

## **Stories from a pandemic: A Podcast by It's OK To Talk**

### **Episode 1: Breakdown or Breakthrough?**

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### **Contributors**

- **Vikram Patel** is a psychiatrist, a researcher, and an author. He has spent the better part of his life and career figuring out how to bring better mental health care to low-resource communities -- especially by teaching ordinary people to deliver basic mental health services. Vikram is a professor of global health at the Harvard Medical School and co-founder of Sangath. His work spans the areas of mental health problems, child development, and adolescent health, in particular, how we can use community resources for assessment, prevention, and recovery (especially focused in low-resource countries). In 2003, he wrote an illustrated book “Where There Is No Psychiatrist” which has become a widely used manual for community mental health in developing countries, the 2nd edition was launched just last year. He co-founded the Movement for Global Mental Health (a virtual network of individuals and organisations that aim to improve services for people living with mental health problems and psychosocial disabilities across the world). He was named in the TIME 100 Most Influential People of 2015. He is especially interested in and a promoter of the arts - especially as a medium for talking about personal experience and mental health.
- **Kehkasha** is pursuing a Master's degree in history and lives in New Delhi. She works with the YP foundation as a community leader.
- **Divya Hariharan** is an experienced social impact and development sector professional. Passionate about social inclusion issues, she has contributed towards several research, consulting, and implementation projects. She has worked in challenging low-income, low-literate settings across India with marginalized communities. Her focus and priority are to build consciousness on and understanding of the importance of mainstreaming gender within large scale policy making and program design. She received her education at the London School of Economics and Political Science with a Master's in Gender Studies. She also holds a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from Hindu College, Delhi University. She is an avid reader and a fitness enthusiast. She is currently working as a Senior Research Manager with BBC Media Action, India.
- **Suraj\*** is a 32-year old development practitioner based in Delhi. He's an avid reader, enjoys cooking and playing the piano, and is fond of traveling. He's autistic and has been diagnosed with bipolar affective disorder.

### **Host**

**Pattie Gonsalves** works in the areas of public engagement and digital interventions to improve adolescent and youth mental health. She is currently a Project Director at Sangath (India) with the PRIDE research programme where she leads the design and evaluation of a digital intervention for school-going adolescents in low resource settings. Pattie also leads It's Ok To Talk ([www.itsoktotalk.in](http://www.itsoktotalk.in)), a national anti-stigma campaign for young people's mental health. As part of this initiative, Pattie currently leads a new Wellcome Trust funded project, “Mann Mela”, that is setting up awareness-building immersive media museums for youth mental health in five cities across India. Pattie holds an MSc in Global Health from the University of Oxford and is completing her PhD from the University of Sussex

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## Transcript

Host: One of COVID 19's most **powerful** effects has been its ability to hold up a mirror to our society, both at a global level and at a deeply personal one - showing us things in ourselves we have long avoided or preferred not to see at all. While this pandemic will pass, we **cannot** expect life to return to the way it was before. It's more important **now** for us to imagine futures in which the scars may remain but we are **changed** by this experience, to be more resilient instead of vulnerable - ~~so that we are~~ able to see not only the post-Covid era but also the future, with *hope*.

Welcome to Stories from a pandemic, a podcast by Sangath It's Ok to Talk project. Sangath is a mental health research organization in India and I'm your host Pattie Gonsalves. I am a mental health researcher and campaigner. To identify some key and immediate concerns that young Indians are facing we hosted virtual discussions with young people from different parts of the country at the end of 2020. Let's hear from 3 of them on how they experienced this last year.

Kehkasha: I lost two of my friends in one day from my life, I felt I stopped investing in people in terms of love or making friends, I stopped all that. I think I am losing myself because of that. Whatever is happening right now I couldn't come out of that mental state.

Divya: A day that stands out to me is when I met my father at the hospital and was able to have a conversation with him for the last time. I was asked to come back to the hospital and was told by a panel of 7 or 8 doctors that there's only a 5% chance of survival that my father has, given his condition.

Suraj: The uncertainty of it all, not knowing what's going to happen or tomorrow is going to look like. Earlier from now how it's going to look like.

