who are not good for your mental health. I've started taking things less personally — I realised most people say mean things because they have not walked in my shoes. So I neither react nor respond.

11. SAY THANKS WITH WARMTH.

Rather than saying a cold thank you, give details about the gift in your message. I recently received a thoughtful gift and I remember writing, "I'm so happy to receive the handmade mugs in my favourite colour." I also usually take a picture and send it along with the message.

12. PICK UP ONE GEN Z SKILL

Incorporate it into your personal or professional life. I started making reels on Instagram to connect with younger generations and make them aware of the importance of mental healthcare. And it made my day when someone quite young from London said she listens to my fun mental health reels to brighten up her day.

13. EMBRACE PREVENTIVE SELF-CARE BY GETTING A COMPLETE CHECK-UP.

Do it without any excuses — physical, dental, ENT, etc. because several serious issues don't show symptoms at all or until it's too late.

14. BUILD YOUR OWN BRAND.

This has nothing to do with whether you're working or not, whether you're an entrepreneur or an employee. Our physical and digital presence speaks volumes. Get professional photos taken; make a visiting card; upgrade your resume or make a personal profile; upload small videos of cooking, skincare, hair care — whatever you are interested in. It will be imperfectly perfect in the beginning but slowly you will learn the trick.

15. LEARN TO BE MINDFUL WHILE DECLINING AN INVITE.

Warmly acknowledge the invite first. Emphasise that you will be missing out. For example, "I'm sorry, I had my customers' visit scheduled on the same date and unfortunately won't be able to attend. It's entirely my loss." Don't be blunt and say, "I'll see if I can attend", "I'm sorry I'm busy, can't make it."

16. CREATE CONSCIOUSLY INSTEAD OF BEING A PASSIVE CONSUMER.

Write, sing, dance, paint, cook or even grow plants. I picked up kitchen gardening recently.

17. PRACTISE ACTIVE MEDITATION TO CLEAR YOUR MIND.

For me, cooking is active meditation — it's so therapeutic!

18. DECLUTTER, DON'T HOARD.

I declutter my home and workspace to get rid of stress. I get so immersed in cleaning up that no other thought even enters my mind.

19. OVERCOME ONE LIMITING BELIEF.

Tap into your deepest insecurities first — "I'm a bad parent because I got a divorce" or "I'm not getting a raise because I'm not good enough". Learn to think about alternates. For example, "I'm not getting a raise not because I am not too good but I need to ask my boss for my raise explaining the work I have done with real time data".

20. STOP POSTPONING YOUR HAPPINESS.

Don't think, "I'll be happy when... xyz happens". You are worthy of happiness irrespective of circumstances and people. Work on incorporating a 'special moment' each day. Eat on the fancy 'guest' plates, go watch that movie yourself, have a laugh by reading memes. My interior designer stopped me from putting a tablecloth on a glass-top table. She wanted me to enjoy it every day instead of reserving it for that big day.

21. GIVE YOUR SELF-TALK A MAKEOVER BY BEING ACTIVELY KINDER TO YOURSELF.

If I make a mistake, I focus on accepting the fact, especially at work where I'm the leader, rather than hiding it and blaming other colleagues.

22. SHOP AND INVEST IN LOCAL MARKETS AND ARTISANS.

I love going to exhibitions to discover, encourage, and buy from upcoming, self-taught designers who are mostly working out of their homes. The tag in the garment 'PROUDLY MADE IN INDIA' makes my heart swell with pride. We no longer need to shop for foreign brands.

23. CHOOSE PROGRESS OVER SUCCESS.

The constant little changes make 'overnight' success possible.

TO MAKE OR NOT TO MAKE

Making resolutions is quite a personal decision and it's perfectly fine not to have any resolutions either. I've put together a list of monthly challenges to try. This helps you focus on one thing a month and takes the pressure off trying to make big changes. It's okay to break resolutions, at least you tried it!

MONTHLY

CHALLENGES

Joyful January — Be the main character in your own book: To do this, decluttering your mind and having an unbiased guide is imperative. And you will find this unbiased, 100 per cent confidential guide in a therapist. Meet with a mental health professional for two-three sessions with the clear goal of venting out all the baggage from last year or your whole life. Just getting your feelings out will help to bring about a lot of clarity.

Fabulous February — It's all about love: Improve your romantic relationships by understanding the types of love languages. Give some space to each other so you can grow independently.

results!

