

Vital Non-Medical Practices for Better Mental Health



Dr. Suresh Kumar

On the 2nd of October, a session was organized by the Eklavya Foundation for Mental Health. The session began with a warm welcome from Mrs. Manjiri Deshmukh, who introduced Dr. M. Suresh Kumar as the guest speaker. She provided a brief overview of the Eklavya Foundation, highlighting its key objectives and elaborating on various initiatives by the foundation. Mrs. Deshmukh concluded by inviting Mr. Rohan Gupta to formally introduce Dr. Kumar.

Mr. Rohan Gupta, a participant and occasional facilitator of Eklavya Foundation's self-help groups, spoke with great respect about Dr. Kumar, describing him

as a mentor and friend. He highlighted Dr. Kumar's impressive background as a retired professor at the Psychiatry Institute of Mental Health and his current role as the head of research and development at City's Rise, a global mental health platform. With this introduction, Mr. Gupta handed over the session to Dr. Kumar.


Dr. Kumar began by expressing his gratitude for the invitation and mentioned that although the session's topics were outside his typical area of expertise, he felt it was important to discuss the role of non-medical practices in the management of mental health. As a psychiatrist with decades of experience, he recognized the need to address these essential practices that complement traditional medical treatments. He outlined the main topics of the session, which aimed to emphasize how non-medical practices could improve mental health and the well-being of both individuals with lived experiences and their caregivers.

Dr. Kumar then addressed the question of why non-medical practices are crucial for people living with mental illness and their caregivers. Although medical treatment remains the cornerstone of managing psychiatric disorders, non-medical practices are indispensable for achieving holistic well-being. Over time, the objective of psychiatric care has shifted from merely reducing symptoms to fostering overall well-being. Non-medical practices, such as managing stress and enhancing emotional health, are essential for improving the quality of life of those affected by mental illness. He pointed out that such practices help not only to manage the severity and frequency of symptoms but also to enhance emotional, social, and physical health, which collectively contribute to a better quality of life.

Dr. Kumar emphasized that stress is an inevitable part of life, and managing it effectively is key to mental well-being. He explained the concept of the

inverted U-shaped relationship between stress and performance. Low levels of stress lead to under performance, moderate stress enhances performance, and high stress results in breakdowns and reduced performance. While it is impossible to live a completely stress-free life, it is possible to manage stress in a way that prevents it from becoming distressed. Physical activity is one of the most effective ways to manage stress. Regular exercise, including activities such as walking, yoga, and swimming, is not only beneficial for physical health but also for brain health. Dr. Kumar recommended engaging in at least 150 minutes of physical activity per week, which translates to 30 minutes of exercise five days a week, to improve mood, reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, and enhance mental functioning.

The next key topic Dr. Kumar discussed was the importance of establishing a routine. Creating a daily structure helps individuals feel more in control and less




overwhelmed by the demands of everyday life. Establishing a stable routine reduces anxiety and contributes to a sense of order and balance. In particular, he highlighted the importance of sleep hygiene, emphasizing that a regular sleep schedule, aligned with the body's natural circadian rhythm, is vital for emotional and physical health. Dr. Kumar provided practical tips for maintaining good sleep hygiene, such as limiting caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol intake after 6 PM, avoiding screen time before bed, and maintaining a consistent sleep-wake cycle. He also mentioned the importance of light bedtime snacks and creating a comfortable sleep environment to ensure restorative sleep.

Dr. Kumar then introduced mindfulness techniques, explaining that they help individuals focus on the present moment, reducing stress and anxiety. He encouraged both caregivers and patients to engage in mindfulness practices such as deep breathing exercises, progressive muscle

relaxation, and guided imagery. These relaxation techniques can help calm the mind, promote emotional regulation, and bring individuals into a state of mental clarity and focus.

Another essential area addressed by Dr. Kumar was the role of creative and recreational activities in mental health. He explained that engaging in hobbies, such as art, music, or writing, can be incredibly therapeutic. These activities provide an outlet for emotional expression and allow individuals to process their feelings in a non-verbal way. Creative pursuits also offer a sense of accomplishment and can serve as a distraction from negative thoughts. Additionally, participating in activities that bring joy or fulfillment can significantly improve mental health and well-being.

