

HOLISTIC HEALTH OF WOMEN: AWARENESS THROUGH VISUAL ARTS

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Abstract

Holistic health refers to the healing of mind, body and spirit emphasizing the need to create an environment where these issues are considered, discussed threadbare and tackled in totality. The main aim is to achieve maximum well-being where everything is functioning, the very best that is possible and it is expected that to achieve Holistic Health people should be educated to accept responsibility for their own level of well-being, and everyday choices are used to take charge of one's own health. But here the key point lies in the basic awareness about holistic healing which is often lacking amongst the majority of the populace. More so if one takes stop of women's holistic health issues. It can be due to ignorance or shame involved in expressing the women's specific vital health issues which prevent the healers and the society at large to come up with remedies and solutions to tackle these areas. Here creating awareness about these important health issues of women is of prime importance where the medium of visual art can play an emphatic role. This research paper deals with the role of four talented women artists who don't merely sympathise or not only provide lip service to the affected women who are suffering from these maladies they have used innovative methods using visual arts and social media to reach out to these persons at a personal level to listen to their issues regarding mental health.

Keywords: *Holistic Health, Socrates, Holism, 'Doodleodrama', '#AreYouOkay', Mounica Tata, 'Is That You'?, Shubham Ladha, Pranita Kocharekar, '#acknowledgeanxiety', 'Taxi Fabric Art Project', Prathiksha Bhat, Sonaksha Iyengar, '#Ato ZofMentalHealth' and 'Dear Brain' or 'The Garden of Kindness' series.*

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Received: 13.05.2021

Approved: 11.06.2021

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ARTS*

*RJPSSs 2021, Vol. XLVII,
No. 1, pp. 039-048
Article No.06*

Online available at:

<http://rjpss.anubooks.com>
[https://doi.org/10.31995/
rjpss.2020147i01.06](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2020147i01.06)

Introduction

In ancient times, the approach to the health of a person was based on his/her physical as well as mental and spiritual well-being. Five thousand years old Indian and Chinese healing traditions stressed a healthy way of life in harmony with nature. Greek philosopher and thinker- '**Socrates**' warned against treating only one part of the body as one part can never be well unless the whole body is healed. So when one talks about Holistic Health it refers to the healing of mind, body and spirit emphasizing the need to create an environment where these issues are considered, discussed threadbare and tackled in totality. The main aim is to achieve maximum well-being where everything is functioning the very best that is possible and it is expected that to achieve Holistic Health people should be educated to accept responsibility for their own level of well-being, and everyday choices are used to take charge of one's own health.¹ But here the key point lies in the basic awareness about Holistic healing which is often lacking amongst the majority of the populace. More so if one takes stop of women's Holistic Health issues. It can be due to ignorance or shame involved in expressing the women's specific vital health issues which prevent the healers and the society at large to come up with remedies and solutions to tackle these areas. Here creating awareness about these important health issues of women is of prime importance where the medium of Visual Art can play an emphatic role. Though the term *holism* was introduced by Jan Christiaan Smuts in 1926 A.D. it viewed living beings as entities greater than and different from the sum of their parts stressing upon the whole body and beyond which refers to mind and spirit. It became a common adjective in the modern vocabulary of healing in 1970 A.D.² For decades, Holistic concepts were not taken seriously by the western world as there were unprecedented advances in the medical profession and scientific pharmacology with amazing medicines for all physical well-being. It dawned upon the healers that mind and spirit also play a significant role in one's Holistic healing and it cannot be ignored any further. With the passage of time, the Holistic Health lifestyle is gaining popularity as its principles often offer practical options and choices to meet the growing desire of enjoying a high level of well-being. Holistic Health is based on the law of nature that a whole is made of independent parts like the Earth is made up of systems such as air, land, water, plants, animals and there should be no doubt if life is to be sustained, these elements cannot be separated as what is happening to one element is also felt by all the other elements and systems. Similarly, an individual is a whole made up of independent parts which are the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. When one part is not working or sluggish it impacts all other parts of that person as all the parts of a body are in constant interaction with each other and their surroundings.³ Holistic

Health is an ongoing process as a lifestyle. It includes personal commitment to be moving forward to the best of wellness despite the present health status or setbacks. Moving ahead is the willingness to move on and a resolve to remove the mental or emotional blocks and stigmas.

