

Suman Fernando finds inspiration in Sri Lanka from Nest's community approach

Promoting happiness

The air is dry and misty, the temperature cold. Work on tea plantations is erratic – no work means no pay. People in remote areas lack proper transport and health care. Children walk to school along winding, dangerous roads. This is Nuwara-Eliya, a picturesque hill town in Sri Lanka where the community-based, independent, not-for-profit organisation Nest opened its latest centre about a year ago.

Since independence in 1948 Sri Lanka has seen massive improvement in education, health and living standards but (no surprise) the statutory mental health services have stagnated. Although the 20-year war between the Tiger movement and the Sri Lankan army affects mainly the north and east of the country,



all regions are affected in one way or another, not least with mounting mental health problems.

Statutory mental health services in Sri Lanka consist of three large institutions near Colombo and very small units attached to general hospitals in a few towns. Community services are virtually non-existent. Indigenous therapies are widely practiced but underdeveloped, expensive and of low status. There are one or two NGOs (voluntary organisations) involved in mental health work but none on the scale or of the quality of Nest.

For two years prior to launching Nest in 1986, two women from Colombo, Sally Hulugalle and Kamini de Soysa, with others, had been visiting a unit housing about 1000 women – designated as 'chronic patients' – in one of the mental hospitals near Colombo. They attempted to alleviate the severe deprivation – and worse – suffered by these women. (Sally is now the chairperson of Nest.) Later they started to take some of the women patients into the community and finally developed a halfway house for ex-patients: the first Nest centre. In 1990 Nest launched a programme for training community health workers to reach out to people

needing psychosocial support from its centres. Today, there are community workers located in eight centres scattered throughout the country, except in the eastern and northern regions that were affected by war. In effect, community workers from Nest cover all of Sri Lanka because they travel widely in their visiting schedules.

Nest depends on financial contributions from both local and European countries, mainly Norway, The Netherlands and Germany. Nest trains its staff, carefully selecting them for their commitment, kindness and ability. The community workers are paid a living wage but all the office bearers and the patron of the centres receive their services free.

The approach to mental health at Nest is holistic, in keeping with the traditions of the country. Its aims have been conceptualised as 'to see happiness, to promote justice and freedom, to promote coping within the community, to promote understanding in the field of mental health and to lift the yoke of labelling and stigmatisation'.

In practice, the model at Nest is to rent and furnish a house with accommodation for two to four residents and two or three staff. Community workers based at the house then visit local people, helping people in need with both practical and emotional support. As they do so, they suss out the problems in the district that they can best help with. Services provided are flexible, diverse and include rehabilitation of ex-patients from mental hospitals; visiting people attending general hospital clinics; accompanying midwives on home visits; visiting institutions such as orphanages and remand homes; receiving children in need of breaks; organising excursions for people in need, including hospital patients; and reintegrating people from institutions back into the community.

The needs are always immense and the staff have to work on their priorities. In one district, for instance, one of the main problems stems from family disruption caused by women – usually mothers – with young children – going to work in the Middle East. In another centre the staff have identified poverty as the major problem resulting from a drop in tourist traffic as a result of airport disruption. Community workers from Nest, visiting with midwives (akin to British health visitors), sometimes unearth psychosocial problems – for example, alcoholism or child abuse – and then use their intervention skills to strengthen families, emphasising independence and freedom of expression.

The work of Nest is a drop in the ocean when one considers the immense mental health needs in this land of people whom, ironically, the tourists like to say 'smile a lot'. But it is a significant and unique approach from which we can all learn.

Photograph: Monica, an assistant housekeeper, and Suman, a manager of the Nest centre, taken with the permission of those photographed.

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