



PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELLING: PRESENT STATUS, ADEQUACY OF TRAINING OF COUNSELLORS AND WAY AHEAD IN INDIAN SECURITY FORCES

Medicine

Dr Sarvadarshi Shukla*

Professor, Indian Army *Corresponding Author

Dr Alok Sati

Professor, Indian Army

ABSTRACT

The Indian Security Forces are often deployed in hostile environment and have harsh and challenging situations in which they operate. As a result, their personnel face multiple Psychological issues. Modern Armies of the world have well established channels and facilities for Provision of Psychological Counselling. A Study was carried out amongst senior medical officers, who had attended a medical officers senior command course, to obtain their inputs as regards their views on provision of Psychological Counselling services in their hospitals, the means to do so, present status, training for such proposed counsellors, and way ahead.

KEYWORDS

Security forces, Psychological counselling, Mental health

INTRODUCTION

India comprises around 18% of the global population and significantly contributes to the global burden of mental disorders. The Security forces of India face unique challenges as far as mental health is concerned. Long periods of deployment, isolation, difficult terrain, constant state of heightened alertness (in field postings), exposure to death and disability of close colleagues/ fellow soldiers, severe weather conditions, separation from family and in many cases, especially, with respect to certain ranks, almost the entire service being spent away from family are some of the issues which the serving personnel face, which predisposes them to mental health issues.

Psychological counselling means counselling or consultation with a Registered Psychiatrist/ Registered Clinical Psychologist for the psychiatric management of a mental, behavioural, psychiatric or psychological disorder. Psychological counsellors having specialised training have become a sine qua non for modern mental health support and early diagnosis and treatment of mental health disorders. Most Modern Armies like those of USA, UK etc utilise the services of Military Psychologists and counsellors extensively (1). The purpose of the current study is to explore the role, status, utilisation, training and future scope for Psychological Counsellors in the Security forces of the India.

METHOD

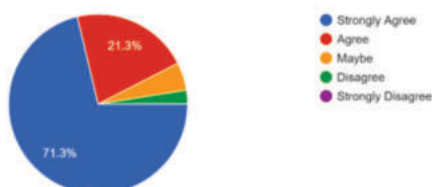
It is a descriptive observational focussed group questionnaire-based study. A brief review of literature was done to assess the importance of counselling services and methodology of providing the same. A questionnaire created on a Google form consisting of 08 questions was circulated online to senior medical administrators of the Indian Security Forces. A total of 80 senior medical officers including specialists and superspecialists and many of them commanding hospitals of the Indian Security Forces filled up the questionnaire. The observations obtained were analysed and discussed accordingly and certain recommendations given.

RESULTS

The questions asked and the response obtained for various questions asked are as mentioned below:-

(a) The first question asked was whether the senior medical administrators think that Psychological Counsellors are required in the Indian Security Forces. There were 80 responses for this questions. The response is as depicted in the Pie Chart, i.e 71.3 % (57 participants) Strongly agreed, and 21.3 % (17) agreed, 04 participants chose the option of Maybe and 2 disagreed.

Do you think Psychological Counsellors are required in the Indian Armed Forces ?
80 responses



(b) The second question asked was whether their hospital/ healthcare organisation have qualified Psychological Counsellors? The responses is as mentioned below:-

- (i) No Psychological Counsellor – 32 responses
- (ii) Psychological Counsellor present – 31 responses
- (iii) Paramedic given short duration training employed as counsellor – 06 responses
- (iv) Non-medical personnel employed as Psychological Counsellors after short duration training – 03 responses
- (v) Religious Teachers employed as Psychological Counsellors after short duration training – 08 responses

Does your hospital/ healthcare organisation have qualified Psychological Counsellors ?
80 responses



(c) The third question asked was whether their organisation/ establishment utilise Non-medical or Paramedical personnel as Psychological Counsellors after short duration training and the responses obtained are as mentioned below :-

- (i) No – 41 responses
- (ii) Yes – 39 responses

Does your organisation/ establishment utilise Non medical or Paramedical personnel as Psychological Counsellors after short duration training
80 responses



(d) The fourth question asked was What should be the modality for Armed Forces Hospitals to get well qualified Psychological Counsellors? The responses obtained are as mentioned below:-

