

## Rethinking Mental Health

**Kunika (Host)** - Tanmoy Goswami was a business journalist for most parts of his life. Then two years ago, he began sharing his journey of dealing and living with mental illness on social media. Recently, he was appointed as the Sanity correspondent for a newly launched European publication called The Correspondent, where he will be writing exclusively on mental health. Ahead of the Mental Health Day, we reached out to Tanmoy to understand his own journey of dealing with and talking about mental illness and health, mainstream media's lack of sensitivity towards reporting on mental health, among other things.

Hi. I am Kunika Balhotra, the communication officer for Suno India and I will be your host for this episode.

Hi Tanmoy! Welcome to The Suno India Show! So can you start by telling us something about yourself?

**Tanmoy-** My first formal diagnosis that I have mental illness was about 18 years ago when I was in college. As it happens often, you put things behind when life happens. In 2017, my symptoms started reappearing, and I was in a bad enough shape that I had to quit my job. I was in the middle of writing a book, and I had to leave that halfway. We were expecting a baby, and it was quite a circus at home. To complicate matters, my depression and anxiety became pretty severe. That's when I decided that I need to understand this condition that I am dealing with and bring my journalistic instincts into understanding everything I can about what I am fighting. So, I started writing, advocacy, and maintaining a public diary of my journey on Twitter and LinkedIn. Then, I started this new uncharted path with a European publication. I'm their only correspondent in India, and I have been writing exclusively on mental health. My life is absolutely unrecognisable to myself. I had very different ambitions 2 years ago, and different plans for myself. If I go back even further, I come from a very small town in the East of India. Then I went to Delhi to study. When I think of the kind of person I was all those years ago, when I was first diagnosed with an illness, it becomes more difficult for me to recognise myself. This entire transition to the world of mental health has been brought on purely out of a lack of choice. It's not something that I am doing because I always dreamt of being a mental health journalist. Nobody likes to write about things like depression and suicide for fun or to become famous. When I now introduce myself, I make it a point to tell people that who I am today is a product of lack of choice rather than a conscious career choice that I always had at the back of my mind. With no regrets, this is what I am today.

**Host-** How did you deal with these depression and anxiety issues for such a long time? Can you tell us about your journey of how you dealt with it and why you had all this in the first place?

**Tanmoy-** Let me tackle the second part of your question first. Why does one's mind become ill? There is no one answer to this. The medical approach is to say that there is something wrong with the chemicals in your brain. That's the conventional thing to say. Many mental illnesses are a product of two things. First is something that goes wrong with your body and your brain, and second is something that goes wrong with your external environment. How your biology interacts with that environment determines whether you can function or

whether you become mentally ill. Depression and anxiety are not exceptions to this. When I first came to Delhi, it was a massive culture shock. Like I was saying, my family is from a very small town. I had not left home for 18 years of my life and then suddenly I was in this big city with completely alien people and alien culture. I think that brought out a lot of anxieties that were lying latent in me. Even though it has become common to talk about this today when compared to 2001/2002, there is still a lot of mystery, stigma and taboo. As you can imagine it, it was quite bleak back then. It was a miracle that my college had a therapist. One of my friends thought that my condition was becoming so bad that I have to go and see the therapist in college. I am very thankful to my friend for sending me to the therapist because he helped me understand what I was going through. I would have acute physical problems. I'd often go out of breath, panic for no reason, see things, and feel like somebody is constantly chasing me and trying to hurt me. Then I would have self-harming tendencies. You tend to brush them away as a sort of typical teenage angst. But when it makes you dysfunctional and when you have cycles of suffering every day for no apparent reason, then you start wondering whether there is something wrong with you. Something that others probably can't see but I feel because I have to go through this every day for no reason. Going to therapy in the first and second year of college dragged me out of that condition. I didn't even know what depression was back then. There was no internet to google and find out what it was. I was quite bewildered. After that, I tried everything for the next few years. I went on this really crazy journey to search for a cure. There would be good days, but my predominant register was always despondent and dejected. A constant feeling of physical hurt was there and I felt like the whole world's burden was on my shoulders. So I went on a wild hunt to find a cure. I have tried everything. I have tried evidence-based medicine (which is popularly known as allopathy in India), homoeopathy, reiki, past life regression, and even aromatherapy. I am not a particularly religious man, but somebody told me not to eat non-veg on Saturdays, and I started doing that 10 years ago. I still don't eat non-veg on Saturdays. How did I deal with it? At some point, I became a believer in what I now call 'the gospel of whatever works'. I don't judge anybody's recommendations. If somebody comes and tells me to do something to find relief, I give it a shot. I realise that something like this really doesn't have a prescription manual that you can blindly trust. It is not like bronchitis or pneumonia or malaria, with a well-established medical regime to follow. Most psychiatrists and psychologists will tell you that the science of it is new, raw and evolving, and there are no certainties. Nobody knows whether a particular pill will work, and to what extent it will work. I go to a therapist regularly, I go twice a week and there are quite a few pills that I have to take every day. Parallely, I keep looking for answers in books and in conversations with random people. Ultimately, the one thing that has really helped me is, opening my life up and connecting with a large community of people who are suffering from all sorts of issues, and sharing stories. That's what saved me all these years. That's how I deal with it.

