

Empowering Mothers, Transforming Lives

A Training Manual for Mothers of Children with Disabilities



Conducted by :



In collaboration with:



Empowering Mothers, Transforming Lives:

A Training Manual for Mothers of Children with Disabilities

Conducted by:

Centre for Counselling, School of Social Work
Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati Off Campus

in collaboration with

Shishu Sarothi, Centre for Rehabilitation & Training for Multiple Disability
Guwahati

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Kalpana Sarathy

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Foreword

Parents and families of persons with disabilities often face innumerable challenges in a world that is fraught with barriers of various kinds. Yet they raise their children with disabilities and train them to cope with adversities and overcome challenges. These struggles often impacts the caregivers in terms of their own health, both physical and psychological. Their spirits however often remain strong and unbroken. I am privileged to write this foreword to the manual, 'Unbroken Spirits' which will serve as a guide for training mothers and families whose spirit I salute. We are extremely grateful to Shishu Sarothi and Ms. Ketaki Bardalai for reaching out to TISS, Guwahati regarding this initiative to conduct a parental support group for mothers of children with disabilities.

Dr. Meghali Senapati, Assistant Professor, Centre for counselling, School of Social Work, TISS, Guwahati Off-campus took this forward readily and conducted eight sessions that were designed to be cathartic, offer support and most importantly empower women whose children live with disability. Dr. Meghali Senapati's contributions combine her years of experience as a social worker with an orientation to mental health and feminist perspectives and all these will richly impact training and support. This manual is an outcome of this process. It is designed to help women identify their challenges and address them by empowering them with an ability to cope with stress in ways that do not add to their problems. I wish that this manual is able to make the desired impact and that it will be used to organise trainings that benefit women who are caregivers for persons with disabilities.

Kalpana Sarathy



Ketaki Bardalai
Executive Director
Shishu Sarothi

Foreword

Caregiving has traditionally been the responsibility of women and mothers of children with disabilities, world over have been playing the role of caregivers with remarkable stoicism. Their work is hard as they have to manage the acute and extraordinary needs of their child and it becomes more arduous with children with disabilities such as cerebral palsy, autism, intellectual disability, deaf blindness, as it requires considerable physical and mental strength, that many young mothers are often unprepared for. Even as they struggle to understand the nature and needs of their child and accept the reality of their children's condition, they have to navigate the ominous medical advice, family pressures and negative emotions of blame, rejection and even abandonment. They juggle with emotions as they manage their multiple responsibilities and duties as a wife, a daughter-in-law, a working woman, a housewife, and a mother to their child with disabilities as well as other children without disabilities. They often have to forego their own dreams and aspirations as caregiving responsibilities take over their lives.

At Shishu Sarothi, in our Early Intervention and Education services, we are witness to all that the brave mothers of our children go through. My colleagues and I are acutely aware of the need to shore up their spirit and build their resilience and stay positive. I am extremely grateful to Prof Kalpana Sarathy and Dr. Meghali Senapati for their help and support in taking our mothers through a process of reflection, introspection and finding their inner strength and resilience.

This manual will serve as a guide for us in the future and will help us to sustain such efforts to build capacities of our mothers to "... get the tough going, when the going gets tough."

Ketaki Bardalai

Acknowledgment

With a heart overflowing with gratitude, I extend my deepest appreciation to the extraordinary individuals who made Empowering Mothers, Transforming Lives: A Training Manual for Mothers of Children with Disabilities a reality. This journey was not just about conducting sessions—it was about hope, healing, and the collective strength of mothers who carry the immense weight of love and responsibility. Their stories, their struggles, and their resilience have forever changed the way I see the world.

My heartfelt thanks to Ms. Ketaki Bardalai, Executive Director of Shishu Sarothi, whose clear vision and deep compassion set this journey into motion. Her belief in the urgent need for support and empowerment was the spark that brought us all together.

To Prof. Kalpana Sarathy, Dean of the School of Social Work, TISS Guwahati off Campus—your steadfast encouragement and unwavering trust in this initiative guided us through every step. Your leadership made this possible.

Mridula Barua, Deputy Director of the Centre for Education, your patience, wisdom, and commitment enriched our discussions in ways that words cannot fully capture.

Ms. Jayashree Bharali, Counsellor at Shishu Sarothi and my co-facilitator in this journey—you were the force behind every session. Your tireless dedication and empathy ensured that no mother felt alone, and for that, I am forever grateful.

My colleague Dr. Pomi Mahanta for taking the session on Understanding Mental Health – it was extremely useful and insightful.

And my dear students - Debadutta, Mohana and Naren for being the helping hands.

