

Proceedings of the International Forum on Emotional Well-Being, October 15, 2019 @ Commonwealth Bank Tower, Docklands, Victoria 3008

Supported by Mental Health Foundation Australia; Multicultural Community Banking Division of Commonwealth Bank Australia; and VicWISE

Basseer A. Jeeawody, Founder & President of EWBI

Dr Basseer Jeeawody introduced the working philosophy of EWBI using the analogy of the teamwork, purpose-driven and determination of an ant colony. This is reflected in the image currently used in EWBI's website.



Like the Ants, EWBI values teamwork and perseveres until we discover approaches, methods and solutions to emotional well-being issues that are appropriate to different communities living under different circumstances.

Basseer identified three groups of people: utilisers, traditionalisers, and professionalisers. EWBI focuses on the 'professionalisers', and adopts a pluralistic approach to address emotional well-being issues.

He explained the emotional well-being is multi-dimensional, which means it affects every facet of our life besides one's mental health.

EWBI's mission is "to leverage the emotional well-being of individuals, groups and communities for positive engagements towards building flourishing societies". This means "doing good" which leads to a sense of "feeling goodness" and "feeling well".

Basseer questioned the conventional usage of GDP and other economic indicators to gauge the state of development, while overlooking the human aspect of development, the main indicator of which is the state of emotional well-being of the people.

"Why is GDP a standard measurement for growth when it can't account for the most basic factor affecting the productivity of workers on daily basis?" he asked.

He referred to Seligman's PERMA model of happiness in helping to deal with emotional well-being issues. PERMA stands for: **P**ositive emotion; **E**ngagement; **R**elationships; **M**eaning; and **A**ccomplishments

EWBI is committed to leveraging emotional well-being towards happiness, fulfilment and productivity in the context of meeting five of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals:

- Goal 3: Good Health and Wellbeing
- Goal 4: Quality Education
- Goal 5: Gender Equality
- Goal 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions
- Goal 17: Partnerships for the Goals.

During question time Ramesh Kumar stated that EWBI should look into the emotional well-being of millions of displaced population and international students who are 'exploited' and treated as a means of revenue.

After lunch, the forum broke into working groups to discuss the current barriers and possible actions that EWBI can take to address emotional well-being issues on local, national and global level.

The following measures were listed:

- Be open to having genuine conversations.
- Listen to others.
- Project a positive attitude.
- Embrace cultural differences and acknowledge the similarities.
- Think local but act global.
- Every aspect of your life can have an impact in your life – from your food habits to what you do in your alone time.
- Find the time to balance technology dependence and human interactions.
- Train experts in current services to identify the right way to deal with a person's emotional issues.

PANEL DISCUSSION

Five panellists presented their views on how emotional well-being issues are affecting their respective communities. Each panellist had 5 minutes.

Alex Wake, *Head of Journalism Program, RMIT University*

Dr Alex Wake, a journalism academic, acknowledged the emotional trauma that journalists experienced in covering traumatic events such as the investigation of child abuse, suicides and depression, and the tsunami.

She cited the prevalence of PTSD among journalists especially female journalists who are more likely than males to experience emotional abuse in their work. Two out of five female journalists had experienced sexual harassment.

She also related her experience with international students who had gone through emotional trauma caused by cultural isolation, loneliness, and difficulties faced in a new academic learning environment. She had helped students address those issues.

Leonel Antonio Chevez

Leonel Antonio Chevez is the Hereditary Chief of the Jaguar House and the Lenca Indigenous People (*Ti Manauelike Lenca Taulepa*). He noted that conflict and violence remains in El Salvador.

He has over two decades of experience in primary care, indigenous health, leadership and cross-cultural awareness. His current work focuses on neuroscience and prevention of terrorism.

Mr Chevez lives in Australia where he works as a cultural and behavioural adviser at Neuropower, and is an international consultant in brain-based programs.

His presentation focused on the functions of different parts of our brain. Hence, he said, it is important to look into how our brain is nourished, and how we need to provide 'good food' to our brain for mental health.

He drew from his experience as a Latin American Indigenous person, and why it is crucial to empower the capacity and capability of people, and to re-connect people to their indigenous ways of improving their emotional well-being.

Melika Yassin Sheik-Eldin, AMES Victoria

Dr Melika Yassin Sheik-Eldin migrated from Eritrea to Australia in 1992. She is Manager of Settlement Partnerships with AMES (Adult Multicultural Education Services) in Victoria. She is responsible for strategic community relations and capacity building partnerships with refugee communities and sector organizations for AMES, and is a board member of the Refugee Council of Australia.

Dr Melika related her experience as a refugee and what emotional well-being means to the refugee community. Refugees, she said, often ride a roller coaster of hope and despair.

Emotional well-being for more than 65m refugees in the world is not a concept, but a reality that starts from the moment they lose hope, identity, loved ones and family. They have learnt how to survive from staying in refugee camps and come to terms of being a refugee.

Refugees sometimes face insurmountable challenges during their resettlement from negative media coverage, stereotypes, the difficulties in adapting to a new culture, language, recognition of their qualification and experience from back home, discrimination, and so forth.

EWBI should focus on effective and practical strategies in helping refugees manage and cope with emotional well-being issues. The success of these strategies is measured by how refugees are using the available services, and ultimately to feel that they are part of the wider community.

She concluded her presentation with an ode of who is a refugee with the refrain “We are ...”