**Host-** You are a journalist and you write a lot about it lately. What is your say on the current scenario on mental health in India among the normal people? How do you think it's being reported?

**Tanmoy-** It's a very good question. It's also one of the things that makes me really angry about the state of reporting on mental health. So I think the way in which mental health is covered in the media currently in India. It is absolutely shocking the level of apathy that ignorance that exists specially in mainstream media and have worked in mainstream media for many many

years and I have observed this from up close the the apathy towards things like mental illness cause suicide is just something else. So often you will see suicide been converted into basically clickbait. So the person who has died, the person's identity will be disclosed, pictures will be put up just to make piece little bit more sensational and get a few more clicks and one of the reasons for which it happens specially with suicide reporting cases in India is, actually there are two reasons one there is very simple WHO checklist that you need to follow if you are reporting on a suicide. Respect the dignity of the deceased not give away the personal details, don't disclose the method of suicide because that give ideas to other people who might be vulnerable. Just basically respect the deceased and respect the privacy of the family. These are not very difficult things to implement but unfortunately I don't think most of the people in India even care about this. Recently the press council has issued a set of recommendations I don't know whether that will have an impact I hope it does. And the other reason apart from ignorance the other reason is and this is a little more structural and historical for a long time suicide was a crime in India right it was only the promulgation of the new mental health care law that we have for the last two years that suicide has been decriminalised. So lot of editors will tell you that we report about suicide in the same way we would report any other crime why should it be any different. This is just a legacy issue so I am hoping that new legal Framework in place editors will begin to see that this is not something which is to be treated like any other random crime and human interest will be paramount. The first part of a question I think was that is a very very large question about what is the state of mental health as a movement in India. I am optimistic about where we are look there are many things that are obviously wrong but but there are many things that are wrong about every health field in India this is not unique to mental health. Healthcare in India is usually problematic as we all know budgets are abysmal, basic infrastructure is lacking all of this whatever is true for other medical fields or areas of healthcare is also true for mental healthcare so I I want to make that statement very clearly upfront. But where it becomes a little trickier from mental health care then other forms of healthcare is that first of all because of the stigma and the taboo associated with it even getting a sense of how big the problem really is getting some numbers credible numbers what is the mental health population in India the size of it what does it look like it has taken as decades to arrive at a decent sort of possible estimate of it and with the last national mental health survey that enhanced it now we have a sense all those numbers for only based on a survey done in a set number of states not the entire country but if you extrapolate from those numbers it is clear that the number is enormous and because of India share population obviously when you plotted on the world map these numbers will look extremely scary and almost like you know they will do of numbers from any other countries in the world so the burden is enormous there are globally if you look at it there are estimates that depression and anxiety just these two disease, I am not even talking about more severe complicated disease like Schizophrenia, or bipolar disorder, just depression and anxiety cause a productivity loss of 1 trillion dollars globally it's just that India's people still don't talk about this problem many employees are able to pretend that this problem just does not exist so how much for productivity loss this is really causing us. So on the one hand you have this enormous burden on the other hand you have problems which are really well documented which is, we really don't have enough doctors, we really don't have enough train psychologists working in the grassroots most of the trained professionals are in the big cities and these are all well known problems. People are talking about this for many many years now and then there is something which is not talk about so often which is that ok if we have to produce enough psychiatrists to treat this very large population of mental people in India it will it will

