

Impact of Mahatma Gandhi's concepts on mental health: Reflections

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ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi can be looked upon as one of the greatest visionaries born. His life tells us about the varied emotions he went through as a boy and young adult during difficult times, and the experiments he did to cope up with these problems. It was his perseverance and dedication to an unrelenting pursuit of his goal that finally led to his transformation. His concepts like nonviolence, satyagraha, brahmcharya and the concepts related to 'Truth' and 'God' can give psychological strength and mental resilience to any individual trying to cope up with the demands of life.

Key words: Mahatma Gandhi, satyagraha, nonviolence, brahmcharya

"Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will."^[1]

–Mahatma Gandhi

INTRODUCTION

The resilience of Gandhiji's mind and his unshakeable faith in his beliefs has made him one of the greatest individuals ever, to have walked in flesh and blood on this earth. His belief in spirituality, better social integration, endless love for other living beings, non-violence, truth and moral values, all can have a significant positive impact on mental health of individuals. He also had a lighter side about which he once said: "If I had no sense of humor, I should long ago have committed suicide."^[2]

THE ESSENCE OF MAHATMA GANDHI

As a boy Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was very shy, had no unusual talents and was less than average in studies at school; self-conscious, serious, fearful of thieves, ghosts, serpents and darkness.^[3]

George Bernard Shaw has said "Life isn't about finding

yourself. Life is about creating yourself". Gandhi, as a young man, was very lonely at the ship during his first journey to England; his experiments in England to become an English gentleman only created more chaos in his life. To change his life, he had to transform his thinking, which finally led to a much simpler and happier life for him. With time, he felt that one should be true to oneself instead of trying to become an another person or trying to make others happy.^[2] It is very often said that "What others think of you, is none of your business;" his transformation in his thinking finally made him "Mahatma" Gandhi as we know him today. The change in him was continuous, throughout his life, learning from his experiences and experiments. These concepts and way of thinking have a very important place in cognitive behavior therapy and can be applied to our everyday lives, to regain mental peace.

John Haynes Holmes, in his book Re-thinking Religion writes "He is modest, gentle, unfailingly kind. His sense of fun is irresistible, his simplicity of manner captivating. Quiet, almost soft in his ways. and an iron courage. The spirit, as manifest in truth and love, possesses his utterly. 'My creed' says Gandhi 'is service of God and therefore, of humanity.and service means pure love.'"

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How to cite this article: Tandon A, Singh VK. Impact of Mahatma Gandhi's concepts on mental health: Reflections. Indian J Psychiatry 2013;55:231-4.

Access this article online

Website:
www.indianjpsychiatry.org

DOI:
10.4103/0019-5545.105540

Quick Response Code



Being patient in most provoking situations, whether it be the huge number of people he met daily, or the alien government he had to deal with; in him we can see many facets of anger management techniques. He was so deeply aware of the fact that “the mills of God grind slowly.” Gandhi worked in those mills.^[4] Three of his outstanding qualities were his simplicity, his firm belief in his fundamentals and an unassuming fearlessness.^[5] His words: “I am painfully conscious of my imperfections and therein lies all the strength I possess, because it is a rare thing for a man to know his own limitations”, gives a reflection of the present day cognitive behavior therapy, which is helpful in so many psychological problems resulting from unrealistic expectations. Gandhiji had a troubled married life for many years initially, when he tried to impose his ideals on his wife; the friction between the two only decreased when he began to win over her by his own example: in order to transform others you have to transform yourself.^[2,6,7] Gandhiji later admitted that it was his wife who taught him how to love, by her constant support and bearing him during his mistakes and anger outbursts. Later, each of them became the other’s teacher with Kasturba inculcating patience in Gandhiji and imbibing his enthusiasm in return.^[8]

Gandhiji, in his quest to perfect his ideals, mastered the technique of anger management. Any individual with a demanding position in society needs to master these techniques. He has said: “I have learnt through bitter experience the one supreme lesson to conserve my anger, and as heat conserved is transmuted into energy, even so, our anger controlled can be transmuted into power, which can move the world.”^[9]

MAHATMA GANDHI: A POLITICIAN OR SAINT

“To see the universal and all pervading Spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself... my devotion to Truth has drawn me into the field of politics... and I can say... in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means”

–M.K. Gandhi

Gandhiji’s passage from a humanitarian and social servant to a politician was rather involuntary. When questioned whether his work was most significant in the social, political or religious sphere, he replied “My motive has been purely religious... I could not be leading a religious life unless I identified myself with the whole of mankind: And this I could not do unless I took part in politics... You cannot divide social, political and purely religious work into watertight compartments...” His love for the people made him work for them and he knew how to mix leadership with humility. Gandhi was an institution in himself with qualities of a politician, a reformer, a philosopher and a moralist.^[10]

MAHATMA GANDHI AS A SOCIALIST

Gandhiji worked on various aspects like decreasing unemployment, reducing friction between individuals and social groups, which has a positive impact on mental health at the community as well as on the individual level. By rekindling the hand-spinning and hand-weaving of textiles, he instilled self-confidence and self-respect among the people; financial security gave them much needed psychological support. Handicraft is much useful during occupational therapy of patients suffering from mental illness.^[11] Social disintegration and unemployment increases the rate of suicide multiple times. Gandhiji vision is far from being an opponent of modern science but by redefining development, it tries to promote mankind’s holistic progress.^[12]