Above all, my deepest, most profound gratitude goes to the mothers who walked this path with us. You came to this space with your fears, your exhaustion, your endless worries about the future—and yet, you showed up. You shared, you listened, you held each other up. Your strength, your vulnerability, your love for your children—it is nothing short of extraordinary. As a fellow mother navigating the complex terrain of parenthood I was your student, learning invaluable lessons of resilience, compassion, and the boundless capacity of the human spirit to endure and overcome. **This manual is for you.** And this journey, this fight for recognition, support, and dignity—it will not end here.

With all my heart,



Dr. Meghali Senapati
Asst. Prof. & Centre Chair
Centre For Counselling, School of Social Work
Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati Campus

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Empowering Mothers, Transforming Lives:

A Training Manual for
Mothers of Children with Disabilities

Abstract

The Empowering Mothers, Transforming Lives, training manual was developed to support mothers of children with disabilities. A collaboration between Shishu Sarothi and the Centre for Counselling, School of Social Work, TISS Guwahati off Campus, this initiative was born out of an urgent need for sustained mental health interventions. The tragic suicide of a mother highlighted the immense emotional and social burdens these women carry, from caregiving challenges to financial struggles and societal invisibility.

This manual provides insights into the intersection of disability, gender, and mental health, along with an overview of India's disability sector and key policies like the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. It documents an eight-week training program (August–November 2023) designed to empower mothers through sessions on emotional well-being, coping strategies, and self-empowerment. More than just a resource, this manual is a testament to their resilience and the pressing need for comprehensive caregiver support.

1. Introduction

Motherhood is often romanticized as an inherently fulfilling role, yet for mothers of children with disabilities, it is interwoven with relentless caregiving, structural inequities, and profound emotional and psychological burdens. The invisibility of care work, especially in contexts where women bear the burden of employment and caregiving, exacerbates their struggles. Feminist scholars have long critiqued the societal expectation that women should perform care work without recognition or support, often at great personal cost. For mothers of children with disabilities, this cost is magnified manifold, as they grapple with social stigma, financial strain, lack of institutional support, and deep-seated anxieties about their children's futures. These struggles are not merely personal but are embedded in systemic inequities that intersect across gender, disability, and socioeconomic status. Despite the crucial role they play in the well-being of their children, their struggles remain largely invisible, unrecognized, and uncompensated.

This manual, developed through a collaborative initiative between Shishu Sarothi and the Centre for Counselling at the School of Social Work, TISS Guwahati off Campus, seeks to address these concerns by offering structured psychosocial support and capacity-building opportunities to empower mothers navigating these adversities.

The Intersectionality of Disability and Motherhood

The experiences of mothers of children with disabilities must be understood through an intersectional lens, recognizing the convergence of gender, class, socioeconomic status, and disability. Women, are often the primary caregivers within families, facing disproportionate expectations to prioritize caregiving over personal aspirations. For mothers of children with disabilities, these gendered burdens intensify due to additional caregiving responsibilities, financial constraints, and the lack of accessible support systems. Their struggles extend beyond personal sacrifices to structural inequities—limited healthcare access, inadequate social security, and the persistent stigma surrounding both disability and mental health. These factors amalgamate to create an environment where feelings of helplessness and despair are prevalent, sometimes culminating in tragic outcomes, as evidenced by the suicide of a mother in this very community.

It has been internationally recognized that women and girls undertake a disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work, including childcare and support for persons with disabilities. The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) stressed the need to promote the equal sharing of responsibilities by prioritizing, inter alia, social protection policies, and infrastructure development and has called for sustained investments in the care economy.

Support systems for persons with disabilities of all ages largely rely on families, particularly women. Meanwhile, the changing dynamics of today's world have led to more women working and juggling unpaid support and care demands that are not only unfair to them but also puts those requiring support at a higher risk of abandonment.

The Disability Sector in India and Assam

India has made significant legislative strides in recognizing and addressing disability rights, notably through the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016. This Act guarantees the rights of individuals with disabilities to education, employment, and social protection, mandating reasonable accommodations and non-discrimination.

According to the 2011 Census, India had over 2.68 crore persons with disabilities, with Assam reporting approximately 4.5 lakh individuals with disabilities. Though a significant population lives with a disability, yet access to services, inclusive education, and economic opportunities remain significantly constrained (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011). In Assam, where resources are even more scarce, families of children with disabilities face heightened marginalization. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016, provides a legal framework for inclusion, but its implementation remains uneven, leaving families to navigate bureaucratic and social barriers with little institutional support (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2016).