Siddhanth Haresh Idnani, *Graduate marketing student, University of Melbourne*

Sidd said that 150 million people in India are dealing daily with emotional well-being issues. The majority are not treated. India recorded the highest rate of youth suicide (per capita) in the world in 2018, according to WHO estimates.

Well-being is fairly easy to understand, he said, but add “emotional” to the word, the concept and experience becomes more complex and delicate.

One could not possibly blame the government or state for the state of emotional well-being in society because it’s a personal issue, and equally hard to diagnose unless the people open up, talk about it and seek help.

Sidd also cited the suicidal ideation of international students, an emotional issue often diagnosed by doctors as bipolar, which exacerbates the situation because international students come from diverse cultural background with different understanding of emotional well-being.

He said that we need to relate to people with sincerity. This is based on his experience as a dance instructor where he eased people into opening up to share their experience with emotional well-being issues.

Mazita Mazukia, *Senior Diplomat, Consulate of Malaysia*

Mazita Mazukia stressed on the need to improve public awareness of emotional well-being issues and how they impact on different communities. In Malaysia, for instance, mental illness is a stigma and hence is not talked about openly in public or covered widely by the media.

She also alluded to the influence of social media on emotional well-being. She cited the example of a teenage girl in Sarawak, who committed suicide following an Instagram poll where she asked her followers whether she should die or live. Her suicide led the state government to take steps to address mental health issues.

Ms Mazita suggested that we needed to be better listeners of how others are dealing with emotional well-being issues. She has also spent much time helping Malaysian students address their well-being issues in Australia.

QUESTION TIME

Srinivasan, *Board member of Victoria Multicultural Commission*

Mr Srinivasan pointed out the insensitivity of service providers in dealing with African and Asian communities. For example, he said an Australian service provider had asked an African and Asian migrant why they are still living with their mother-in-law, not realising that the extended family structure in many migrant communities. He said that there is a need for service providers to undergo cultural competency training.

Ramesh Kumar

Mr Kumar asked a rhetorical question: Where do we go from here? Are we losing our humanity? He said we need to connect with our neighbour, global community, and take personal responsibility for fostering better emotional well-being in each other.

Mahek

As part of the South Asian diaspora, Mahek posed these questions: how do we communicate ways to improve emotional well-being across cultures, and how can we start a conversation?

Dr Alex Wake replied that we needed to be more civil with each other, be authentic, and “be present”, which is the mission statement of RMIT. She cited the example of survey by Australian Broadcasting Commission where three in four respondents are worried about racism in Australia.

Dr Melika said the first step is to understand the background of the person, get them involved, and give them the opportunity to get involved.

GROUP PRESENTATION

Group 1: Mahek

In the Australian context, the key points in taking actions to address emotional well-being issues are:

- Public education and raising awareness through engagement activities and knowledge sharing.

- At the national level, embed emotional well-being subject in primary school curriculum.
- At the global level, rethink and redefine concept of wealth and healing of community through the emotional well-being window.
- Provide communities with easy access to the literature on emotional well-being.
- Promote collaboration among NGOs and state authorities.
- Use social media for positive public relations and story telling to raise the Emotional Quotient rate of different communities.

The challenges are:

- How prepared are we in facing and taking up the challenges of emotional well-being given the prevailing stigma and fear of talking about it?
- Where are the funding sources for emotional well-being programs to support international students?
- Ways to overcome: collaboration among organisations,

Group 2: Wendy, *Social Work student*

The barriers of addressing emotional well-being issues are the lack of financial resources to support emotional well-being programs, especially for international students; and the lack of information, hence the lack of awareness (for instance of emotional well-being terminologies), lack of acceptance, and unpreparedness to seek help from psychologists and other mental-health professionals.

Group 3: Sean Ryan, *International student Victoria University*

This group alluded to the practical advantages of starting a “community action group” on raising public awareness of emotional well-being, particularly among the international student population in Victoria.

Group 4: Trish, *Former consumer advocate/adviser to Fed Health Ministry*

Likewise with Group 1, Trish highlighted the need to return to the grassroots in address emotional well-being issues starting with primary school kids and their parents. This also means involving the local government and media in any EWB initiatives to promote the idea of self-care (currently a well-funded project in Victoria) and person-centred care.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Dr Basseer Jeeawody reminded the forum participants of the ripple effect of what EWBI is doing. Initiatives at the local level will gradually lead to larger projects at the state, national, regional and global levels – the ripple effect.

Faith and conviction in what we do will see the ripple effect lead to tangible outcomes.

The Forum concluded with a meeting of interested persons in setting up an Australian Chapter of EWBI to be based in Melbourne. Steps will be taken to write up the Articles of Association and Constitution for ratification by EWBI board.

Cluster Directors will also form their own regional teams to promote EWB education in schools and adult education centres, media training and aged care.

Presentation by Dr Melika Yassin at AMES office in Melbourne, October 16

Dr Melika Yassin Sheik-Eldin presented to the EWBI team the community projects that AMES had implemented. AMES serves the refugee communities in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania.

She explained how AMES has provided refugee communities with free legal advice related to resettling into a new culture, finding suitable employment, English language training, self-empowerment, for instance, through the Sorghum Sisters project, and so forth.

She presented various successful evidence-based projects with refugee communities launched by AMES, for instance, community garden projects.

AMES has signed contractual work with Department of Immigration in three-year blocks across the three states.

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