

Letter to the Editor

Life skills education: a coping strategy against substance abuse

Sir,

Substance abuse has been a topic of discussion for healthcare professionals. It involves using harmful or hazardous psychoactive substances that, if administered into one's system, can affect the mental processes. Consumption of these substances leads to societal as well as health problems among its users there by indirectly affecting their families too. These substances mainly include alcohol, tobacco, opiates, cocaine, amphetamines, hallucinogens, prescription and over-the-counter drug abuse.^{1,2} According to the world drug report 2020 by United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), there are about 35 million people who suffer from drug use disorders and require treatment services globally.² In India, the substance abuse epidemic in the younger generation has increased rapidly. The crucial factors which lead to these problems involve familial, social as well as individual problems. Familial issues may involve childhood maltreatment or familial substance abuse. Similarly, social issues involves deviant peer pressure and association with popular groups in order to prevent from being bullied. Individual factors which might lead to substance abuse includes depression and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).³ Its prevalence at the national level varies for different substance abuse forms, accompanied by drastic regional variations. Issues regarding treatment access and adherence concerning substance user disorders (SUD) already existed. Due to the current COVID-19 situation, drastic social and economic changes have further worsened the situation. So in this regard, newer strategies have to be brought up in place.⁴ It has been found that life skills education is one of the most influential activities in school-based substance abuse prevention.

According to WHO, life skill enables a person to deal effectively with the demands as well as challenges of day-to-day life. The skill development starts with defining and promoting specific skills, promoting skill acquisition and fostering maintenance of skills. The skills learned through this type of education are more essential than those required to solve numerical problems and understand literacy. It is not associated with the teaching of active learning but also apprehensive with maintaining the balance of knowledge, attitude and skills in day-to-day life. WHO has divided life skills into many categories like critical thinking and decision-making skills, interpersonal and communication skills and coping and self-management skills.⁵

In India, the introduction of life skills education at the grass-root levels, especially at the ayushman bharat health and wellness centres (AB-HWCs) would lay a strong foundation for eliminating the SUD from society and would also help in treatment adherence of those undergoing any treatment. In this regard, the first and foremost step is to identify the various stakeholders who could first understand what exactly is life skill education and then they may be trained in such a way that they would be able to impart the knowledge to society. The crucial stakeholders who can be trained are the community health officers (CHOs), auxiliary nurse midwife (ANM), accredited social health activists (ASHAs), Anganwadi workers, school teachers and members of the panchayati raj institutions (PRIs). For imparting knowledge in the community, peer support groups can be made comprising of individuals suffering from the same problems which would result in better outcomes. ASHA workers can play an essential role in identifying the target population, following which they can be line-listed. In general, the individuals of younger age groups should be targeted as this is when they are highly vulnerable mentally and emotionally. Later on, all the remaining age groups can be educated as well.

With the fall in the national economy in last one year, there is an increase in the unemployment rate. It has certainly impacted individuals' mental health across all age groups. With the uncertainty looming large regarding the reopening of schools, adolescents are being deprived of quality school education. This is bound to hamper their all-round development. So in the present scenario, imparting life skill education has become more important than ever, not only among the youth but across all age groups. It would help the individuals to think critically regarding any situation and improve their decision-making skills. It would also enhance their communication skills as well as enabling them to cope with problems and develop resistance against which would prevent them from not getting easily indulged in any form of substance abuse.

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