- (i) Well trained from Outsourcing basis – 39 responses
- (ii) In House trained serving personnel – 24 responses
- (iii) Well trained as Defence Civilians – 13 responses
- (iv) Cannot Say – 04 responses

What should be the modality for Armed Forces Hospitals to get well qualified Psychological Counsellors ?
80 responses



(e) The fifth question asked was whether the Paramedical/Non medical Psychological counsellors utilised regularly for counselling activities? The responses obtained are as mentioned below :-

- (I) Sometimes/ Occasionally – 29 responses
- (ii) Yes – 26 responses
- (iii) No – 25 responses

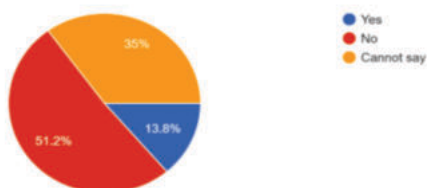
Are the Paramedical / Non medical Psychological counsellors utilised regularly for counselling activities
80 responses



(f) The sixth question asked was Do you think the training provided to Psychological Counsellors is adequate? The responses to the question are as mentioned below:-

- (I) No – 41 responses
- (ii) Cannot Say - 28 responses
- (iii) Yes – 11 responses

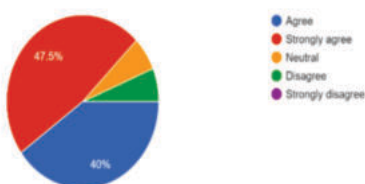
Do you think the training provided to Psychological Counsellors is adequate
80 responses



(g) The seventh question asked was Should every healthcare organisation in the Indian Security Forces have Psychological Counsellors? The responses to the question are as mentioned below: -

- (i) Agree – 32 responses
- (ii) Strongly Agree – 38 responses
- (iii) Neutral – 05 responses
- (iv) Disagree – 05 responses
- (v) Strongly Disagree – Nil

Should every healthcare organisation in the Indian Armed Forces have Psychological Counsellors
80 responses



(h) The last question asked was whether the senior medical officers think that there is scope for enhanced scope of Counselling services in the Indian Armed Forces? The responses to the question are as mentioned below :-

- (I) Agree – 21 responses
- (ii) Strongly Agree – 56 responses
- (iii) Neutral – 02 responses
- (iv) Disagree – 01 responses
- (v) Strongly Disagree – Nil

Data Analysis:

The data thus obtained was analysed and there are certain facts that emerge out of the same as mentioned below: -

- (a) A large majority of participants (74 out of 80) agree that Psychological Counsellors are required in the Indian Security Forces.
- (b) Only 31 (38.75%) of hospital/ healthcare organisation have qualified Psychological Counsellors. The rest 32 (40%) either have no Psychological Counsellors, or have religious teachers (08), or Paramedical Staff (06), or Non-Medical Staff (03) employed as Counsellors.
- (c) The responses of senior medical officers as regards utilisation of Non-Medical/ Paramedical Staff being employed as Counsellors after short duration training is equivocal (41 out of 80 state No).

- (d) A large number of officers (39, i.e. 51.25%) state that Well trained Counsellors should be obtained through Outsourcing basis. 24 stated that Counsellors should be in house trained service personnel. 13 stated that defence civilians can be utilised as counsellors after due training.
- (e) A large number (68.75%) of participants stated that in their healthcare organisations Non-medical and Paramedical staff are either sometimes/occasionally or always utilised as Counsellors.
- (f) Only 11 (13.75%) participants felt that the training provided to Psychological Counsellors in Security Forces is adequate.
- (g) 87.5% of the participants responded that all organisations in security forces should have Psychological Counsellors.
- (h) Almost all (96.25%) of the Senior medical Officers felt that there is scope of improved/ enhanced training to be provided to the Counsellors in the Security Forces.

DISCUSSION

Psychological Counsellor and Counselling have become an essential and inescapable part of Modern Psychiatric treatment and mental health support being provided in all Psychiatric centres/ hospitals and many modern security forces of the world also extensively utilise the services of Psychological Counsellors (1). Psychological Counselling has become such a vast field with tremendous implications and applications right from Cognitive behavioural therapy to deaddiction, treatment of Post Traumatic Stress Disorders, Psychological preparedness, etc.

