

Marriage: A Psychological Trauma for Persons with Mental Illness

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ABSTRACT

In Indian context marriage is a social institution of extreme relevance. Marriage has an important role in mental health of any individual. It does not always have positive outcome and the correlation between marriage and mental illness seems to be complicated. Major mental illnesses are usually diagnosed at late adolescent and early adulthood. This is the age when decision of marriage is taken, and this rise to dilemma whether to marry or not, and whether marriage will improve or deteriorate the condition. The difficulties are equally faced by the individuals and their family members. Mental disorders and problems in marriage are closely linked though there is a controversy about it. In India, it is commonly assumed that marriage would help in the management of mental illness. Marriages are assumed to reduce the problems of individuals with mental illness through its effects on social support and intimate connection. But on the other hand, it has been seen that in many cases after marriage couples are separated or divorced due to mental illness and to some extent marriage contribute in the maintenance of mental illness, or lead to trauma in the person and in the caregivers. In this paper author wants to shed light on how marriage contributes to mental-health problems; whether it has a protective role or it leads to psychological trauma in the life of person with mental illness.

Keywords: Marriage, Trauma, Mental Illness

Marriage has been, since ancient times, one of the most important social institutions in all societies and it forms the basis of civilization and social structure. It is to be a contractual agreement that formalizes and stabilizes the social relationship which comprises the family. (Nambi 2005). The anthropological handbook “Notes and Queries” defined marriage as “a union between a man and a woman such that children born to the woman are the recognized legitimate offspring of both partners.” (Royal Anthropological Institute 1951)

Marriage is defined differently, and by different bodies, on the basis of various cultural, religions and other personal factors. Marriage is defined as formal union, marriage is a social, and legal contract between two individuals that unites their lives legally, economically, and emotionally. Being married also gives legitimacy to sexual relations within the marriage. In traditional perspective marriage is mostly seen as a key role for the preservation of morals of different cultures and civilization. Marriages are done due to many reasons such as legal, social, emotional, economic, spiritual, and religious. These might include arranged marriages, family

obligations, legal establishment of a nuclear family unit, legal protection of children, and public declaration of commitment. (Prakash & Kiran 2011)

Methodology

Free access articles were searched using key words and phrases like marriage, mental health, mental illness. Bibliographic references from the searched articles were further used to widen the sources of references. The articles where only abstracts and access to full paper was available were included. A total of 20 articles were identified and were reviewed.

Marriage and Mental Illness

Marriage is the greatest event in an individual's life and brings with it many responsibilities. Mental disorders can either result in marital discord or may be caused by marital disharmony. In predisposed individuals, marriage can cause mental-health problems (Nambi 2005) Divorce seeking couples have higher psychiatric morbidity than well-adjusted couples with more neurotic traits. Besides, studies consistently show greater distress among widowed/separated/divorced men and women. Greater distress is seen in among married women compared to married men

and greater distress in single women as compared to single men (Nambi 2005) Indian society has a greater bias against women with mental illness; many of them are abandoned by their husbands and in-laws and are sent back to their parents' homes. (Behere, Rao and Verma 2011)

This causes misery and stigma and further complicates their problems by making them more susceptible to development or exacerbation of psychiatric disorders after marriage. (Behere & Tiwari, 1991)

Marriage: A Stabilizer or Stressor

Marriage may influence mental health in different ways. In India, it is popular belief that marriage is a cure for different forms of mental disorders ranging from neurosis to psychoses. Marriage may reduce mental health problems through its effects on social support and intimate connection. On the other hand, marriage can theoretically impose some harm on the mental health of a person. Marriage is a social process requiring responsibilities for it to be successful. Studies have confirmed that there is a higher percentage of marital discord, separation, and divorce among psychiatric patients. (Dominian, 1997)

Most of the mental health professionals sometimes give advice regarding the marriage of a person suffering from mental illness keeping in mind the prognostic factors and other contributing factors. But not always the result is positive the families report of separation; divorce etc as result of ill-planned marriage. This can be detrimental to the continued well-being of certain types of mentally ill like acute psychotics. However, there is no factual evidence to support one or the other view.