The mental health of mothers of children with disabilities is a critical but often overlooked aspect of disability discourse. Research highlights that caregivers of children with disabilities experience significantly higher rates of anxiety, depression, and burnout compared to other parents (Singer, 2006). The social determinants of mental health—including poverty, gender inequality, access to healthcare, and social support—play a crucial role in shaping these experiences (Marmot et al., 2008). In low-resource settings such as Assam, the absence of structured psychosocial support intensifies feelings of isolation and despair, sometimes culminating in tragic outcomes. The heartbreaking suicide of a mother served as a wake-up call, highlighting the urgent need for sustained mental health interventions for mothers and ultimately leading to the development of this particular training program

Social Determinants of Mental Health in Mothers of Children with Disabilities

The mental health of mothers of children with disabilities is shaped by a range of social determinants, including economic security, social support networks, healthcare accessibility, and cultural attitudes toward disability. Studies indicate that caregivers of children with disabilities report higher rates of depression, anxiety, and chronic stress compared to other mothers (Gupta & Singhal, 2004). The relentless caregiving demands, coupled with limited respite options, contribute to emotional exhaustion and caregiver burnout. In Assam, where mental health services remain scarce and stigmatized, these challenges are exacerbated, leaving many mothers without the necessary psychological and social support to cope effectively.

The Training Program: A Journey Toward Empowerment

Recognizing these challenges, Shishu Sarothi, a leading organization in Assam dedicated to working with children with disabilities and their families, reached out to the Centre for Counselling, School of Social Work, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Guwahati Off-Campus, for collaborative intervention. The shared mission was clear: to provide a structured support system that not only equips mothers with coping mechanisms but also fosters a sense of community and self-empowerment.

The training program, conducted from August to November 2023, unfolded over eight interactive sessions, each designed through participatory methods that centered the voices and lived realities of the mothers. The sessions encompassed goal-setting, exploring aspirations, managing stress, understanding mental health, and pathways to economic self-sufficiency.

These themes were deliberately chosen (in consultation with the mothers) to address the intersecting challenges of care work, financial independence, and psychological resilience.

One of the most profound outcomes of this initiative was the transformation witnessed among the participants. The program culminated in a Valedictory Program entirely orchestrated by the mothers themselves—a powerful testament to their growth, solidarity, and renewed sense of agency. The celebration was not just a conclusion but a reaffirmation of the strength that emerges from collective healing and shared struggles. The program reaffirmed that peer support, community engagement, and structured interventions can serve as powerful catalysts for positive transformation.

2. Overview of the training sessions

Session 1: Introduction and Goal Setting

In the inaugural session, participants were welcomed into a nurturing environment where they could openly share their experiences and aspirations. Led by facilitators, the session began with setting the tone for the training program and establishing a safe space for discussion. Through interactive activities and guided reflections, mothers were encouraged to articulate their personal goals and aspirations. This session aimed to foster a sense of community among participants and lay the foundation for future sessions focused on personal growth and empowerment.

Session 2: Exploring Aspirations and Identities

Building upon the foundation laid in the first session, participants delved deeper into their aspirations and the challenges they face. Through the "Problem Tree" activity, mothers collaborated to identify the root causes of their challenges and explore potential solutions. This session provided a platform for participants to share their experiences and support one another in navigating the complexities of raising disabled children. By acknowledging their aspirations and confronting obstacles, participants gained clarity and resilience to pursue their goals.

Session 3: Stress Management and Coping Strategies

The third session centered on equipping participants with practical tools for managing stress in their daily lives. Facilitators guided discussions on the importance of prioritizing mental well-being and introduced coping mechanisms such as expressive art therapy and mindfulness practices. Participants engaged in hands-on activities to explore these techniques and develop personalized strategies for stress management. This session aimed to empower mothers with the skills and resilience needed to navigate the challenges of caregiving while maintaining their own well-being.

Session 4: Understanding Mental Health

In this session, participants focused on understanding the signs and symptoms of mental health issues and taking ownership of their mental well-being.

Through interactive discussions and activities, facilitators provided insights into the biopsychosocial model of mental health and emphasized the importance of seeking support when needed. Participants explored strategies for promoting mental wellness in their daily lives and gained confidence in recognizing and addressing mental health concerns. This session aimed to destigmatize mental illness and empower participants to prioritize their mental health needs.

Session 5: Introduction to Peer Counselling

The fifth session introduced participants to the concept of peer counselling and its role in providing support and empathy within communities. Facilitators led discussions on active listening, empathy, and non-judgmental communication skills essential for effective peer counselling. Participants practiced these skills through role-playing exercises and shared their experiences of offering and receiving support. This session aimed to foster a culture of mutual aid and empowerment among participants, laying the groundwork for future peer support initiatives.