**Host: You just heard from 3 young people we talked with, Suaj, Divya and Kehkasha. We will be hearing from them more in this episode. Stories from a pandemic will share experiences with you about how a few Indians adapted to life during the pandemic and how they reimagine the ways in which they continue to live, learn and work after the pandemic.**

**In the opening episode, I am excited to be talking to the professor, Dr Vikram Patel, a globally renowned psychiatrist and researcher. Vikram is the Pershing Square professor of Global health at the Department of Global Health and Social Medicine at Harvard Medical School and Co-founder of the Indian NGO- Sangath. Welcome Vikram, we are so happy to have you on the show. Could you tell our listeners a little bit about yourself?**

Vikram: Thanks for inviting me to the show, Pattie. I trained in medicine in Mumbai and had a long journey to Zimbabwe, Australia and then back to India and I've lived in India for the past 25 years researching all aspects of mental health. For the last few years, I've worked at Harvard Medical School and I split my time between India and the U.S. I'm really passionate about one thing more than any other and that is every single person in the world has the right and capabilities to enjoy the best quality mental health.

Pattie: Could you also tell us one thing you discovered about yourself in this past year?

Vikram: I think that when I reflect on the last year probably the most important thing, I discovered was the simple pleasures in life that I had become actually pretty ignorant of and I'd overlooked the simple pleasures that cost me nothing whether that's cooking a meal for my family and friends, whether it be walking the dog, or just watching a film with someone I like

Pattie: Thanks for sharing that, I'm sure many of our listeners can relate to that, not just in India but around the world. You've written extensively and talked both in India and at a global level about how COVID 19 is not creating a new mental health crisis but expanding an existing crisis that has been around for a long time. Could you tell our listeners how we can make sense of this and begin to put mental health front and center especially in India's response to and recovery from COVID 19? To me, it almost feels like an insurmountable challenge.

Vikram: I think you are absolutely right. We had a crisis well before COVID 19 but it was under the radar, I think what COVID 19 has done has brought that crisis into full view but we should not believe for a moment that this crisis was created by COVID 19. It existed for years if not decades. We've just simply ignored it. Now here is the opportunity that COVID 19 presents which means that we can finally pay attention to this incredibly important but neglected issue in young people's well-being. I think the most important lesson that COVID 19 also teaches us is the importance of community, of acting together as one nation, as one community towards addressing the critical determinants that affect our well-being, whether it is for example how we relate to each other as citizens of our country, how we build a healthcare system that addresses all people's needs across the country that is not fragmented for example, according to how much money you earn, what you can afford. This is the time for solidarity, to work together towards promoting everyone's well-being.

Pattie: And for those of us who campaign for young people's mental health, one of the big questions is what is the most meaningful way a young person can be involved in this as well?

Vikram: I think young people are the central demographic here. I mean it's not just because of numbers you keep hearing in India, you know. The so-called demographic dividend is because we have hundreds and millions of young people but it's because young people are that particular demographic that is the agent of social change more than any other demographic in any society across time in history. Most revolutionaries have come from this particular demographic group, people who've changed the world. Let's look at Greta Thunberg as an inspiration, I'm sure for everyone. It's young people who have the greatest amount of hope because also, they are the longest horizon in which, to look at the future of the world that they inherit and so I think young people have to be in the driver's seat for the change that we need to see happen.

Pattie: Thanks, Vikram. I think that's a fantastic way to visualize this. And what about you, when you were young and looked into the future at your own horizon, what was your biggest concern?

Vikram: I have to say, I had a pretty misspent youth and I don't even remember much of it but what I do remember is that growing up in the 1970s in India, the world seemed a lot simpler a place to live in than what it must feel to teenagers and young people. For example, that was a great time of hope. There was a sense that our nation was moving forward as one. Issues like climate change were not even on the horizon and the kind of hate filled politics we see around the world and in this country in particular simply did not

exist. So, I think there was a period of enormous hope when I was a young person and actually, I had a pretty good youth from what I can remember. But also, I must emphasize, I come from a very privileged background and my experiences reflect my privileges.

Pattie: And when you reflect on your experience of the pandemic, can you recall one important day that stands out to you and could you tell our listeners more about that day?

Vikram: To be sure, I wasn't thinking very far in the future at that stage in my life. I was thinking more or less about tomorrow and I think a lot of young people are like that. Not every young person is thinking about changing the world and that's okay. I think most young people just want to have a good life for now and maybe in the future and I think it was probably in that group. I certainly will tell you one thing; I wasn't a kind of young person who wanted to change the world.

Pattie: Let's go back to the three young people we heard from at the beginning of the episode. First, let's meet Kehkasha. She just began her masters at a university in Delhi. She's muslim and lives in a primarily muslim community area. She also works with a local NGO on a girls' empowerment project.