Me, Myself, & I May — Sit with your thoughts: One of the most difficult things for any human to do is to sit alone with their thoughts. We often surround ourselves with people not because we want company, but because we don't want to be alone. Begin with a roomcation, then move to a staycation, and even try a solo vacation. Learn to enjoy your own company — to be alone, not lonely.

Jovial June — Start positive family traditions: Break stigma. Have monthly conversations about mental health as a topic to start normalising its place in your home. Encourage, empower, and enable the older women in your family to fulfil some of the dreams they had to sacrifice. Help your grandma sell her

above your means. Then the third week go back to your usual lifestyle. When the fourth week starts, you'll not only identify and understand your privilege (which you can start giving gratitude for), you'll also realise whether the grass is actually greener.

Awesome August — Say No: When you think about toddlers, besides the cuteness factor, what's the first thing that comes to your mind? Their amazing ability to say 'no' to anything and everything they don't like without caring what others say. Adopt this 'no means no' attitude for the whole month. Say 'no' to one small thing every day that you don't really want to do. You don't have to be rude about it, but you need to be firm. This is also an excellent way to practise setting and maintaining boundaries.

Super September — Say Yes: Now that you've learnt to say 'no', you need to practise saying 'yes', not to others, but to yourself. For the whole month, say 'yes' to small things that make you happy. And in this spirit of positivity, try a 'no complaints day' once a week too!

Outside October — Do a month full of daily little kindnesses: Step out literally and metaphorically, donate a mix of your time (read to seniors in an old-age home) and expertise (tutor/coach/mentor college students) to help others each day. Give the gift of education to the less privileged children who are talented and can excel if given a small tab or laptop. When my father passed away, I made a resolution in my father's memory to donate five tabs to whoever needs it. Give your older clothes and accessories to the less privileged instead of discarding, but in good wearable condition.

No-Negativity November: Let go of toxic relationships, add love and light to your life. Renew older/faded connections which add to your joy.

Do-it December — Leave Your Legacy: A common need of humans is wanting to be loved and remembered. I too want to leave my legacy. I wrote my memoir so my story could help and inspire others. I've been working on my memoir for a year and a half, and it's finally ready. I cannot wait to share more about it with you very soon!

Pictures: istock

Minu Budhia is a psychotherapist, counsellor, founding father of Caring Minds, I Can Fly, Cafe I Can Fly, and a TEDx speaker. Write to askminubudhia@caringsminds.co.in



DECLUTTER, DON'T HOARD. I DECLUTTER MY HOME AND WORKSPACE TO GET RID OF STRESS. I GET SO IMMERSSED IN CLEANING UP THAT NO OTHER THOUGHT EVEN ENTERS MY MIND

Magical March — Commit to a new financial goal:

• Whether you have to Google the difference between credit and debit or have an amazing investment portfolio, make it a point to learn something new about your finances. I had kept a good accounting teacher to teach me the basics. Why? Because financial awareness is the key to financial security. Also file your own income tax returns.

Amazing April — Do one thing that terrifies you emotionally:

Scared about having difficult conversations with the important people in your life? Terrified of being lonely? Scared about being judged and ridiculed? Do it anyway. Pick a single fear, make a pros and cons list about what happens if you do the scary thing. You will get amazing

crochet on Instagram or get *musli* a pair of denims and take her clubbing. Treat your family the way you treat your best friends, don't take them for granted. The positivity with which you treat your friends, have that smile with your family too. Go for a family vacation once a year, including your extended family. Weave moments of magic in relationships. Nowadays, I'm happy to see family reunions are becoming common.

Joyride July — Take a reality check:

Try a different normal to get a reality check. To do this correctly, try two very different lives for two subsequent weeks — one where you live below your means; and one where you live



Hosting a party on Holi is not an easy task

HOLI

INS AND OUTS OF HOLI GATHERINGS

How to refuse an invitation? What to buy? How to be a good host? Here are a few things to remember if Holi is on your mind



MINU BUDHIA

With Holi around the corner, I couldn't help but think of a colourful topic to write about for this column. A little tongue-in-cheek, shaken and stirred — get ready to sip this heady Holi drink for your mind.

