

Saukhyam Webinar

LOCATING SELF WITHIN THE LIVED
EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY



Richa Sharma

Mental health professional,
M.Phil. (Psychiatric Social Work)

Date:30-03-2021

Tuesday

About the webinar

The webinar was on “Locating the self within the lived experience of disability”. The Zoom session was on March 30, 2021 at 7:00pm. The speaker for the webinar was Richa Sharma, a mental health professional and founder and psychosocial consultant of ‘The Dialectical Mind’.

Abhishek and Dipika, Sign language interpreters from NISH were present during the session. Shinu, project associate of Prajaahita’s Nirampakaram project was the facilitator. She started the session by introducing the topic of the webinar and welcoming the resource person.

Richa began the talk narrating the idea behind the topic of the webinar; to discuss the discourse of disability and understand the idea of self. She said that disability-most of the times- becomes the only criteria when we interact with people. Instead, we need to see people beyond their disability. We should be aware about the other different features the person has and not just look at disability on the first hand. She prepared a presentation for the webinar. She began with the explanation of what we understand by the word “self”. She said that self is an evolving concept and constantly changing one. We have different opinion about our self at different times. She then shared a quotation by Sylvia Plath “I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart, I am, I am, I am.”, and shared that having an identity is very important for oneself. She says ‘identity crisis and things related to who we are’ is universal concept and affects all. She commented identity and self is very important in the context of disability because, for example, using a wheelchair might overshadow your other features and parts of self. It is a serious issue and damage for the person.

Next she spoke about components of self which are self image, self esteem and ideal self. She explained each of these components. She emphasised that self images are neither good nor bad. Self esteem on the other hand is value loaded. At this point she opened a question for the listeners to answer about doubting ourselves when someone compliments us. She encouraged the talk to be interactional. She spoke about situations when our self esteem changes and are affected due to environmental factors. How we look at ourselves is a very significant factor. Third is how we like to be in future. The self that we aspire to be. That is ideal self. We keep role models to create an ideal self. She gave an example of women having images of ideal body images because of the influence of certain people around us.

Next she gave an activity for all. The activity started with asking 5 words that come to their mind when we describe ourselves. They were given the option to speak and also to type it out. One response came from the audience. She then reiterated the question again and

responded to the answers given by the listeners. Aslam, Sooraj and Kripa responded to the activity. She emphasised that it is very important to be self aware. She responded to the comments posted by the listeners. She then spoke about the need of being aware about our life skills. She commented that she received creative bunch of people as the audience as they all had different potential and skills.

“Self is evolving (cognitive dissonance)” was the next topic of discussion. She gave the example of getting stuck in the pandemic and learning new habits. She said how we adjusted to the new changes and how we learned to survive the pandemic. She then explained the two images she presented to show how our self and thought processes work. She explained cognitive dissonance and added that we learn from observation. She then explained the image which was about child learning from parents by observation. She said there is chance of internalising behaviour through observation. When we talk about bodies, she said that we are deeply influenced by peers, influencers and toys. She explained this with the example of

children learning about what is beautiful and ugly through the environment. Notions of beauty are deeply ingrained in our images of self. Food habits have changed to accommodate different body types. She then said about dolls and toys of women bodies to look very fair and skinny, and how that influences our idea of body image and types.

We learn from our experiences was the next segment. She gave an example of a person experiencing neglect when there is no ramp for the PwD. Spoken and unspoken things are learned. We learn whether or not we are part of the larger society. She spoke about rejection of PwD in our society and talked about the need to question it because the former will blame themselves otherwise.

Stigma is the other segment of the talk. With the kind of exclusion from social spaces, there is stigma and shame that come from these external sources. Stigma later becomes the inner voice because we are constantly faced by stigma. Problem arises at this point in life. She then posed a question where she asked if anyone had faced stigma in their life, in any social situation. A respondent

shared that visitors have looked at them in an odd way for being different.

Richa ma'am, then spoke of gaze that is really problematic and an issue that we have to address. Another respondent who has visual impairment shared that there is stigma attached to what work can be done by some person with VI. Richa then spoke of the gender aspect along with disability that adds on the stigma for the people. People look at labels and doesn't look at the skills and potential of the person. Another response was in the area of being an outsider to any space. Richa added the stigma attached to gender and being a woman. She spoke about the internalised stigma we have. She explained how stigma and shame operates. She thanked everyone for sharing their experiences.

Next she spoke about bursting the myths related to disability. She commented on the medical model view of disability and how it is very individual oriented and blaming the person for the disability. She explained about social model of disability. Boundary of disability will be narrow when we make spaces around us very inclusive.

She gave an example of how we are inclusive in this webinar with having sign language interpreters. Disability should be located in the society and not on the person. She then spoke about how power is in the hands of the majority and added that when we cater to only a segment of people we are diminishing the beauty of the world.

Ableism and us was the next part of the presentation. She then got back to the topic of self concept. She then posed few questions related to the self concept and disability. These questions were reflective in nature. They were like "what limits you?", "how does your disability limit you?" and so on.

Richa then spoke of acquired disabilities. She presented an image of Kubler-Ross Grief cycle. That image showed the cycle starting from denial, anger, bargaining, depression and then acceptance. She gave an example of a person acquiring locomotor disability after meeting with an accident. She also gave example of war veterans and how they acquired disability later in their life. She explained the cycle using these examples.

She then explained the concept of functional role of the body and organs. Body and organs do not have to serve an aesthetic role, and also mentioned that definitions of beauty can be multiple. Aids and appliances used by PwD help in doing the functional role of the body. There is diversity in beauty. She mentioned about Priya's Mirror which is a group of acid attack survivors working in the field of self image and beauty. She ended the segment telling "beauty needs to be celebrated in all shapes and sizes".

She ended with an Albert Einstein quote, "everyone is a genius but if you judge a fish on its ability...." Then she opened the discussion to all and asked about stigma that people have experienced. The space was then opened for discussion, queries and comments.

With this, the session came to an end. A vote of thanks was delivered by Sooraj the Director of the organisation. The session ended by thanking the speaker, and the interpreters. Before the session ended one person had a doubt as to how to reduce depression and over thinking. The answer Richa gave was initially to

understand the gravity of the trouble we are facing. She then asked to consult a counselling service and seek help from professional and clinically services. She then recommended a book which can be read to know about CBT.