Kehkasha: The issue which surfaced for me during the pandemic was that of discrimination. Historically, we have all read about prejudice and discrimination in books but experiencing it was a very different feeling. The incident which took place, Tablighi Jamaat one and afterwards the way the Muslim community was being targeted and the anti-national scenario which took place, watching the political upheaval on television did not affect me personally as such but when I started seeing people I considered friends putting up anti-Muslim comments such as get out of this country, etc. I felt very bad looking at all this because I identify with both communities, Indian and Muslim. I cannot be expected to choose between them. I talked to my professors about this as I was unable to work on assignments or read, I love reading. To channel all this anger and hurt as well as to cope with the situation, I took up social work. So, I joined an organization and they offered me a project which involved consulting work and I liked the idea because it involved working within a community. The aim of that project was to explore how the pandemic affected the society and it was about increasing and strengthening leadership skills among girls and women. So, what I learnt from my experience is, acceptance, like I always used to deny the hurt I'm feeling and trivialize it. I think it's very important to accept the pain and feel it if you want to move ahead. If you aren't in your best mental space, we need to accept it and go with the flow because uncertainty is the essence of life. We don't know anything for certain. So, believe in humanity and spread happiness.

Pattie: So, for Kehkasha the pandemic was scary as it brought to light another very difficult reality. What do you make of Kehkasha's story?

Vikram: What a moving and inspirational account by this young woman. There's so much in there. I'm gonna just pick a few things I took away. First of all, of course the impact the pandemic has had on her mental health, the bereavements that she experienced, the uncertainties that she speaks to but I think more profound is the direct demonstration of how the hate filled politics of our country is affecting the well-being of young people. Of course, it's easy for us to see this as the problem of only the minority community that is the target of hate but I want to remind all our listeners that it is the majority community that has to really act because ultimately our hate filled society will affect everyone. Those of us who stand around watching this hate filled politics breed are complicit. We have plenty of historical accounts of the tragedies that have befallen nations as we have allowed hate filled politics to spread in those countries and

I think this is the moment of reflection for every single Indian about the kind of society that we want. One, in which a whole section of our people is terrorized by fear or one way we can all live in trust and solidarity with each other but I think the positive thing that this young woman teaches us also through her experiences is how you can turn such a terrible situation into something positive by becoming involved with community action and I think our listeners should know that there is a profound science to this. The science that demonstrates that when you reach out with compassion to one another, you're not just doing charity for others, you are not just helping others in a patronizing way but you are actually, most importantly helping yourself. The single biggest beneficiary of helping others is yourself and we gave very strong evidence on how this not only improves your mental health but actually also improves your life expectancy. So, this through the words of this young woman, we can see how this is playing out and I'm just truly inspired.

Pattie: I think that's such an important reminder for us all, the very real connection between compassion, reaching out to others around us and how that actually helps us the most. Thanks, Vikram. And what do you make of the reality that Kehkasha speaks of where a young person is being forced to hide a part of their identity?

Vikram: First of all, I have to say we live in a terrible society if anyone has to hide their identities. It speaks to the larger social ills and I'll be very clear to all our listeners that we must work towards a society where no one has to hide their identity and to try and push the emphasis on protecting yourself to the individual is the worst possible kind of world that we would have created. Nevertheless, of course, we live in a world like that and I think the answer to your question would be that you have to form connections through the various networks that young people can naturally discover both through social media but also through the informal networks we have in our communities to identify others like us who can understand us and with whom we can actually have a social group. It's important to remember and I want to emphasize this that the vast majority of young people everywhere want a world that is free of this sort of discrimination. It is the minority who have actually allowed, who are vociferous, who are vigorous and who are violent and I think it is for that silent majority to express itself to create the world that we all want.

Pattie: Now, let's meet Divya, a researcher and professional from Delhi who tells us about a day that she can never forget when she lost her father to COVID 19. In spite of her very difficult experience, she tells us that the pandemic has shown her hope in the midst of immense grief.

Divya: Loss of a family member was definitely challenging because in my case, I cannot disentangle COVID from what happened. I lost Dad to COVID and I think that was the moment when the pandemic became very real for me. While we were able to perform all the last rites, we were able to cremate him, go through that entire process... i it also made me think about all the families that probably didn't even have that opportunity come their way given how excruciatingly painful loss during this time has been. So, definitely it's been an emotional journey and one that's been very very difficult and it continues to be. The pandemic isn't over and I have conversations with other people about their experiences with COVID and in some cases even loss. Everything just comes rushing back and I try to work my way through it and there are moments when it's difficult to rationalize the whole experience and also find yourself at a spot where you start questioning your luck and whether you really had to be on the receiving end of it all.

Pattie: What do you make of Divya's story?

