

Can Social Prescribing Restore the Lost Sense of Human Connection and Foster Mental Well Being in Today's Youth?: A Literature Review

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Abstract: *Social prescribing is simply put, the linking of patients from various health care institutions with sources of support in the community for their physical and mental well being. Sometimes people come in with problems relating to loneliness, work stress, relationship issues or feelings of despair. Oftentimes, medicines can only do so much in countering these problems. This is where social prescribing comes in. As noted by Kirsty et al, social prescribing appears to help people by providing professional support to address social problems and then helps them engage in social activities with the community thereby providing a sense of belonging and finally helps the individual realize his personal and social assets thereby giving the person a more optimistic outlook towards life and significantly improving their mental well being.*

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1. Introduction

Human beings are social animals. This is a well known fact. Even back when we were living in caves and hunting down animals for food and survival, we always functioned as a group. This greatly increased the likelihood of us living long enough to reproduce and so from an evolutionary perspective, this made a lot of sense.

Hence, those who were excluded from the community or those who didn't like being a part of a group, often times simply didn't make it.

But today, it is a completely different story, we live in comfortable and sophisticated houses with little to no risk of dying just because we don't have a social life.

Then why is it that even today, when we lose our sense of belonging to a social group or are abandoned by our closest of kin, we are left feeling naked and exposed? This is because our brains haven't evolved to this new reality. Our brains still believe that if our social bonds are cut, there is imminent danger and hence urges us to amend our relationships or make new social connections ASAP. If not, we are left with a cynical outlook towards life.

But that is only the immediate consequence of feeling socially isolated, as people who have been lonely for a long time perceive the world quite differently as they tend to be mistrustful of others and are on high alert.

It is true that people who are lonely are way more likely to develop mental health issues such as feeling depressed, anxious and suicidal but it doesn't stop there. There are a number of implications on physical health of such individuals such as:

- Individuals who are socially isolated for a prolonged period of time are way more likely to die a premature death, a risk that may rival those of smoking, sedentary lifestyle and obesity
- Chronic loneliness is associated with about a 50% percent increased risk of dementia.

- People who don't have strong social bonds are also 29% more likely to die from heart disease and about 32% more likely to die from stroke.
- Loneliness among heart failure patients was associated with a nearly 4 times increased risk of death.

There is also the question of which groups often experience such distress. Most commonly – Immigrants, LGBT community and victims of childhood mental trauma are way more likely to feel socially isolated

There also seems to be a correlation between crime, violence and social isolation.

According to Stickley et al, adolescents who feel isolated are way more likely to engage in risky behaviour and also in usage of illicit drugs and hence drug addictions.

How does social prescribing work in this situation?

Social prescribing is simply put, the linking of patients from various health care institutions with sources of support in the community for their physical and mental well being. Sometimes people come in with problems relating to loneliness, work stress, relationship issues or feelings of despair. Oftentimes, medicines can only do so much in countering these problems. This is where social prescribing comes in.

As noted by Kirsty et al, social prescribing appears to help people by providing professional support to address social problems and then helps them engage in social activities with the community thereby providing a sense of belonging and finally helps the individual realize his personal and social assets thereby giving the person a more optimistic outlook towards life and significantly improving their mental well being.

In a study done by Kellezi et al, health care providers have long understood the implications of lack of social bonds on physical health and the resultant increased patient load in primary care. They viewed social prescribing as an effective tool in tackling this problem. The patients too have felt that

they have made valuable relationships along the social prescribing pathway from the link workers to other members in the community. Group memberships have reduced the usage of primary care services as they have increased a sense of social belonging and decreased the sense of loneliness in the participants.

However as noted by Kilgariff - Foster et al, though there seems to be qualitative evidence, there does not seem to be enough quantitative evidence and more research needs to be done.

According to Bertotti et al, social prescribing can especially help:

- People who are socially isolated
- Patients suffering from mental health issues
- Those with chronic health problems
- People with complex social needs

Bertotti et al also notes that there are three main components to social prescribing:

- First the patient is referred from the primary health care provider to the social prescribing coordinator or link worker.
- The link worker consults the patient and better understands what their problem is and what kind of social prescription would best work for them and elaborates on the various community services available in the locality.
- Finally, the patient interacts with the appropriate social community thereby securing their social needs and improving their overall wellbeing.

So to summarize, social prescribing connects people to practical and emotional community support, through link workers, who are based in GP practices and take referrals from all local agencies. Link workers have the privilege to build trusting relationships, know the individual on a more personal basis, formulate a shared plan and introduce people to community support.

As noted by Helen et al, social prescribing can take various forms.