I'm talking about manners regarding invitations and gifts. In this season of fun and festivities, after the Covid silence, there have been and will be invitations galore — from simple get-togethers to big bashs, which entails sending and

receiving invitations and gifts. Over the decades, my husband and I have accumulated our fair share of beautiful and thoughtful invites and replies, but over the past couple of years, we've had some hilarious, eye-rolling, eyebrow-raising, and borderline annoying ones too. Yes, I'm sharing examples. No, not sharing names. So sit back, enjoy, and take it with a grain of salt. And maybe a dash of pepper too.

Think about the enormous effort hosts put in for any event. Invite lists, invite creatives, decor, food and beverages, WhatsApp group messages, emails, follow-up reminders, and most importantly, the love and care they put into inviting people to be a part of their happiness. And all that love and enthusiasm is met with these replies:

- ▶ "Shall try"
- ▶ "Shall try my best"
- ▶ "Shall come if I'm in town"
- ▶ "Shall revert" but never do
- ▶ "I didn't get any message" but message shows DELIVERED
- ▶ "Oh I didn't see"

These cryptic and elliptic replies

leave us confused and wondering if you will, in fact, show up, and confused as to how many seating areas there should be.

The polite but lost replies: Some reply with only "thank you". Yes, we're so glad, and appreciate your courtesy and love for brevity (we like short, crisp replies too), but do we count you in or out?

Some others with the namaste emoji: We're adopting namaste over handshakes too and love our Indian culture, but it really doesn't give us a clue about whether they plan to visit or not!

Many reply to actually confirm or decline: These people, for sure, are our favourite. Even if they declined. Why? Because they at least have the manners to inform us. And usually these are the people who have the busiest, most packed, hectic schedules that include inter-continental travel. They are sure of their plans, sure of who they want to meet, and always reply warmly.

"Oh yes! Where? When?": These are the downright confused busy

bee. A strange reply that we are met with when we call to remind guests closer to the event after having sent the invite. And even on the day of the event, there are those that ask you, yet again, "where should I come, what time should I be there?" when the details are on their phone WhatsApp! **"Sorry, shall miss the play":** Erm, that's okay. For whoever invited you to the play. But what about the book launch we invited you to? It's amazing to see these bees get their wires crossed not just about days and dates, but the entire occasion itself.

The complete silence non-replies: This lot seems to love the song *When You Say Nothing At All*. There's no word of acknowledgement, and so, of course, no commitment to say "yes" or "no". We understand this rids them of



Be mindful about deciding on the gift, especially food and beverages

their headache, but think of the poor hosts who are trying to balance the invite equation with unknown variables — please, just reply! We get that you love your privacy and we dared to reach out. If you're not interested, please say so.

It is always good to look at the mirror. The same people who do not RSVP to reply expect others to send the RSVP immediately against their invite.

CONTD ON P22

FROM P21

DO AND DON'T OF INVITATIONS AND GIFTING

How and when you send invites and gifts is an excellent way of showing people how much you value and appreciate them and their time. It's the little things that matter. These little drops in the ocean help us establish and nurture the relationships that weave together the social fabric of our lives. Let us take a look at some of the do and don't of invitations and gifting.

WHEN YOU'RE THE HOST

Save the date: This is no longer reserved for weddings. Especially important if you're planning a formal or a big event. A "save the date" allows people to prioritise your event if they wish to.

Send detailed invitations out at least two weeks in advance: Everyone is busy juggling their own schedules, so if you really want people to attend, give them time.

Include an RSVP section: Always add and highlight your request for an RSVP and include a number too.

Send a reminder: Two to three days before the event, send a "gentle reminder".

Respect your guest's privacy: It is really surprising and offensive how event managers call up senior, respected individuals on their personal mobile numbers to ask about their RSVP status, or even their address to deliver the invite or gifts! This is an absolute invasion of privacy and bad manners. The more senior they are, the more they value their personal approachability. Just because you have your invitee's number does not mean you will hand it over to all of your staff involved in planning the event. When someone asks for their number, you cannot share it without their permission. Either you should make the call yourself or ask politely whether they are comfortable with your sharing their numbers.

GIFTING, A TRICKY DEPARTMENT

Send gifts at least a day or two before the event, especially for birthdays and anniversaries. It allows the recipient to have the time to savour your gift because it won't get lost in the sea of gifts on the day of the party.

Wrap the gift keeping the recipient's taste in mind. Use colours, materials, styles that are the recipient's favourites. For example, if they are passionate about sustainability, don't send them a gift wrapped in bubble wrap and layers of plastic or other non-biodegradable wrapping. Try jute, fabric, reusable baskets, or even newspaper.