The goal of counselling is to help individuals overcome their immediate problems and also to equip them to meet future problems. Counselling, to be meaningful has to be specific for each clients involving his/ her unique issues and expectations.

Counselling is aimed at helping the individual in solving problems that are already present, preventing the occurrence of problems in future and also enhancing personal, social, emotional, educational and vocational development. Thus, psychological counselling has remedial, preventive and developmental aspects.

The aim of Psychological Counselling is also to provide universal access to equitable, accessible, affordable and quality mental health care and exponentially scale up the reach of counselling services to anybody who reaches out.

The Society for Counselling Psychology in the USA states that Counselling Psychology is a generalist health service (HSP) specialty in professional psychology that uses a broad range of culturally informed and culturally sensitive practices to help people improve their well-being, prevent and alleviate distress and maladjustment, resolve crises, and increase their ability to function better in their lives. It focuses specifically but not exclusively on normative life-span development, with a particular emphasis on prevention and education as well as amelioration, addressing individuals as well as the systems or contexts in which they function. It has particular expertise in work and career issues. (2)

The Security Forces of the country owing to their diverse nature of deployment and due to presence of continuous state of heightened alertness have difficult and different work environment as compared to other security organisations as well as civilian counterparts. The Security forces of India face unique challenges as far as mental health is concerned. Long periods of deployment, isolation, difficult terrain, constant state of heightened alertness (in field postings), exposure to death and disability of close colleagues/ fellow soldiers, severe weather conditions, separation from family and in many cases, especially, with respect to personnel in non gazetted ranks, almost the entire service being spent away from family are some of the issues which the serving personnel face, which predisposes them to mental health issues.

Military/ Combat psychology can be defined as a sub specialization field of psychology that deals with promoting the readiness, resilience, altruism of military personnel in training, research and analysis and operations by applying the principles of psychological sciences. As far as clinical military psychology is concerned, it deals with proving psychological intervention for mental health issues, psychological preparedness and traumatic experiences, usually in a clinical setting (3)

The incidence of Suicides in the Security Forces of the country has been 1113 from 2010 to 2119 and according to the data provided by the government in the Parliament. Out of these 1113 cases, 891 cases took place in the Army, 182 were in the Air Force and 40 were in the Navy. (4)

Modern Armies like USA, have a very well established Psychiatric and counselling services at all levels, including providing Psychiatric consultations at Command levels wherein expert mental health advice is provided to commanders too. The Military Psychiatrist provide primary preventive screening to psychiatrist consultations at remote levels and there is great thought and attention paid to the uniform, behaviour, approach, disclosure etc of the psychiatrist.

All the above emphasise upon the fact that Psychiatrist and counselling services have a great role to play in the Security forces because of the peculiar nature of their role, deployment conditions and occupation.

Presently the Security Forces of the country through the Medical Corps does provide Preventive, Promotive and Curative services are being provided through a network of Psychiatry centres and Community Outreach Programme to train commanders at all levels. Major Security Forces hospitals have well equipped Psychiatry centres capable of providing high quality care and support for psychological conditions. Psychological counselling by trained military psychological counsellors, and training of counsellors is undertaken regularly. Religious Teachers in the security forces besides preaching religion are also being trained to augment the availability of psychological counsellors in units and provide requisite care in community settings. In some stations, a telephone helpline 'Mansik Sahayata' has been established for psychological counselling services at all Head Quarters. Creation of an integrated network of counselling with follow up services of medical and psychosocial interventions including video consultations has also been undertaken in some stations.

However, the Medical Corps does not have a identified appointment of Psychological Counsellors in its hospital establishment. Although Many Psychiatry centres have employed Psychological Counsellors on hiring/outsourcing basis, but all centres do not have the same.

Psychological counsellors as part of the Mental Health services should have the potential to provide support for technical issues, collaborative consultations, capacity building, implementation, service provision, monitoring and evaluation, research and innovations.

There is a need for having a station psychology counselling centre at all stations, especially wherever Field medical setups or hospitals located in bigger centres. This is felt because of recent rise in number of alcohol dependence and suicide cases.