Vikram: Divya's story captures a number of different themes and again, I'm just going to focus on a few that I think are really important. The first, of course is the profound grief associated with losing a parent. I think there can be probably no more painful an occasion than that in your life, maybe short of losing your child. And I think especially when you lose a parent or a loved one in the context of the pandemic, it's completely unexpected. It's out of the blue, this wasn't the result of a long-term illness. You weren't prepared for it, emotionally and I think she really speaks to that grief very vividly. But again, I think Divya shows how you can deal with the grief in ways that are very positive. She speaks particularly of the environment, the social scaffolding that helps people deal with these adversities. Particularly, in her case her employer and I think that's an important, very important observation that at the workplace, the employer has such an important role and it's such an influential role in terms of promoting the wellbeing of everyone in the workplace and in the way that her employer responded to her needs is exemplary. It's a lesson really for all workplaces. I think the other thing that she said which struck me as really incredibly important is that it's okay to be vulnerable. It's okay not to be okay. And it's therefore also okay to tell other people that they're going through a difficult time. I think this is so important. We don't understand the exact mechanism why this happens but every one of us surely has that experience that simply sharing our distress with someone else makes the distress much less and I think that's something very powerful about the act of sharing and that alone gives everyone hope in the way that she described it because I would hope that every single one of us at least has one person we just have to think about, who in our social network that might be. I'm sure everyone of us has at least one person that we can turn to, to share experiences and feelings of distress and I would encourage everyone to do that if that moment should come.

Pattie: Thanks for sharing that Vikram. Another interesting feature of the pandemic has been how it has in many ways shifted the burden of caregiving from parents, grandparents or other caregivers to the younger generation, to children and young people. Infact, I've experienced this in my own life with an 81-year-old Dad, a 72-year-old Mum who I was supervising almost policing in fact for the first few months of the lockdown. What do you think this really tells us?

Vikram: I think what the pandemic has brought into sharp notice is the weakness in our healthcare system, complete absence in our healthcare system of supporting families who are caring for people with terminal illnesses, degenerative conditions and diseases. I'll tell you what, it reminded us we desperately need such a system to be put in place. Right now, we are thinking of covid but countless more families are affected by caring for older relatives with conditions like dementia, Alzheimer's disease, strokes etc. and we have absolutely no system in place to support those families. You're absolutely right. There is a burden of care. In the old days, typically we lived in large extended families where there were always a few people around in the house who could care for the people who were sick. Today actually we live in small nuclear families not only are we finding that there is competition between having to go to work and caring for the person at home but here is a really difficult question: what about the elderly people who have no one to care for them? and I think this is what we should turn our attention to the mental health needs of the persons caring for those who are actually sick but those who are sick themselves and have none to care for them and if there was one thing young people should do right now is to become a powerful movement to advocate the need, the government's responsibility to deliver a long term care system in the community

Pattie: We now hear from Suraj, an entrepreneur and development worker from Delhi. He loves to read, travel, and also cook. He is autistic and lives with bipolar disorder. While some of the things that most young people in our discussions reported struggling with, for example, social isolation, were not such a big challenge for Suraj, he struggled with things such as access to mental health care and important medication that he needed. Let's listen to Suraj's story and what he learned through the pandemic.

Suraj: Managing a chronic mental health condition, through the pandemic, brought some challenges, small and big. one of the smaller challenges was facing the idea of getting COVID 19, of facing a dire prognosis but one of the greater challenges was dealing with all the changes that this condition and the way the world was dealing with it, brought about in life, so it interrupted life, it interrupted the sameness in life and it also interrupted my mid-term plans so things that I had planned not just on how to go about my day, but also about how to go about the next 6 months, the next one year of life and the uncertainty of it all, the not knowing what's going to happen, how tomorrow is gonna look like, how a year from tomorrow is going to look like... at the same time, I have learned that one needs to be a better manager of their time at all times and has to be prepared for the worst-case scenario because sometimes, unpredictable things are going to happen.

Pattie: What do you make of Suraj's story?

Vikram: Suraj's story reminds me that while we've heard a lot about the impact that the pandemic has had on the mental health of the people in the community, we don't talk enough about the impact that the pandemic has on people who already had an existing mental health problem and I think, we need to pay particular attention to this vulnerable group. Vulnerable because the pandemic through various ways, of course, affects the mental health of everyone but you can imagine that if you already had vulnerabilities related to your mental health the effects are likely to be even greater. Not least because your routine care, care of all health problems was disrupted by the pandemic, and that, of course, includes mental healthcare. We now know from studies that have been done in the other parts of the world, that when people with mental health problems also get infected with COVID, the outcomes are much worse, the reasons we don't know for sure why, but we do know they are much worse, so Suraj is right to be concerned and I just hope that he was able to access good quality mental health care despite the barriers imposed by the pandemic but like all the other stories I've heard, the other things that Suraj says that is really inspirational is, his ability to look at the future with hope in spite the predicament he is facing right now and I do believe that hope is THE most powerful sentiment that we should all keep in mind. We must always remember that this is an extraordinary situation, someone quoted - A black swan movement and it is, certainly, in my 56 years, I have never experienced anything as unbelievably extraordinary as this and this situation affects us all. we are all in the same boat, some of us may travel in a yacht, others in a rowboat, but we all get to the shore, the safe shore together.