Dr. Kumar also touched upon the importance of diet and nutrition in maintaining mental health. He explained that a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins plays a




role in supporting brain health and regulating mood. Likewise, excessive consumption of processed foods, sugar, and caffeine can destabilize mood and energy levels. Staying hydrated is equally important for maintaining mental clarity and focus. Spending time in nature is another non-medical practice that Dr. Kumar recommended. Research has shown that being outdoors, whether through gardening, walking in a park, or simply enjoying nature, can reduce stress, improve mood, and enhance overall well-being. Regular connection with nature is increasingly recognized as an important factor in mental health care.

In addition to these practices, Dr. Kumar highlighted the importance of building resilience. Resilience is defined as the ability to bounce back from setbacks and adversity. By developing coping strategies, focusing on personal strengths, and maintaining hope for the future, individuals can build resilience, which will help them tackle future challenges more

effectively. Encouraging positive thinking, gratitude, and hope are all integral to fostering resilience. Dr. Kumar then explained the role of spiritual practices in maintaining mental health. For those who find comfort in spirituality, engaging in prayer, meditation, or attending religious services can provide emotional support and a sense of purpose. However, he acknowledged that for non-spiritual individuals, focusing on principles of “good orderly direction” can also provide structure and guidance for mental well-being.

The session also emphasized the importance of social connectedness. Humans are inherently social beings, and maintaining healthy relationships is essential for emotional support. Building and maintaining positive relationships with family, friends, and community members can reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness, which are common challenges for individuals with mental illness and their caregivers. Dr. Kumar concluded the first section of the webinar



by discussing the critical role of education, more specifically psycho-education, in managing mental illness. He explained that persons with lived experiences of mental illness benefit from understanding their conditions, learning about effective management strategies, and setting realistic expectations. Similarly, caregivers can provide better support when they are educated about the nature of mental health conditions. Psychoeducation empowers both patients and caregivers by improving their knowledge and equipping them with the tools to manage the illness more effectively.

In the second section, Dr. Kumar discussed various forms of psychological support, such as talk therapy and cognitive-behavioural therapy for psychosis (CBTp). He explained that therapies like CBTp help individuals challenge unhelpful thoughts and develop coping strategies to manage symptoms, such as hallucinations and delusions. Dr. Kumar also recommended family therapy,

which can improve communication, reduce stress, and support recovery in a healthy way. He mentioned the importance of social skills training, which helps individuals improve their ability to communicate and build relationships, thus reducing social isolation.

Peer support groups were also discussed as a valuable resource. Dr. Kumar praised the Eklavya Foundation's peer support initiatives, noting that they help reduce stigma and provide a space for individuals to connect, share experiences, and support each other. He also mentioned that programs focused on employment, education, and housing support could significantly improve the independence and quality of life for individuals with mental illness.

Dr. Kumar stressed the importance of self-care for caregivers. He encouraged caregivers to prioritize their own well-being to avoid burnout, mentioning the need for regular

breaks, emotional support, and respite care. Additionally, he discussed the significance of setting boundaries, managing expectations, and advocating for individuals with mental illness to ensure they receive the best care and support.

The final section was a Q&A session. Dr. Kumar answered questions posted in the chat box by the webinar attendees. His personalized advice and explanations to their particular problems and doubts were insightful for everyone in attendance. Mr. Ganesh Rajan then concluded the webinar by giving a vote of thanks.

In conclusion, non-medical practices offer a holistic approach to mental health by addressing the emotional, social, and psychological needs of individuals. These practices complement medical treatments, promoting essential coping skills,

emotional resilience, and self-awareness. By empowering individuals to manage their conditions beyond medication, non-medical approaches play a crucial role in mental health care. They not only reduce stigma but also foster social connections, creating a sense of community and support. Ultimately, integrating these practices enhances overall well-being, making mental health care more comprehensive, person-centred, and effective.

**- Report by Sannika Tamhane
and Vaishnavi Patil
Students of MIT-WPU, Pune
Interns at Eklavya Foundation**

**For further information, please
contact Eklavya Foundation for
Mental Health at
eklavyafoundationmh@gmail.com
Our website:
<https://www.eklavyamh.org/>**