

How this economics professor dealt with schizophrenia and built a support network

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WHAT FIRST appeared as a noticeable drop in his academic performance at college slowly turned into sleepless nights and a growing suspicion of the outside world. A second-year BSc student, he gradually pulled away from the college environment and soon the typical signs of schizophrenia, a severe mental health condition that affects how people think, feel and behave began to appear, including delusions that made everyday life increasingly difficult. A break from studies for the next five to six years were also marked by hospitalisation and struggle.

Still, Prof Anil Vartak found the determination to fight for a better life. He completed his PhD in the economic aspects of mental health, retired as head of the department of economics at Pune's SP College and, over the years, has been a strong pillar of the Schizophrenia Awareness Association. Moving on, he has set up the Eklavya Foundation for Mental Health, reaching out to patients and caregivers, so much so that the Maharashtra government has signed an MoU with the voluntary organisation on helping each district set up self-help groups.

Mental Health Awareness Month is observed every May in the country to reduce social stigma, promote open conversations and offer support for



Maharashtra Health Minister Prakash Abitkar with Prof Anil Vartak after signing MoU. EXPRESS

those facing mental health challenges. For 68-year-old Prof Vartak, awareness about mental health conditions is extremely important and needs to be followed up with action. "I was fortunate to have the support of my parents and close friends. But I did lose valuable years. I was even hospitalised. But, eventually I completed my post-graduate and doctoral studies from Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics (GIPE) and went to head the department of economics at SP College," Prof Vartak said.

He documented his own journey, laid down some key perspectives in a booklet "Tried

and tested methods for regaining mental health', where he said, "My own mental illness made me understand that nothing is 'bad' in this world. The path is fraught with difficulties, but problems can be overcome if we adopt logical ways and means of dealing with them," Prof Vartak added.

For Prof Vartak, it was about how to support people facing mental health struggles, create hope in moments of isolation and while recovery is not instant, the professor points out that during his personal journey he learned about the 'self-help' method developed by Dr Abraham Low in the mid-20th Century. It was in

2001, while in the US, he was able to connect with Recovery International (known as Recovery Inc), a prominent mental self-help organisation, and visit several groups. "We found the Recovery method adaptable to our Indian urban middle class," Prof Vartak writes in his booklet.

As president of Eklavya Foundation for Mental Health, Prof Vartak has been creating awareness about mental health disorders, offering guidance to patients and their families through lectures, workshops and support groups. "After all don't trees shed their leaves with one season and regain their splendour with the next. So instead of feeling depressed about what one lacks, the best thing is to plan on regaining those lost skills," Prof Vartak said.

According to a national survey conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), about 10-14% of adults in India suffer from mental health disorders. Since Maharashtra's population exceeds 12 crore, it is estimated that around 1.2 to 1.8 crore people in the state are living with mental health disorders.

Of these, approximately 2-3% suffer from severe mental illnesses. Although the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017 provides a legal framework for mental health services, at the community level the responsibility of caring for persons with mental illness largely falls upon families.