Pattie: Suraj was one amongst many of the young people we talked with, who spoke at length about resilience. With other young people, we spoke with, it seemed they felt the pressure to feel resilient, something they needed to experience and describe to others around them. What do you make of this and is this helpful in terms of coping with the impacts of COVID or another similar crisis?

Vikram: I think resilience is a very important but also an overused concept, at its basic resilience means the ability to bounce back when you face a difficult situation, but I think that the way that resilience has often been interpreted that it's all about the individual and therefore if you can't bounce back, it's the individual who's at fault - "you're not strong enough; look at your neighbour, he too is living in a COVID situation, but look he's got on with life and you haven't", so it's as if something wrong with you and I reject that idea of resilience. I think all the evidence shows that resilience is not just an individual, internal capability, resilience is also determined by the extent to which society has made the resources that any individual needs to be able to cope with these difficulties available and accessible. In the absence of those resources, all individuals will have difficulty being resilient. So, we must all remember that resilience is an interaction between our social and our inner world.

Pattie: The three stories that we heard highlight the unprecedented nature of what has happened and how every aspect of life has been affected. they also show us precisely this connection or the lack of it between our social world and the inner world and how that makes all the difference, based on the lessons that you have learned through the pandemic, If you could go back to March 2020 and give yourself a message to listen to, what would it be?

Vikram: I think the emotions that I faced in the first few weeks of the pandemic were characterized by overwhelming anger, rage. Actually I would say that. Rage at the way you know more than a billion people had been locked down. I could not comprehend how we could live in a country that could do this to ourselves to people in my country. I felt rage when I saw millions of people chucked out of their work, I felt rage when I saw people having to walk with their kids and belongings and die on the way. I couldn't believe that I could live in such a cruel country. I've now realized that rage was perhaps misplaced and I kinda look back and should have turned my rage into something productive, I should have become involved in community actions as many people did to work with those who were as it were outcast by the wealthy of this country who just looked away, but of course, in Goa, it was a very different world where I was locked down, there was actually very little of this, this was just images that were being beamed into my life through the television. so I turned my rage into writing and I wrote quite a lot especially in the *Indian Express* in which I've had a regular column. You know I don't think it had any great impact but it's a way of me being able to sublimate, to displace my anger into something that at least gives me some relief. More recently I've become much more involved in turning that anger into something productive by looking at how one can contribute to and support the millions of our fellow country people who've been denied jobs and who have lost their jobs and who are struggling with their livelihoods and that is what I can tell all our listeners we can do- we can turn all our disappointments and anger into something socially meaningful and productive and I'm still learning how to do that.

Pattie: Thanks for that honest and encouraging response. Today we've talked about how we stand at an important point in our journey as individuals and as a community. Whether we look at the last year as a breakdown or a breakthrough. During the research for creating this podcast, we talked to a range of young people from across the country. Many of their voices will be featured across the next five episodes of this series in discussions about how to positively use social networking, how to address pressures to be productive while navigating disruptions to our routine, and shifts to online work and study, how to cope with grief and loss, whether COVID has impacted suicides and how we can explore hope in a seemingly desperate time. My final question to you Vikram, is how do we begin to look ahead with hope?

Vikram: I'm reminded of something one of the young people said on this show, which is, first of all, accept the present, I think that's a very powerful message, don't fight it. Things that are happening around the world are very powerful forces, they are actually beyond the control of ordinary human beings, they are even beyond the control of countries we've seen. So don't fight it, accept it and remember as I mentioned earlier that we are all in the same boat and we are sailing all together in the same direction. Always be hopeful as one of the other young people said on the show and this too will pass. Combination of acceptance and hope to me are the most important things to have at this time.

Pattie: Thanks very much, Vikram for your insights and for your own story too.

Vikram: Thank you so much and also thank you for the wonderful coffee you brought to this recording.

Pattie: Thank you to our listeners for tuning in. Today we spoke about how we can take a position of hope and of finding breakthroughs as we reimagine our futures together. we can find links to more information and helpful resources on our website - [www.mannmela.in](http://www.mannmela.in). Stories from a pandemic, lessons in hope are supported by the Wellcome Trust as a part of our Mann Mela project and thanks to our studio engineer Ishaan Gandhi and producer Faith Gonsalves.