Today's fast-changing lifestyle has pushed people into mindboggling competitiveness in achieving goals in the so-called modern concept of progress which leads to unfathomed misery and frustration in the event of non-fulfillment of their goals in a short time. People are pushing their boundaries beyond their mental and physical capacities in this mad race. It is seen that women often are under great stress and pressure due to some stereotype ideas of modernism prevailing in our society, where each one is elbowing the other using nefarious, unhealthy and unethical mind games and tactics to run down the others. This leads to many mental, physical, social and moral illnesses and disorders like anxiety, depression, emptiness, loneliness and even pressing desire to harm one's self and a nagging feeling of inadequacy and futility of purpose of life. Sadly, there is a marked increase in such cases and general bewilderment prevails in a women's world. These important and essential factors are not openly discussed and they take deep root into the psyche of a person and the whole family, society and country at large suffer impaired progress and a sense of helplessness. Our traditional notions about many aspects of one's physical merits are based on deep-rooted ignorance wrapped in social norms and prevailing cultural and religious ethos which hamper crystal clear comprehension of the realities of life. Understanding these obstacles and dogmas, four brilliant women artists have dedicated their lives to fully understanding and battling these dark patches and come out openly with fascinating solutions through their creative art humor and sarcasm, dealing a deadly blow to such demonic stereotypes prevalent in our society, as all four of them had to tackle these issues personally in their lives but they refused to surrender to such negative aspects and gathered their mental courage and faculties to catch the bull by the horns. The first step towards handling these nagging issues is to accept that these exist- underlining their deep-rooted prejudices then only the awareness about such mental and physical hardships can be undertaken through Visual Art and textual narratives prepared by understanding and truthful creators who truly aspire to change this position for the Holistic Health of fellow women. This calls for serious approaches and sustained efforts to bring about a change in the mindset of fellow human beings. These talented well-meaning artists don't merely sympathise or not only provide lip service to the affected women who are suffering from these maladies, but they have also used innovative methods using Visual Arts and social media to reach out to these persons at the personal level to listen to their issues regarding

mental health.

'Doodleodrama'

Renowned illustrator and comic maker- Mounica Tata gave up her day job to work as a freelancer, she faced an uncanny demon. Working all alone from home, without social interaction, she felt lonely and developed symptoms of depression. Having experienced gloom at first hand, she decided to document her journey through a series called '#AreYouOkay', on social media. **(Plate No.1)** She wanted to give a visual depiction of her feelings like drowning when in a crowd among others. This year she made eight such expressive posts, depicting emotions like anxiety, depression and loneliness among others in eye-catching and evocative humorous yet thought-provoking illustrations accompanied by suitable lines and narratives, to reach a large number of people to share and eradicate their psychological obstacles. To quote National Mental Health Survey 2015-16 which was implemented by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences, Bengaluru, there is a huge burden of mental disorders in the Indian community. The study was undertaken in 12 states which revealed that nearly 11% of Indians above 18 years suffer mental disorders of some level.⁴ Through '#AreYouOkay': Mounica Tata's illustrations of feelings to start a dialogue on mental health was initiated and she held several workshops to start a dialogue as her artwork revolves around thematic and topical issues, exorcising the things that are hidden underneath the surface of the human lithosphere. She has an uncanny gift to draw out the internal battles we face and find it hard to express more so in the case of young women due to lack of a sincere support system from society. In her own words, *"I am posting this with a couple of agendas in mind to start a dialogue on mental health to raise awareness, hopefully, it will help people to understand and take these issues seriously to encourage other people to be more sensitive, receptive and compassionate. Normally such topics make you uncomfortable or if it upsets you or if you do not wish to read and engage, you can skip this one."* Mental health she says is hard because how do you run away from something that is inside your mind? It is even harder to explain and put in words because there are just so many feelings and emotions. It is an amusement park of feelings in your mind that runs wild 24X7 and makes you feel you cannot breathe, cannot feel your face and any minute now you are going to throw up. Then there are times she says when you feel like you are drowning and no one is bothered. They just keep on seeing you going deeper and deeper, breathlessly reaching out for help, but there is no help coming. Who will not agree that these issues are of immense importance when we pertain to the Holistic Health of women, which should certainly include mental as well as physical health because scientifically it is proved in the

medical profession that certain hormones are released in our brain and other parts of the body which control our well-being and mood swings which in turn affect our physical health. These two issues are married to each other if they are in perfect harmony you are feeling at the top of the world and can face the obstacles in life in a befitting manner.