take us decades. So what is the quick way to achieve this we already have a medical curriculum right which produces many general physicians every year and the shocking thing is that in the medical curriculum psychiatry is like a 15 day module at the end of your course nobody takes it seriously you know it is just treated as sort of like totally irrelevant subject. If all these general physicians are passing out every year trained in basic treatment they can shoulder a lot of burden then people don't have to go to specialists but this does not happen in India. of course another big problem was that until recently insurers were not covering mental illness as cognisable condition they said they wouldn't cover for them but now with new law once again that is again a very very remarkable thing that has happened is that mental illness and physical illnesses are now treated on a par, so if an insurer is covering physical illness they have to necessarily provide cover for mental illnesses this is something which is very very revolutionary that happened of course still there is a problem because much of the expenditure for mental illness people happens in the form of outpatient expenses the rate of hospitalization is still very low and until you are hospitalised insurance will not pay. So we are, I would say obviously overall there is a better mood right now, because well people like Deepika Padukone are talking about it so so there is a lot of buzz in every media outlet you see excitement about mental illness, a lot of ordinary people are coming out in talking on social media about their mental illness so a larger sort of de-stigmatization is underway which is very very good to see with the legal and policy changes things have started happening that again is very very heartening, what happened before the 2019 elections which the 'Bridge the Care Gap' movement was started by the Mariwala Health Foundation and others and a bunch of NGOs and they got the Congress party and and the CPI(M) to include mental health in their election manifesto, that was an incredible thing that is never happened before in India, overall there are a lot of reasons to be optimistic about old problems remain but I think concrete changes are happening on the ground we still have a long long way to go before we can start feeling complacent but I think a good beginning is happening from my perspective that's what I think.

**Host-** Suno India had earlier in the year reached out to Mariwala Health initiative during the launch of the 'Bridge the Care Gap' campaign. You can listen to this [episode](#) of The Suno India Show on our website.

Nowadays, do people come out and seek for help? Are they still reluctant or have they actually started talking and confronting it more?

**Tanmoy-** Definitely there is a lot more awareness now so I feel like specially people in our social economic class we call them PLUs - people like us - there is certainly a lot more gradual opening up that is happening but that is still very very small the larger picture the number of people was still talking about this problem is very, very small percentage. And you know it's not difficult to understand why because if you work somewhere your boss may not understand what you are going through and more people who have talked about their problems, you know the mysteriously they have lost their jobs often families are not equipped to handle these things, show the big problem is if you are suffering from depression or any other mental illness it's not you were suffering write it also your care takers your family your husband your wife whoever, your children. And they are not equipped to handle these things, so still I would say the proportion of people talking openly about these things is very very small and also not sure whether a celebrity talking about this issue makes any difference to

an ordinary guy on the street because you know you can always turn around and say that xyz you know big movie stars can talk about these things because they can talk about these things it's not that something terrible is going to happen to them they are not going to suddenly get out of a job because they admitted they have depression not taking away the courage that it requires for anyone who talked about this but I am just there is a possibility for an ordinary person to think like that. So I think that unless there is like education in like this many other things doing this creating awareness at an very early stage of your life so if you are told from a very starting point of your life that is talk ok to talk about these things, that you are not weird because you feel a certain way one day then this conversation will become normal but until then you still see a very small population who have access to social media who are not scared of being stigmatized or isolated very small population will talk about it. When I started talking about it a lot of people started asking me that you will lose your job at that point of time I already quit my job so I didn't have much to lose so I wasn't thinking about whether it will impact my future employees when I started talking about this publicly. But I believe of my own reasons and my reasons were very different not everybody will find good enough reasons to talk about this publicly and there are genuine concerns so so people have definitely started feeling a lot more empowered at least people in a particular section of the society but I think the overall picture is still one of like people attending to live with this deal with it in their own quite ways rather than confronting the problem because the social and economic cost can be quite massive if you don't have a proper support this system then things can go really badly wrong even if you come out and talk about it even something basic like anxiety disorders people can start looking at you like you just grew two horns.