The Security Forces of the country have been utilising the services of para medical personnel (Nursing Technicians/ Nursing Assistants personnel) or Non-Medical Personnel (Religious Teachers) who have undergone short courses in Psychological Counselling at various Psychiatric Centres. However, their utilisation is not always uniform and optimum, due to varied causes including their aptitude in providing consultative services, different nature of their primary jobs, spread out deployment at times, and scant opportunities for refresher cadres. The importance of Counselling services is also not always apparent to all commanders.

The following recommendations are offered with regards to the future role and utilisation of Psychological Counsellors in the Armed Forces Hospitals and in the organisation as such:-

- (a) It is essential to realise that Mental Health Support and Counselling Services need to be made available at all levels and in all stations. These should not be restricted to Psychiatric centres.
- (b) Medical Officers at levels should also be trained in mental health disease diagnosis, treatment, counselling and preventive and promotive strategies.
- (c) Well trained Psychological Counsellors should be made available either through hiring/ outsourcing basis in all Military Hospitals. These counsellors can work in association with medical officers in non-psychiatric centres and approach the Psychiatrist in higher centres for referral purposes.
- (d) Creation of a Psychological task force for each station including various mental health promotive strategies, counselling services, child and adolescent psychiatric and mental health support,

review of all soldiers having psychiatric illnesses etc.

- (e) Utilise trained counsellors in peace time or field medical organisations to counselling services and various other activities as mentioned above. Specific training regarding handling of cases of Alcohol dependence, marital discord and early detection of signs of depression can be provided by Psychiatrist in form of video conferencing/ regular training modules.
- (f) These counsellors need to sit in civil clothes in and in an open and congenial atmosphere wherein serving personnel or families can approach without the fear of stigmatisation and be able to perform their counselling in an empathetic and unobstructed manner.
- (g) There should be a system where they can refer to local medical est and need for further management decided.
- (h) The Paramedical and Non-Medical Personnel being sent for undergoing Psychological Counselling courses should be carefully selected and should have an aptitude for undertaking this very sensitive activity.
- (j) There should be a system of roster of the such people who have been trained, regular appraisal of the counselling activities being conducted by them, and also refresher cadres for them in Psychiatric centres.
- (k) A tele mental health or a hot line for seeking mental health support should be available in all stations and at all times. The Govt of India has established a Tele Mental facility by the name of TELE-MANAS SCHEME (Mental Health assistance and Networking Across States). Tele MANAS is a comprehensive Mental Health Care service in India. Rs. 120.98 crore has been allocated for National Tele-Mental health programme (NTMHP). Tele-MANAS services are available in 20 languages provided through 130 Mental Health Professionals, 173 District Mental Health Program Personnel and 580 Tele-MANAS Counsellors (5).

CONCLUSIONS

Mental Health and Psychological support through counselling services has garnered immense importance and their rising awareness on their provision in all segments of the society. The Security Forces Personnel are at increased risk because of the peculiar nature of their role, deployment and risks faced by them. Psychological Counselling services through provision of well qualified counsellors through outsourcing basis should be implemented in all military hospitals. Appropriate training to Para medical/ Non-medical Personnel (who have suitable aptitude) and suitable utilisation can also serve as immense force multipliers at remote locations where it may not always be possible to send counsellors. Provision of Tele mental health services should also be made available at all stations. All the above recommendations will help in reducing the incidence of suicides, marital discord, mental health illnesses amongst the serving personnel and their families.

REFERENCES:

- [1] MILITARY PSYCHIATRY PREPARING IN PEACE FOR WAR, Office of The Surgeon General Department of the Army, United States of America et al, a, FRANKLIN D. JONES, M.D., F.A.P.A. LINETTE R. SPARACINO, M.A, 1994
- [2] What is Counseling Psychology. www.div17.org. 2023-03-14.
- [3] Military Psychology- Need, Scope and Challenges, Mansi Sharma, Indian Psychology, ISSN 2348-5396 (Online) | ISSN: 2349-3429 (Print), Volume 9, Issue 2, April- June, 2021.
- [4] <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/819-incidents-of-suicide-reported-in-armed-forces-in-last-5-years-govt/articleshow/92982361.cms> The Times of India, 19-07-2002.
- [5] <https://telemanas.mohfw.gov.in/#/home>.