Mounica Tata's creative journey started way back in their teens when she was in the habit of doodling all the time on many topics concerning her life and the outcome came out through the formation of '**Doodleodrama**' which pokes fun at social issues, inhibitions and relationships among women and their friends and relatives and she incorporated her adorable pets and animals in this project.⁵ Her artwork has fun details and most of them are in the form of story-telling with rhythmic language patterns floating around them. She answers questions posed by her viewers with amusing insight and no longer is afraid of negative aspects of these issues. She has designed interesting wedding cards, logos, bags, placards, menu cards for some restaurants and wall posters for young women for their study rooms with interesting and tickling explanations and illustrations. Much of '**Doodleodrama**' dwells on what it means to be a woman in India, depicting the impact of menstruation (**Plate No.2**), economic burdens that Indian women face and the cathartic value of female friendships. For instance, in an evocative series of illustrations titled '**Sante**' (which means market in Kannada) Mounica depicts a range of female wanderers in a crowded marketplace, their eyes and bodies hinting at the reality of their lives. Though Tata had no formal training in art, said she began to discover and articulate her personal feminist politics after marriage- when I went to look for a job, people would say things like '*Oh you don't look married*' and that bothered me. How am I supposed to look different if I am married?⁶ In some illustrations she has shown hair on women's legs and armpits which is a natural phenomenon through people around you raise eyebrows. She has effortlessly battled the stereotypes about women, their appearance and their status in life. Each illustration is intended to raise your mind and spirit so that you live happily in whatever condition you are for your own Holistic Health.

'Is That You'?

Shubham Ladha has written eloquently about these women crusaders in the 'Verve Magazine' which has a tagline- 'The Spirit of Today's Woman'. Ladha writes that "*Instagram is the canvas of creative visualizers who depict invisible issues of mental illnesses.*" He says, "*There have been taboos, stigmas or shame attached to mental disorders, usually reducing them to 'just a phase' for one to get over. More often than not, they are so invisible that the people around them cannot get a grasp of what it feels like to suffer through these issues and*

preferred to brush it under the carpet instead.” WHO’s 2015 health estimates around 50 million Indians suffer from depression and about 30 million from anxiety issues making it imperative to talk about the elephant in the room. Art, by its very nature, has a universal language that words do not possess. To raise awareness and show support for those living with mental disorders, they are amongst a few Indian artists who are talking about mental health through the medium they excel at. After battling social anxiety through professional help, illustrator Pranita Kocharekar decided to comically draw about the “emotions of an anxious person” through **the ‘#acknowledgeanxiety’ Project (Plate No.3)**. Through her fifteen illustrations, she highlighted the social situations that perfectly capture the emotions that she faced- and many others can relate to such as over-thinking, worrying about things that weren’t worth pondering, or just plain indecisiveness. With every post, she reminds us that these aren’t tools for self-diagnosis, even inserting a humorous self-help aid that says “Dr. Internet says breathing techniques are a cure for anxiety at an early stage.”⁷ Women suffering from these disorders which are mostly invisible to others get a chance to open up a dialogue with self and the sincere helper who wishes to change the position with simple yet practical methods and processes so that negativity disappears at the earliest and positive attitudes and perceptions are formed in one’s life for a Holistic Health status. Women in large numbers interacted with her and opened up their hearts and minds which made them relaxed and hope was kindled in their hearts that nothing is lost and all taboos can be overcome with little personal effort. The artworks generated by this Mumbai-based Graphic Designer are light-hearted series of sixteen illustrations titled- **‘Is That You?’**. She was also part of the city-wide **‘Taxi Fabric Art Project’** which transformed seat-covers of Mumbai cabs into canvases with doodles and illustrations. Kocharekar’s artwork strikes a beautiful balance of being bold in its thought, yet feminine in its execution. **(Plate No.4)** Her ongoing ‘doodle a day’ Project has also garnered many social media followers.⁸

‘Opening Up is the Key to Eradication’

Yet another creative artist- Prathiksha Bhat, who herself battled bouts of depression and anxiety started a campaign through Instagram portraying her mental health through Visual Art. Simple but impactful, her work is a window to her emotions and conversations with her therapist. **(Plate No.5)** There is a sincere effort to empathise with the fact that change takes a while, but is fruitful when achieved.⁹ These illustrations fill you with hope and delightful insight into the malady which can be tackled effectively and should not be kept to oneself. Opening up is the key to the eradication of this condition. People are out there waiting for you with their help and

sincere and compassionate advice. She too has a large fan following and people especially women discuss openly with her their health issues and how success can be achieved with patience.