**Host-** Do you think social media is a safe space to talk about issues?

**Tanmoy-** In my experience it has been a terrific place it has actually played a very big role in my healing process. But that need not be the case for everybody I understand that also my exposure is limited to the English speaking part of social media I don't have access to vast population that converses in local languages and cultural sensitivity matters a lot in these things so I don't know what the social media picture is like if you step out of the English bubble, the big city bubble but for me it has worked well it has been a place where I got a tremendous amount of support I have made excellent friends a lot of people who have become my mentors who have inspired me to start studying psychology to understand that my condition is better than all, I have known all of them through my social media so I have a lot to be grateful about but it can swing both ways it can also be a place where you are labelled as somebody who needs too much attention, I was reading a story I think it was in the guardian there was a story about young people talking about their problems on the internet and there is a new term to criticize that it's called 'sad fishing', so apparently people like who seek help or posts and emotional message on social media people think that they are doing it to attract sympathy and that is now called sad fishing. So you know there is there are two sides to every coin my experience was very positive but I can't really say that for everyone else.

**Host-** You are the Sanity reporter for The Correspondent. What does it mean for you personally and professionally? What kind of stories would you want to explore in the upcoming months?

**Tanmoy-** [www.thecorrespondent.com](http://www.thecorrespondent.com) is a brand new English language platform, the parents are Dutch, it's called de correspondent. Sanity is the name of my beat and the reason I call it sanity because I wanted to avoid calling it mental health because I thought mental health is loaded with pharmacological tones so it seems like there's something medical that I want to talk about which is not really the case I really want to break down this whole idea of you know what it really means when it comes to mental health the typical condition of being perfectly mentally healthy, what does the pursuit of sanity really look like break it down into its component so my first project since you asked me what I will be really working on in the future is a series of stories which will explore the prominence of human guilt and how guilt is shaping the world around us because I believe unless you are able to break the idea of mental health or mental illness being into more manageable smaller parts, it can be very intimidating. Mental illness is such a vast nebulous term that to be able to make sense of it and grapple with it you need to break it down into its components so my first stories is going to be on exploration of guilt. Another area that interests me in a great deal technology policy and regulatory Framework so there are in technology there is a huge boom now there are a lot of apps there are virtual reality headsets all sorts of things are being developed by startups and they are working in this usually define space of mental health and wellness so I really want to understand what's going on there is well because once again technologies being sold as a great solution to all of these things but I have my own doubts so I am not going to really right about India I am just based in India happy coincidence that I will get to look at a lot of stories from Indian kind of a lens but I am not going to be writing India per se my mandate is to write about the entire world because the correspondent has more than 50000 members in 130 + countries, it's a global mandate I am still trying to figure out how one person gets into it when a person to all of this but because we are very modern collaborate with our members we do this very very unique brand of collaboration so if you go through my first story and you start scrolling to the comment box you will see the quality of interaction that happens on the site is so so high and it's a new experience for me and i am learning I am sharing everything that I am learning, I don't have the arrogance to claim that I know everything I dont I am very well aware that I am not a specialist in any sense of the word and please do keep this sentence in your final recording I am not I am a student who has been given this opportunity for has been claiming this opportunity because of a particular journey that I am going through my own life, I will be learning a lot in the next 6 months about beginning and how different societies and how they define mental illness for, I would like to give an example of how amazing global perspective is that i read a story somewhere which said young boy was labelled as schizophrenic in America, is actually revered as a shaman or a seer, in Burkina Faso, which is a West African country. So the definition of illness how ill people are treated in different countries and different cultures, everything is so different and so the way in which we engage with the different people in different parts of the world