Session 6: Taking Care of Self (Expressive Art)

Recognizing the importance of self-care in maintaining overall well-being, this session focused on exploring practical self-care practices for participants. Facilitators guided discussions on various self-care methods such as meditation, laughter therapy, and physical activity. Participants engaged in experiential exercises to experience the benefits of these practices firsthand and develop personalized self-care routines. This session aimed to empower participants to prioritize their own needs and cultivate resilience in the face of adversity.

Session 7: Recognising Mental Illness

In this session, participants deepened their understanding of mental illness and addressed the stigma surrounding it. Facilitators provided insights into different mental health conditions and encouraged open dialogue about the challenges of seeking support. Participants shared their personal experiences and learned about available resources for mental health support. This session aimed to promote empathy and understanding towards individuals with mental illness and empower participants to advocate for mental health awareness in their communities.

Session 8: Becoming an Entrepreneur

The final session focused on exploring entrepreneurship as a viable livelihood option for participants. Facilitators discussed the benefits and challenges of starting a business and provided practical guidance on entrepreneurial skills and resources. Participants brainstormed business ideas and developed action plans for pursuing their entrepreneurial ventures. This session aimed to empower participants to take control of their financial futures and pursue economic independence while balancing their caregiving responsibilities.

Introduction and Goal Setting

Objective:

To provide a supportive space for the mothers of children with disabilities enrolled at Shishu Sarothi to express their emotions, understand the aim of the training program and together plan for future sessions.

Materials Used: Flip chart paper/ White Board, Markers, Timer & Music player

Session Overview

The introductory session began in an atmosphere heavy with emotion. The recent loss of one of the mothers to suicide had left the group shaken with grief, helplessness, and unspoken fears. It was in this deeply sensitive context that the sessions began – The mothers arrived with visible agitation, expressing grief, helplessness, and concern for their own well-being and that of their peers. Recognizing the urgency of their emotional needs, the session was designed to provide a space for expression, support, and collaborative planning for the program's future sessions.

Welcome and Introduction: The session commenced with a heartfelt address by Ms. Ketaki Bardalai, Executive Director of Shishu Sarothi. She warmly welcomed the mothers, acknowledging their invaluable role in their children's lives and emphasizing the importance of prioritizing their own mental health and well-being. Her words set a compassionate tone for the session, reinforcing the idea that seeking support and sharing experiences is not just beneficial but essential.

The facilitator then took over, facilitating the session and encouraging mothers to engage with honesty and openness. From the very beginning, a participatory approach was emphasized, ensuring that the mothers had an active role in shaping the structure and content of the program.

Icebreaker Activity: To foster connection and ease any initial apprehensions, the mothers were paired off for a simple but effective icebreaker. They spent five minutes getting to know each other, discussing their interests, hobbies, and emotions. Following this, each pair introduced their partner to the larger group. This activity helped build a sense of camaraderie, breaking down barriers and reinforcing the shared experiences that connected them.

Group Sharing : The heart of the session was an open group discussion where the mothers candidly shared their thoughts, emotions, and experiences. They spoke about their journeys at Shishu Sarothi, highlighting both the joys and the struggles of raising a child with a disability. The conversation provided a cathartic release for many, offering them reassurance that they were not alone in their challenges. Through this sharing, they also articulated the kind of support they hoped to receive—both from each other and from future sessions. Additionally, this discussion served as a key moment to establish the goals for the overall program, as mothers reflected on their needs and the direction they wanted the sessions to take them.

Shaping the Programme: A Participatory Approach

Out of this sharing emerged a critical need—to shape the rest of the program in a way that would provide real, tangible support. The mothers were asked what they needed most, what would help them move forward. They responded with clarity:

- Sessions on coping with stress and anger
- Building emotional resilience for themselves and their children
- Creating a peer support network to ensure no one felt alone
- Learning self-care strategies that fit into their demanding lives

As each suggestion was noted down, there was a shift in the room. The helplessness remained, but alongside it, a sense of agency began to emerge. This was not just a training program—this was their program, built around their needs, designed to ensure that no mother ever felt alone again.

Reflections

By the end of the session, the tension had not disappeared entirely, but it had transformed. The grief was still present, but it was now accompanied by something else—determination. The program had begun not just as a training session, but as a collective journey of healing and empowerment. And for me, what started with hesitation ended with a deep understanding of the strength in that room.

This was only the beginning.

Moments Captured



Exploring Personal Aspirations and Identities

Objective: To empower participating mothers in identifying their aspirations through shared experiences.