Marriage Directly Proportionate to Mental Health Issues

Marriage may be stressful for vulnerable people with existing mental illness, which may lead to further development of mental-health problems and may contribute in relapse of the disorder. Major mental-health disorders may be the cause or effect of marital discord. (Rao, Nambi & Chandrashekhar 2009) Several studies have shown that marital stress is associated with a range of psychiatric disorders. (Mendels & DiGiacomo) Certain personality traits and disorders like dependence, passiveness, aggression, histrionic, paranoia and obsession, especially when aggression is a marked feature, have a high incidence of severe marital discord.(Dominian, 1979)

When compared to well-adjusted couples, divorce seeking couples have a high psychiatric morbidity, with more neurotic traits. (Rao, Nambi & Chandrashekhar 2009) Studies in male neurotics showed that inability of wife to escape from husband's constant neurotic behavior may contribute to her marital tension. Eventually separate outlook of both spouses may lead to independent and separate activities and further increase conflicts and gradual alienation. (Collins, Nelson & Troop 1973)

Specific situations related to marriage like anorgasmia, impotence, discovery of extramarital affair, problems with children, an announcement of intent to divorce can be the major trigger to psychological problems. (Rao, Nambi & Chandrashekhar 2009)

Greater distress is observed among married females as compared to married men. It may be result of multiple factors like more responsibilities in taking care of the family, adjusting to a new family and environment, pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood, etc. (Rao, Nambi & Chandrashekhar 2009)

Marriage: Productive or Traumatic Agent

Married men have a statistically significant delay (1-2 years) in onset of psychotic

symptoms in mental illness, when compared with single men. (Jablensky, et al. 1992) Men are found to have the lowest rate of depression, as compared to divorced/separated men in whom rates were highest. Married females with mental illness are more likely to be sent back to their parent's house, abandoned, deserted, or divorced this is a traumatic experience for the individual and the family as well.

Marital and family problems can be important stressors leading to many mental health issues, which in longer run may be a traumatic experience for the person. In case of females separation/divorce is not a very feasible alternative to problems such as marital discord, dowry demands and ill-treatment/cruelty by in-laws etc, and the continuous exposure to these their life becomes traumatic.

Marriage, Psychopathology and its Effect on Females

For the females, marriage is a one-time event of their life, which is glorified and sanctified and is associated with much social approval. If this is endangered or broken by mental illness like psychoses, the lives of these women are shattered beyond repair. In Indian context, women suffer the most in the case of mental illness. When psychiatric

disorders occur in young girls, parents are worried about marriage. Lack of awareness and the widespread belief that marriage is the solution for all evils prompt many parents get their daughters married even when they are symptomatic when facts come out, a grave situation of mutual distrust, animosity, and hostility occurs. (Pathak & Sharma 2013)

Women suffering from major mental disorders, whether developed before or after the marriage are often abandoned by their husbands and his family. As a result, lives of these women are shattered beyond repair and almost all these women now come to live with her parents, many of whom are already aged. (Sathyanarayana, Nambi & Chandrashekhar 2009) Women face immense hardships and are left to fend for themselves with few options open. They are ostracized on three counts, namely female status, having severe mental illness (Pathak & Sharma 2013) Things are not so grave for men in Indian context. The female faces social isolation and compounded stigma of mental illness. The stigma of being separated/ divorced is more acutely felt by families and patients than that of the mental illness. (Thara and Srinivasan 1997)

Burden on Care givers/Partners

Mental illness affects not only the individuals affected by it but also everyone around them, including immediate family, other relatives, and mostly both. For many people, marriage creates an important sense of identity and self-worth. (Gove, Style & Hughes, 1990)

Caring a person with mental illness may affect the mental health of their partner too. Some support their mentally ill partners, but most of them do not want to live with them and ask for separation resulting in separation and divorce. This happens more with female patients. After separation the life of the patient is drastically affected and may lead to worsening of the situation of the patient. Care givers of these individuals suffer much more than the individuals themselves; feelings of disruption, loss guilt, frustration, grief, disappointment, and a fear about the future of their loved ones make them miserable.