**Host-** If there is one message that you would like to give to the listeners about mental health, what would it be?

**Tanmoy-** I have a bias for communication because for me, it has worked really well. I know that if I hadn't started communicating about my disease or my condition, I wouldn't have started the healing process I know that there is right now is there a lot of cultural pressure to start talking like you know it is seen as a cool thing with increasing sort of exposure media interest celebrities talking about it there is a lot of pressure so if you are so if you have a

problem take your own time you don't have to feel pressured nobody else gets to decide what is a good time for you to start you know speaking about it publicly but what you should not delay is seeking help you know seek help from where you can, identify at least one person in your life that you can walk up to if there is no person that is readily accessible there are helplines do whatever you can to get help if you feel that, if you even have a little bit of suspicion that something might be wrong with the way you are experiencing life please seek help, don't let anybody decide when or if at all if you should go public with your story but what I would really urge everybody to do is make this a part of your life. In India, we have this we don't go to the dentist until our teeth starts falling out, you can't afford do that with your mind just like you can't afford to do that with your heart or your liver, just because it is invisible please don't ignore it don't wait for the proverbial crap to hit the roof go out and seek support so there is a lot now on the internet where you can just learn whether it is reaching out to help line or finding a therapist or just the basics do whatever it takes and I am a part of an informal group of people on social media we are always around my Twitter handle is [Toymango](#) so please if there is any way in which I can help you with information about any of these things please write to me I will try and get the information for you if I don't know myself I'll try to find someone who can help you out but it's very important I have been helped by a lot of strangers and there's now sort of become very influential part of my life so don't even hesitate to reach out to even absolute strangers. Sometimes an awkward conversation can be a beginning of something healing and life-altering so talk to somebody rest of the decision to talk about it openly publicly in office in your family your parents to your friends all of that is your decision you take your own time don't get pressured but please please do seek help whenever you need help. That's the one thing I want to tell people.

**Thank you for listening to this episode of The Suno India Show. If you or anyone you know is feeling depressed or suicidal, consider reaching out to helplines. We have made available a list of helpline numbers on our website.**

**Tamil Nadu:**

1. State health department suicide helpline number - 104
2. Sneha Suicide Prevention Centre - 044-24640050

**Telangana:**

1. Telangana government suicide prevention toll free number - 104
2. Roshni- 040-66202000, 66202001
3. SEVA- 09441778290, 040 - 27504682 (between 9 AM and 7 PM)

**Karnataka:**

1. Sahai- 24-hour helpline numbers: 080- 65000111, 080-65000222

**Kerala:**

1. Maithri helpline - 0484-2540530
2. Chaithram helpline: 0484-2361161

(Both are 24-hour helpline numbers.)

**Andhra Pradesh:**

1. Life Suicide Prevention Helpline No.78930-78930

2. Roshn -  
Helpline 1: 9166202000  
Helpline 2: 9127848584
  
1. National Institute of Behavioural Institutions, West Bengal: 09836401234
2. Vandrevala Foundation Helpline, India: 1860 266 2345  
24x7  
Email: [help@vandrevalafoundation.com](mailto:help@vandrevalafoundation.com)
3. iCall, Mumbai: +91 22 2556 3291  
Monday to Saturday, 8 a.m. to 10 p.m.  
Email: [icall@tiss.edu](mailto:icall@tiss.edu)
4. St. Stephen's Hospital and Emmanuel Hospital Association, 24x7 helpline: 1860-266-2345
5. KEM Hospital's psychiatric department, Mumbai: 022-24131212
6. Samaritans, Mumbai: +91 22 3247 3267 / 022 6565 3267 / 022 6464 3267  
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7. Aasra, Mumbai: +91 22 2754 6669 (24x7)  
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8. Jeevan Aastha helpline, Gujarat: 1800233330