‘The Garden of Kindness’

In a similar vein, the work of illustrator and artist- Sonaksha Iyengar is of immense value for people who seek her advice on mental health and her Instagram series on mental health and Holistic well-being of women is a whopping success. She started **‘#AtoZofMentalHealth’** which illustrates a mental disorder for each letter of the alphabet, has been widely viewed and commented upon. The drawings, made using watercolours and digital media, are simple, brightly coloured and come with bits of explanatory text. **(Plate No.6)** For example: ‘G’ has been ‘Grief’, showing a woman sitting on her haunches, eyes closed, head bent in ‘G’ shape. Raindrops in sunshine yellow, leafy green, fuchsia pink, keep falling on her head and all over her. The accompanying text says: *“Grief does not come with a times stamp.”* The idea is to further elucidated in the comment space: *“You cannot ‘get over it. Grief does not come with a manual, nor does it come in steady doses...It looks different for everyone. It is already really difficult to breathe and be when you are drowning in grief so support and compassion are really important. Be Kind.”* Because Sonaksha says, *“Kindness is one of the threads in the weave of my work.”*¹⁰ **(Plate No.7)** In yet another series: **‘Dear Brain’** or **‘The Garden of Kindness’** series, Being kind is the main plank. The drawing depicts three delicate-looking flowers with the text: *“There is nothing in nature that blooms all year long so don’t expect yourself to either. Don’t despair, Be happy.”* **(Plate No.8)** Before she started her illustrations, she used to write a blog on ‘Self-Care’ and ‘Body Positivity’ when she was in High School. I was always on the lookout for space where people could engage in conversation about mental health issues, and simply be without feeling mortified about what was going on in their heads. But she soon found Graphic media arena and social media are her favorite mediums where she felt at home and comfortable.¹¹ The impact of illustrations and Visual Art is more than the words for textual narratives. They are easy to understand and thus the idea which one wants to convey is planted easily into the head of others.

Summary

Going through all these creative projects on mental and Holistic Health, one is sure that these talented young women have been able to open a space for free and frank dialogue on the Holistic Health issues concerning women. They have been successful in opening up on the disorders they had gone through themselves and thus

the platform of Instagram and social media through visually charged illustrations, artworks, kind and compassionate brief narratives, slogans and textual insights helped a large number of women who were depressed, lonely and angry and had lost all hope to rise from the crises. These artists have also established that the mental health of a woman is of utmost importance for the physical well-being of a person, then only one can talk about Holistic Health care which is not only necessary for a specific person but for his/her family, friends, relatives, society and the country at large for sustained and meaningful progress.

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Plate No.1

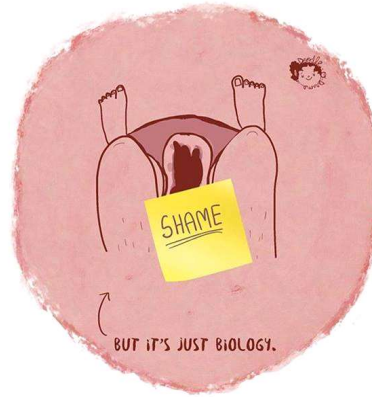


Plate No.2



Plate No.3

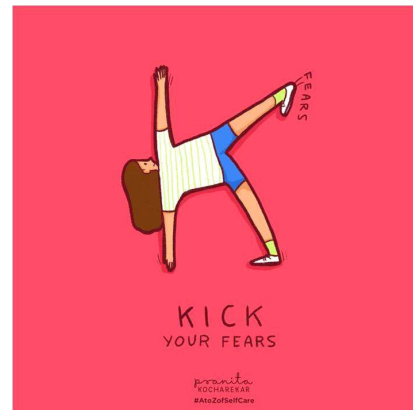


Plate No.4



Plate No.5

ANXIETY CAN COME IN THE BRIGHTEST COLOURS



a to z of mental health

Plate No.6

GRIEF DOES NOT COME WITH A TIME STAMP



a to z of mental health

Plate No.7

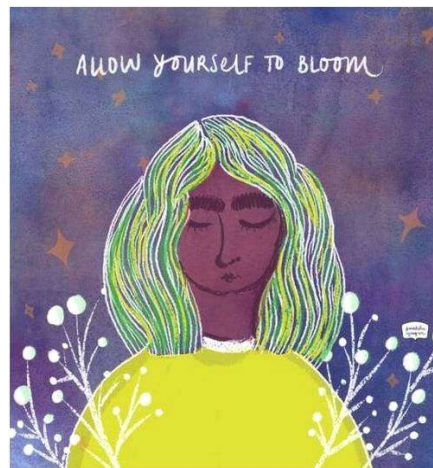


Plate No.8