Choose the gift based on the recipient's favourites. Be mindful about deciding on the gift, especially food and beverages. Make sure you're aware of their food preferences and allergies — vegan, vegetarian, non-vegetarian, gluten-free, dairy-free, nut allergies, which cuisine they like and so on. For beverages, don't end



Think about the enormous effort hosts put in for any event, most importantly, the love and care they put into inviting people to be a part of their happiness



How and when you send invites and gifts are an excellent way of showing people how much you value and appreciate them and their time



Make it a point to meet the host or hostess so that they feel appreciated

up sending wine or whisky to a coffee or tea lover.

Write a personalised note. Even if it is just your signature, a short note, or a long personalised letter, sending a note in your own handwriting conveys both warmth and how much you value the person.

WHEN YOU RECEIVE AN INVITATION

There's no room for "maybe". Hosts put in a lot of effort in planning an event — whether it's a dinner for six or a party for 60 or 600. Respect that by replying with a clearly understandable "yes" or "no".

If the invitation is for cocktails and dinner, it is always better to let the host know if you will attend only cocktails or stay back for dinner. If you've already committed to be somewhere else, the host will be happy that you were frank and honest and saved the extra counts. Not replying in advance and skipping silently is

not appreciated.

Accept with actual enthusiasm. Share how much you're looking forward to the event and extend congratulations if it's a special occasion. Always add a compliment too about the design of the invite.

Some of my husband's favourite responses when someone calls to invite are:

"We are really excited!"

"We are going shopping for the party"

"You need not call me for this"

Decline with real regret. If you are unable to attend, say that with warmth too. Express how it is your loss that you are unable to attend, how much you will miss not being there.

Be discreet. If you are in a group outing with the host and other people, do not mention the invitation.

LET'S TALK ABOUT GIFTS

Send a prompt acknowledgement

immediately. This should be done the moment you receive a gift or are notified when it reaches your home. A simple "thank you" to acknowledge receipt is always appreciated.

Send a photo. When you open the gift, you may like to take a photo and send a short note thanking them once more while complimenting their choice. This time, make sure you mention a specific aspect of the gift that makes it special to you.

COMPASSIONATE COMMUNICATION

One point to note — you never know if someone is suffering from depression, social anxiety, or some personal grief or illness that you know nothing about. They may not reply at all or send something non-committal. If you get such a reply from a person who usually responds immediately and with enthusiasm, do take a moment to check in on them. Compassionate communication is of the utmost importance. It's very easy to judge, to jump to conclusions.

WHEN YOU'RE ATTENDING A LARGE EVENT

Discuss the event on the way, like who is the host, hostess, bride, groom, special occasion, invitees with whom you would like to meet etc. so that when you meet them you can talk about something specific.

Make it a point to meet the host or hostess so that they feel appreciated.

If the host is talking to someone, wait for your turn.

So, what did you think? Have you ever been at the receiving end of such funny and not-so-funny replies? Share with me on askminubudhia@caringminds.co.in. Wishing all of you a happy, safe, and hilarious Holi.

Minu Budhia is a psychotherapist, counsellor, founding father of Caring Minds, ICanFly, Cafe ICanFly, and a TEDx speaker

In Dharamshala for a brief holiday recently, I had a conversation at a local tea stall. It went something like this:

Me: *Bhaiya*, coffee hai?

Him: *Jee kafi hai*.

Me: *Kaun si? Kaali wali ya doodh wali?*

Him: *It espresso hai*. (He meant Nescafe *doodh wali*, which was made with a special espresso machine.)

I smiled and said: *De do bhaiya*.

This was a small-town term for cappuccino, which I didn't know still existed. It was so nostalgic. We grew up drinking espresso milk *kafi* made with these machines. Till my teens, I thought that espresso coffee meant cappuccino.

Needless to say, the coffee was out of the world with a biscuit dipped in it and I loved every sip. It brought back memories of my childhood in Tinsukia, Assam.

While I was thinking about what to write for my next column, soaking in the beautiful atmosphere and the pristine *vataavan*, my creative juices started flowing. I thought about how short getaways, long vacations and staycations are so essential to our mental health. That got me thinking about how travelling has impacted me, especially travelling in India. Today, in my column, what you'll find is a peek into my desi travel diaries, why I think seeing our own country is also important and, of course, how travel leads to better mental health.