Arts on prescription programmes offer creative and participatory workshops (e. g. dance, drama, music, painting, and poetry)

Education on Prescription: In this type of social prescription, people are encouraged to gather to learn basic skills and education which would aid them both mentally and financially.

Ecotherapy: Helps individuals in becoming physically and mentally revitalized through contact with nature (e. g. walking in green spaces, going trekking).

Exercise on Prescription: Involves referring patients to exercise programmes and sports. This has a three fold effect in improving physical and mental health whilst also encouraging social bonding through team work in case of sports.

Apart from the few mentioned above, social prescribing can take countless forms and dimensions. As a testament to that, there has been a couple of initiatives in our institution – Schizophrenia Research Foundation.

The “Namma Area” project promotes a sense of community and security for the youth in and around Chennai without the fear of being discriminated against thereby promoting psychosocial well being.

There is also another initiative namely “PIECES” which aims to help people suffering from schizophrenia know that they are not alone in their struggle by being able to relate to others and their medical and social needs are taken care of in this community.

Another initiative pertinent to adolescent mental health is the Resource centre for Youth Mental health by SCARF (rYMs) based in Chennai, India.

It has been recognized by our institution that the transitional years from 15 - 25 years of age can be a very distressing time for some adolescents and it is often during this time that these people are exposed to addictive substances from their peers resulting in addictions. Also about three fourth of mental illness have the onset around this time.

Most people of this age have very little awareness about mental health in India and as the parents and the society in large is mostly blind to it, these people often do not reach out for help. This leaves many youngsters frustrated as they feel like they are the only ones with such malfunctioning minds leading them to feel that they cannot open up to anyone.

Another key issue is that of sexual orientation and gender identity which also becomes more pronounced during these years, thus those who do not fit into society’s conventions are left feeling alien in their own homes. .

This leads to a tremendous amount of mental fatigue and feelings of isolation resulting in many cases of suicide. Thus we have realized that we need to bring in an intervention to the society to help adolescents of this age group express themselves without feeling like they will be outcast or judged for who they are. This is why we have introduced the concept of safe spaces which is a inclusive social community where these adolescents are able to feel a sense of belonging and are taught that it is okay to be different.

The concept of safe spaces can be considered as a form of social prescribing for the youth. This is not a new concept as it is already being practiced all over the world. In fact the UN has recognized the role of safe spaces in youth development during the International Youth Day 2018. These spaces can be both online or physical spaces where youth are encouraged to engage in activities they are passionate about whilst maintaining their safety and dignity.

These are the primary characteristics of these safe spaces:

- Youth driven: Youngsters help organize and run these programmes resulting in increased involvement and empowerment of peers.

- Youth focused: These spaces are there to solve the many confusing topics that adolescents have such as careers, drug abuse, sexuality etc
- Democratic and safe: Those participating in these programs are able to voice their opinion without the fear of discrimination or persecution from the community and hence are able to express what they feel.
- Accessible and Co - localized: These spaces must be in the neighbourhood of the children for easy accessibility and also must provide additional services such as education and care of physical and mental health so that multiple services can be delivered to these adolescents under one roof.

SCARF (Schizophrenia Research Foundation) has made significant contributions to the field of providing care for those with mental health issues for nearly 35 years. One of the initiatives of SCARF was to assist in early identification and management of mental health issues and thus, the Youth Mental Health program was initiated.

So far rYMs has conducted various activities ranging from Listener's Circle, Movie Screenings, Self - defence, Movement therapy, Musical jam, Stand - up comedy, Communication workshops, Art workshops, Game night to interactive sessions on Interpersonal relationships, Suicide and Nutrition. At the end of each session, there is a discussion about the mental health aspects so that young people are better able to relate to it and incorporate it in their lifestyle

Other examples of safe spaces around the world include:

- 1) Its OK to talk – India
- 2) 5th space – India
- 3) The Junction – UK
- 4) Headspace – Australia
- 5) Jigsaw – Ireland
- 6) Youth one stop shop – New Zealand
- 7) Foundry – Canada
- 8) ACCESS open minds – Canada
- 9) Community Health Assessment Team (CHAT) – Singapore

2. Conclusion

It is quite clear from our review that social prescribing most certainly has a beneficial outcome in helping increase social bonding and improving the overall well being of its participants. This can be used as a tool to help many patients who feel a sense of isolation especially those infragile age groups such as children, adolescents and elderly. Implementing more programmes in India could definitely help address the massive mental health crisis and the extreme shortage of mental health professionals in this country. But as it is hard to fund and sustain such programmes, the support of local governments in implementing such community gathering events will make it more feasible and sustainable for a larger population.

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