With mental illness, if marriage is done under pressure, there is a strong possibility of deterioration of condition. Many stressors described as being responsible for relapses of illness. Uncertainty of marriage being fixed-up, dowry issues, shifting to a new home, difficulty in continuing necessary medications and regular follow-ups to the

psychiatrist/psychologist, stress of sexual intercourses, pregnancy and childbirth. (Behere, Rao & Verma, 2011)

Expressed emotions in the spouse's family may be high, which can worsen the illness and lead to relapses. The situation becomes worse for the woman in Indian society as she has exited her existing social supports to move to her husband's household. Higher psychiatric morbidity exists after childbirth, particularly in areas of functional psychoses and depressive illness. (Kendell Wainwright, Hailey & Shannon 1976)

Mental disorders impact not just on the individuals affected but also on those around them, including immediate family, other relatives, and may be both. For many people, marriage creates an important sense of identity and self-worth. Caring of a person who is mentally ill may affect the mental health of the spouse. Some support their mentally ill partners, but most of them do not want to live with them and ask for separation. This happens more with female mentally ill patients. After separation, women live with their parents. Care givers of these women suffer much more than the patients themselves; feelings of disruption, loss guilt, frustration, grief, disappointment,

and a fear about the future of their loved ones make them miserable.

Outcome of Marriage in Mental Illness

The patients with mental illness have high rates of marital discord, separation and divorce. (Dominian, 1979) The high marital rates, presence of children, shorter duration of illness at inclusion, presence of auditory hallucinations at intake are associated with a good marital outcome. Unemployment, drop in socio-economic level and the presence of psychotic symptoms and self-neglect for a long period are associated with a poor marital outcome.

The burden of caring the person with mental illness almost invariably has to be borne by the aging parents, spouse, husband and other family member leading to economical and emotional burden. In schizophrenia, it is reported that rates of fertility and reproduction reduce. (Rao ,Nambi & Chandrashekhar 2009) In females, after marriage, an early relapse causes mistrust and suspicion in the family; this in return jeopardizes the success of the marriage and the outcome of the illness. An episode after childbirth or several years of marriage are however, viewed as less favorable and thus does not result in separation/divorce further.

(Kamath & Kumar 2003) High rate of divorce is seen in heavy drinkers probably due to a high incidence of domestic violence to the tune of 60-80 %.(Batra & Gautam 1995)

Family problems that are likely to co-occur with alcohol problems include violence, marital conflict, infidelity, jealousy, economic insecurity, divorce and fetal alcohol effect. Numerous researchers have reported a strong association between marital problems and depression. Marital dissatisfaction was uniquely related to major depression for women and dysthymia for men, even after controlling for comorbid disorders. (Whisman 1999) Generalized anxiety disorder in women was associated with poorer marital functioning as reported by women, but not by their male partners, whereas husbands' GAD was not associated with poor marital functioning being reported by either spouse. (McLeod 1994)

Conclusion & Discussion

Marriage influence mental health in many ways of every individual. In case of mental illness it becomes even more complicated because of the roles and responsibility associated with marriage. In India, it is a very popular belief that marriage is a cure for different forms of mental disorders

ranging from neurosis to psychoses. Marriage may reduce mental health problems through its effects on social support and intimate connection. On the other hand, marriage can theoretically impose some harm on the mental health of a person. Many studies have confirmed the finding that there is a higher percentage of marital discord, separation, and divorce among psychiatric patients.

It is seen in most of the cases that marriage leads to a good prognostic factor for the individuals with mental illness, they are supported by their partner and families .But there are many cases where the patients are left after the family get awareness about the mental disorders. The divorce and separation are often seen in the individuals with mental illness. The pressure of fulfillment of roles and responsibilities of marriage may lead to worsening of the situation of the patient.

The negative environment, the expressed emotion by the family members leads gives rise to negative self image, decreased self confidence etc in the person .In Indian context, this kind of marriages not only affects the patient but also affects the entire family including children because genetic vulnerability is one of the major issues suffer the most in the case of mental illness.

The potential of marriage to reduce certain kinds of mental-health problems probably owes itself to the beneficial effects it confers

in terms of increasing personal and social support. Marriage adds to social status and may decrease stigma.

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