MY TRAVEL DIARIES

Post-Covid, as a family, we've mostly been travelling in India — Dharamshala, pockets of Rajasthan, Hyderabad and Cochin were such wonderful places to be!

Rajasthan: When I was in Udaipur, one evening I realised how beautiful it all was. Sitting outdoors, watching traditional



India has numerous destinations waiting to be visited to rejuvenate jaded minds and weary bodies, says **Minu Budhia**



A view of Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh, at sunset

dance, eating local food and immersing ourselves in the culture of the place felt like coming home. All over it was the same 'namaste' culture. No one greeted with 'good morning' or 'good evening'. Udaipur has been declared the next 'Smart City'. There is a lot of development, but the whole atmosphere is soaked in regional culture.

I met two or three very upcoming designers who are working with organic materials and are so trendy and affordable too. I feel proud of these talented young desi designers.

In Ranthambore, it was great going on the safari. People used to crave the sight of a tiger. This holiday also made me feel for the privacy of the animals and the importance of letting them live in their own habitat. Rather than seeing them as captive beasts in zoos, we should visit them respectfully in nature. It is a privilege to see them in their natural surroundings, where they are not just entertainment for humans. Also, our natural wonders are so many and there is so much untouched, virgin nature to explore.

In Dharamshala, I felt like it was a home away from home. The place had such an accepting atmosphere. For half the day we stayed in the hotel and relaxed. We explored local eateries for lunch and dinner at the hotel that was infused with local flavours.

JONDO

I also made a new discovery here: The joy of not dressing up! I wore a tracksuit in the morning and evenings and during our explorations I repeated my outfits. I didn't bother much with make-up either. Less is more is so true.

Also, the chef would serve with a lot of love Himachali *thalis* for dinner that highlighted so many unique flavours but ultimately so very familiar because, after all, the roots are Indian. And we would go in our pyjamas for that homely dinner. And, of course, the

The Telegraph

t2 on Sunday

XXIX

The Telegraph 30 APRIL 2023 15

collection of authentic momos available everywhere was lip-smacking. One more popular local dish was the Buddha Bowl. Two cute cafes we explored were Morgan, which serves Italian food, and Khanabadosh, which has Indian and South Indian food.

Another great thing was making friends with fellow travellers at the hotel. A lot of the hill stations create several experiences/attractions such as lovely high-teas, happy hours, and brunches in the hotel itself and there are activity rooms and indoor sports such as table tennis too so that everyone can come to one place, gather around, talk, get to know each other and bond.

We even met another couple with a special needs child who were able to holiday peacefully in this tranquil place. The atmosphere was so cheerful with people introducing each other and mingling. During the high-tea held between 4pm and 5pm, masala tea and filter coffee were made right in front of us. A stall had local cookies and sandwiches and even our favourite *chivda* and *bhujia*. You can be yourself if you don't want to chat with others and this was the time the idea of this article came to me.

Especially when I travel to smaller, unknown pockets of my *desi*, I feel that our colonial hangover is finally disappearing. In Himachal, people take pride in their *desi* clothing, everyone says *namaste*, and people are happy to speak mostly in their own regional language and dialect. From the tea to the people — everything is so beautifully and traditionally Indian. While in Himachal, I also fell in love with the local handicraft — woollens, shawls, bags — so so pretty, so Indian!

ATITHI DEVA BHAVA

The warmth and welcoming nature of the people in India is unparalleled. Wherever we go we are welcomed with open arms. After all 'Atithi Deva Bhava' is a big pillar of our culture. If you go to a different state in India, you are treated like a guest of the state — the people involved in your hospitality work tirelessly to make you comfortable. Our culture is so rich, so attractive, and so varied that it deserves to be seen, felt. While our tourism infrastructure is



Psychotherapist Minu Budhia (right) with younger daughter Prachi

not as developed as that of the West, we are making headway. The good thing boosting tourism is that several domestic airlines now have direct flights to many places from Calcutta, where options were limited earlier. Today, Udaipur, Jodhpur, Chandigarh, Goa, Shillong, Coimbatore, Surat, Amritsar and so on are either one flight away or can be reached via another city. From Delhi, too, the airlines are opening up many places with direct flights that make travelling easier.

The first time we went to Goa, I didn't do much research and it was touristy, crowded and not as great as I expected it to be. I didn't enjoy it at all. Before we went the next time, my elder daughter guided me on which places to go and avoid. I also did extensive research on places to visit, routes, hotels, beaches, food, ambience, shopping, etc. The result was we had a wonderful time.

