

Family Therapy: A Boon To Modern Stressed Women

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Women are integral to all aspects of society. However, the multiple roles that they fulfill in society render them at greater risk of experiencing mental problems than others in the community. In recent years, Family Therapy has been identified and used as an important tool for the management of most of the mental health problems. A broken family, poverty, natural calamities affecting the family structure, death of the dear ones, entry of new member in the family, attitude towards sex is considered to be some of the significant causes which challenge the integrity of the family and affect the mental health of the individual family members. Women suffer twice as often as men by adverse mental health. For the past few years family therapy has been fast replacing the pharmacological, psychotherapeutic approaches to ensure enduring mental health rehabilitation outcomes. In this article we try to relate the influence of family therapy on mental health with special reference to women.

Key Words: family therapy, mental health, women

Women being the most important part of the society bear maximum burden of responsibilities. Women playing multiple roles as wives, mothers and caregivers of others make them more vulnerable to be affected by mental disorders compared to men. The most common mental disorders amongst women are anxiety related disorders, depression, the effects of domestic violence, sexual violence, and escalating rates of substance use. Prevalence rates of depression and anxiety disorders as well as psychological distress are higher for women than men. Mental illness is associated with a significant burden of morbidity and disability. Women suffer twice as often as men by most forms of depression and anxiety disorders, and nine times as often by eating disorders.⁷ Depression affects the mental health most adversely. It is most commonly seen in the age group ranging 25-44 years.⁷ Data from the World Bank study revealed that depressive disorders accounted for close to 30% amongst women in developing countries while only 12.6% of men were affected by depressive disorders.¹⁶ Approximately 12 million women in the United States experience clinical depression each year and one in every eight women can be expected to develop clinical depression during their lifetime⁸. There are many factors that may contribute to adverse mental health in the form of depression such as developmental, reproductive, hormonal, genetic and other biological differences e.g. premenstrual syndrome, childbirth, infertility and menopause. Social factors may also lead to higher rates of

clinical depression including stress from work, family responsibilities, the roles and expectations of women and increased rates of sexual abuse and poverty.⁹ Twenty to forty percent of women may experience premenstrual syndrome and an estimated 3 to 5 percent have symptoms severe enough to be classified as Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD).¹⁰ The marital status also seems to contribute mental health in women. Unhappily married women have the highest rates of depression.⁷ Approximately 10%-15% of women get postpartum depression, within the first year after the birth of a child.^{2,13} Many Researches show a strong relationship between eating disorders and depression in women.¹⁵ Thus all the factors like socio-cultural, economic, legal, infrastructural and environmental factors affect women's mental health adversely.

Concept of Mental Health

A sound mind in sound body has been recognized as a social ideal by the Indian Sages and Seers. According to them, mental health is the balanced development of the individual's personality and emotional attitudes which enable him to live harmoniously with his/her fellow men/women. As per WHO definition mental health is defined as "*a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community*".¹⁷ In order to maintain

a good mental health it is imperative that one should be physically, psychologically, socially and spiritually healthy because all the four are too closely knitted that can not be separated from one another. Thus, the resolution of mental health problem and persistence of good mental health thereafter requires a therapeutic procedure involving the psycho-physio-socio and spiritual milieu of the person. Especially for the women who are much more dependent on the family, the Family Therapy is an important procedure because it involves a number of therapeutic approaches which treat a family as a whole rather than singling out specific individuals for independent treatment. The system-centered approach to the family is most fully developed in the work of Bell (1961)³, Ackerman (1966)¹ Satir (1967)¹² and Haley (1971)⁴ who have independently developed therapeutic methods for working with whole families.

Goals and Process of Family Therapy

Family therapy, also referred to as couple and family therapy and family systems therapy, and earlier generally referred to as marriage therapy. It is a relatively recent development in psychotherapy that involves all the members of a nuclear or extended family. It helps families or individuals within a family understand and improve the way family members interact with each other and resolve conflicts. The goal of the family therapy is to discover how the present problem is related to the network of relations in the family and consequently, in what way and how family members might participate. Family therapy Helps in identifying conflicts and anxieties among the family members and helps the family to develop strategies to resolve them, strengthens all family members so they can work on their problems together and teaches ways to handle conflicts and changes within the family differently. In general, anyone who wants to improve troubled relationships can be benefited from family therapy. Family therapy is very helpful in solving the issues like -Marital problems, divorce, eating disorders, such as anorexia or bulimia, substance abuse, depression or bipolar disorder, chronic health problems like cancer, Grief, loss and trauma, work stress, parenting skills, emotional abuse or violence and financial problems.

Indications for Family Therapy

Family therapy is usually undertaken where the identified patient is so enmeshed in pathology producing family processes that he cannot sensibly be treated alone. Family therapy has been used effectively where families, and or individuals in those families experience or suffer serious psychological disorders (e.g. schizophrenia, addictions and eating disorders); interactional and transitional crises in a family's life

cycle (e.g. divorce); as a support of other psychotherapies and medication.

Korchin (1999)⁵ described the following three conditions where family therapy can be applied:

- 1) Family crisis which affects all the members, such as a move to new city, death of a family member, unemployment, and so on.
- 2) Marital or sexual disharmony among women , men both.
- 3) Family conflicts along value or generational lines, where adults may be in controversy with the adolescents over their life styles, goals or social values.

Impact of Family Therapy

Family therapy is based on the belief that the family is a unique social system with its own structure and patterns of communication. It may be conducted by a pair or team of family therapists who have come from a wide variety of educational backgrounds including psychology, psychiatry, social work, nursing, pastoral counseling and education. In many cases the marriage and family therapy team consists of a man and a woman in order to treat gender-related issues or serve as role models for family members. Family therapy plays an important role in the prevention and response to issues affecting family life in small geographic areas as well as globally. Research indicates that family therapy is more effective than individual treatment for many mental health problems such as schizophrenia, alcoholism and drug abuse, children's conduct disorders, adolescent drug abuse, anorexia in young adult women, childhood autism, chronic physical illness in adults and children, and marital distress and conflicts.⁶ Pandey (2004) et al.¹¹ in their study had shown the mental status of the Indian women (17-43 years) who were having the problems of generalized anxiety, obsessive-compulsive neurosis, late pubescence, death anxiety and psycho-somatic infertility. They were directly benefited by family therapy offered for a period of three months. Their mental health status was assessed before and after the intervention. A follow - up after six months had shown that their improved mental health status was sustained.

Conclusions

The mental health of people mainly depends on their family relationships. Now a days family therapy approach is the most important to ensure the maintenance of good mental health, not only among women but all the members of the family. It is important to note here that family therapy shouldn't be substituted for other necessary treatments. For instance, family therapy can help family members cope up with severe mental disorders but the person should continue taking the medications¹⁴. The hospitalization of mentally ill and the concept of halfway homes have been gradually abandoned with an emphasis on family therapy nowadays than ever before.

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