SPIRITUALITY AND MAHATMA GANDHI

Gandhi considered God as “an indefinable mysterious Power that pervades everything. which makes itself felt and yet defies all proof...”^[13] “...I may live without air and water but not without him... blast my beliefs in God and I am dead.”^[14] To him God is truth, love, ethics and morality; he is the source of Light and Life. He simply is to those who have faith. He is in us and yet above and beyond us... Gandhiji has repeatedly insisted that “There is no Religion higher than Truth.” There should be truth in thought, speech and action.^[15] *Mantras* had no meaning to him, unless they are adaptable to daily activities of human life.^[16] One should break out of the ego-cage of I and mine, to be united with the Lord of Love.

We very well know spirituality and religion can play a very significant role in health and wellness. Therefore the gate keepers of mental health advocate for the “inclusion of spirituality as a potential resource in mental health recovery and wellness.”

NON-VIOLENCE AND SATYAGRAHA

“I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary; the evil it does is permanent”

–Gandhiji

“Non-violence is the law of our species... the dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law –to the strength of the spirit...;” Non-violence in its dynamic state means conscious suffering, but not meek submission to the evil doer; it means putting one’s strength of the soul against the wrong. Satyagraha implies the force which is born of truth and love or non-violence...^[17] As a moral weapon it raises political warfare to a higher plane. During the struggle against independence “Satyagraha” took many forms: Marches, hartals, fasts, boycotts, civil disobedience.

These principles of Satyagraha can be applied to domestic as well as community problems; the purpose being to resolve the conflict by mutual understanding and cooperation. Many of these concepts form part of problem-solving techniques; non-violence should be part of all interpersonal relationships. If this is strictly followed so many incidences of domestic violence will stop, leading to a healthier home atmosphere for all family members, especially children.

Gandhiji viewed Satyagraha as an attitude of non-violent love, with no self-interest also referred to as “self-Satyagraha,” which forms a bond with humanity.^[17] Patience, sympathy and endurance are the fundamentals of “self-Satyagraha,” just as they are for “political Satyagraha.” “Domestic Satyagraha” demands the need to forgive, forbear, support the other person always and when necessity arises, resist lovingly. Here the highest achievement is reached when a couple in a relationship considers the welfare of the other more important than self. In “family Satyagraha” the welfare of the children would take precedence over everything else. At work most conflicts arise because of self-interest; and a finer look would reveal two unbending egos; similar to the saying “Everyone thinks his watch has the right time.” If the concepts of Satyagraha are applied at work, in the true sense, with minimal self-interest, a common viewpoint can be reached and the work can proceed in a healthy and cooperative environment.^[17] He has said:

“There is no time-limit for a satyagrahi nor is there a limit to his capacity for suffering. Hence there is no such thing as defeat in Satyagraha”^[10]

INTERNET AND THE GANDHIAN PHILOSOPHY

Internet has the potential to promote new collectivities and Gandhian values like cooperation, mutual trust and caring, sharing of resources and collective growth. In Program or be Programmed: Ten Commands for a Digital Age, media theorist Douglas Rushkoff writes: “We are creating a blueprint together—a design for our collective future. The possibilities for social, economic, practical, artistic and even spiritual progress are tremendous. Just as words gave people the ability to pass on knowledge for what we call civilization, networked activity could soon offer us access to shared thinking— an extension of consciousness still inconceivable to most of us today.”^[18]

THE BRAHMACHARYA CONCEPT AND GANDHIJI

“When the disorderly sexual life spreads among a large part of the members of a society, then mental diseases, emotional storms and crises, and paralysis of will begin to mount...”

—Pitirim Alexandrovitch Sorokin in *Sane Sex Order*

Brahmacharya is very often wrongly attributed only to its partial meaning: Sexual abstinence; however, it was

inseparably interlinked, by Gandhiji to truth and non-violence. When brahmacharya is understood as a spiritual science, sublimation can transform human sexuality into a new stream of energy, leading to a non-violent evolution. Anything which can create new life can be regarded as worthy of highest reverence. Sex in its procreative function, is a messenger of non-violence and divinity, and comparable in an illustrative sense, but not in the real sense, to God’s own limitless creative power. Non-violence is integral to human birth and every stage of human life. Just as sex is derivative of the creative power of God, all forms of non-violence can be considered as human derivatives of life-sustaining power of God.^[19]

A WAY OF LIFE

Mahatma Gandhi was included by Agnes Maude Royden, a preacher and suffragist, in a series of addresses at the Guildhouse in London, on “Makers of Modern Thought,” in first half of the 19th century. In Gandhi can be found an integration of life. His ways concerning different aspects of life can be better considered as a “way of living.” His “way of living” if followed, will definitely have a positive impact on mental health of an individual; though it can be argued here that many of his ways are not for the mentally frail.

“Joy lies in the fight, in the attempt, in the suffering involved, not in the victory itself”^[10]

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Source of Support: Nil, **Conflict of Interest:** None declared