What I learned from this experience was that whether a place is big or small, research is a must to have a great experience that is tailored to your specific needs. Especially if you're going to a smaller, less-visited destination, speak to local guides, your hotel concierge, and even your fellow

guests to have the best holiday possible. In every city or town there are two types of areas. One should discover the right area, the right food, the right shopping.

CHILDHOOD HOLIDAYS

I spent my childhood travelling mostly to Darjeeling (numerous times), Dimapur, Shillong, Kaziranga (numerous times), Duliagan and Silchar. Those days we used to think that our parents have no other places to take us to for our holidays. *Bas school ki chutti ho gayi toh Kaziranga chalo*. Kaziranga and Darjeeling were our homes away from home. Everyone would recognise us there. But those are the memories I treasure. Those are the days that will never come back. There was a kind of joy in those holidays.

DOMESTIC VS INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL

There is a difference between a tourist and a traveller. Typically, the former runs around with an itinerary, visits popular spots,

THERE ARE ALSO SEVERAL WELLNESS RETREATS AND RESORTS WHICH CAN ADD LIFE TO YOUR YEARS AND YEARS TO YOUR LIFE. I THOROUGHLY ENJOYED MY DETOX HOLIDAYS AT ATMANTAN, PEMA AND ANANDA SPA!

multiple cities/countries, and tries to get the maximum ROI (return on investment) out of the huge amount spent on any international trip. And this leads to more fatigue than rest and relaxation. But when you're in India, you can easily focus on only a single city, not even a state, and soak in the local flavours without hopping around with a to-do list.

Personally love a mix and match of holiday types — long and short, close by and far away, relaxing and adventurous, wellness or indulgent. Holidays don't always have to mean well-known places and locales filled with tourist attractions. We can also visit metros, so-called tier-2 cities, small towns and villages. One is not always in the mood for a long trip so a short visit to a place like Hyderabad, Bangalore, Pune, Vizag, Surat, Amritsar, Nainital, Chandigarh, etc. will lift your spirits.

There are also several wellness retreats and resorts which can add life to your years and years to your life. I thoroughly enjoyed my detox holidays at Atmantan, Pema and Ananda Spa! Indian wellness retreats offer both Indian and continental healthy food options. Another advantage is that the yoga and Ayurveda practised here are authentic. They originated in our country and the real experience can only happen where it all started. And it is a misconception that these packages are only for luxury travellers.

In Indian hotels, the breakfast spread is usually quite lavish and comprises American, European, Continental, South Indian, North Indian, regional and healthy options that cater to all types of preferences from all parts of the world. I'm a big fan of handmade South Indian filter coffee — machine-made cappuccinos are not to my liking — and I'm proud to say this filter coffee is available in every part of India. Also, our *desi* masala chai, which is handmade too, is available everywhere! This makes

for an inclusive, accommodating and comfortable travelling experience in terms of food.

Another way I plan my holidays is based on the people and number — whether it's a couple's holiday, one with immediate family, one with extended family, or an interesting one with friends. Not only is staying in India for the holiday much easier to arrange and way more economical, it also helps to cater to a variety of food needs across all generations.

For family holidays, if we go abroad, we're so busy seeing the sights that the whole point of family time is defeated. Instead, going to a smaller, quieter place in India allows us to be together and spend quality time with each other and do activities together and everything can be pre-planned and enjoyed on any type of budget.

This brings me to destination weddings. The number of foreigners coming to India, especially Rajasthan, for their weddings (and milestone birthdays) also reminds us of our vibrant culture. The most humorous part of our *videshi* destination weddings is that the only thing that remains foreign is the place, since every other aspect is ferried from India — the cook, the *halwai* crew, the clothes, the make-up artist, the stylist, the gifts, the singers, the choreographer, the musician, the *chaitwala*, the *paanwala*, the *mehendiwalli*, and *dholi* to name a few. The destination is *videshi* to our satisfaction, but everything else is *desi*. After all, *dil toh hai Hindustani*!

I am just too in love with travelling in India.

The *namaste* culture!
The '*espresso kafi*' culture!
The *desi* culture, our own very culture!
Love you India!
ATHITHI DEVA BHAVA!

Minu Budhia is a psychotherapist, counsellor, founding father of Caring Minds, iCanFly, Cale iCanFly, and a TEDx speaker