Materials Used: Flip chart paper, Markers, Timer & Music player

Building on the reflections and emotions shared in the first session, the second session focused on helping the mothers of children with disabilities articulate their personal aspirations and identify the challenges that hinder their pursuit. The session was designed to provide both a structured space for self-exploration and a participatory activity that allowed for collective problem-solving. Recognizing that caregiving responsibilities often consume their identities, the session aimed to reaffirm the importance of their personal dreams while also addressing the systemic and social barriers they face.

Recap of the First Session

The session began with a brief reflection on the key takeaways from the previous discussion. Participants were invited to share insights, emotions, and any thoughts that had emerged since the last meeting. Many mothers expressed how the opportunity to share their struggles and experiences in the previous session had been both cathartic and validating. This opening discussion reaffirmed the need for continued dialogue and mutual support within the group.

Discussion on Aspirations

The facilitator then introduced the theme of aspirations, emphasizing the role of personal goals in mental well-being. The discussion highlighted how having a sense of purpose contributes to resilience, reduces stress, and fosters emotional well-being. As the conversation unfolded, the mothers began sharing their personal dreams—some spoke of resuming their education, others expressed a desire for economic independence through small businesses, while some longed to engage in creative or social activities that once brought them joy. There were also moments of hesitation, as some struggled to articulate their aspirations, having spent years prioritizing their children's needs over their own. Despite these uncertainties, a common thread emerged—**the longing to reclaim a sense of identity beyond their caregiving roles.** The facilitator acknowledged the social conditioning that often restricts women's aspirations, reinforcing their roles solely as caregivers. Through gentle prompts, the mothers were encouraged to recognize their contributions as "home managers," challenging the notion that their labor is invisible or insignificant.

Problem Tree Activity

To further explore the barriers that prevent them from achieving their aspirations, the mothers participated in a Problem Tree activity. Divided into small groups, they worked collaboratively to visually map out the challenges they face.

- The trunk of the tree represented the challenges ("*Bor Gos*" in Assamese).
- The roots symbolized the root causes ("*Xipa*") of these challenges.
- The leaves illustrated the implications of unfulfilled aspirations ("*Paat*").

As the groups engaged in discussions, they identified a range of interconnected challenges—financial constraints, lack of family support, societal stigma, exhaustion from caregiving, and limited opportunities for skill development. Some noted that even when opportunities existed, they often lacked the confidence or time to pursue them. The act of mapping out these challenges visually allowed the mothers to **recognize patterns and systemic barriers that extended beyond their personal circumstances.**

Group Presentation and Discussion

Each group then presented their Problem Tree, explaining the different layers of challenges they had identified. The facilitator guided the discussion, helping participants reflect on commonalities across their experiences. The exercise provided validation—many realized they were not alone in their struggles, and that their barriers were not personal failures but **rather structural and societal limitations.**

Discussion on Stigma and Discrimination

The session concluded with an open discussion on stigma and discrimination, particularly how societal attitudes toward disability impact their lives. Mothers shared experiences of being excluded from social events, encountering judgment from family members, and facing isolation due to their children's disabilities. The discussion emphasized the need for collective advocacy and self-empowerment, reinforcing that challenging stigma requires both external societal change and internal recognition of self-worth.

Reflections

By the end of the session, a shift in perspective was evident. The mothers, who initially struggled to articulate their personal goals, left with a deeper awareness of their aspirations and the barriers they needed to overcome. More importantly, the session fostered solidarity, as they recognized the power of shared experiences in finding solutions.

An **intersectional approach** helped deepen this understanding, allowing the group to see how privileges and sanctions coexist in their lives. While some of the mothers had financial stability or jobs, their experiences as women in a patriarchal society still constrained their choices and freedoms. Others, despite lacking financial security, had supportive family structures that enabled them to navigate caregiving more easily. Through this lens, they were able to see that oppression is not uniform—it is shaped by multiple, overlapping factors such as gender, class, family support, and societal norms.

This realization reinforced the **importance of collective advocacy**—that their struggles, though personal, were part of a larger systemic issue that required both external change and internal self-recognition of worth. With growing confidence, the mothers looked ahead to the next session, ready to continue their journey toward reclaiming their identities, building resilience, and challenging the limitations imposed upon them.

Moments Captured



Coping with Stress

Objectives: To understand the causes of stress and its implications on mental health and to learn coping strategies for managing stress effectively.

Materials Used: Whiteboard and markers, Expressive art supplies (paper, colouring materials), Glasses of cold water & Projector

The third session unfolded with a focus on stress management, resilience, and self-expression through art. The mothers, bound by their shared journey of raising children with disabilities, gathered once again, carrying with them the emotional weight of caregiving. The facilitator initiated the discussion with a fundamental yet often overlooked distinction—mental health versus mental illness—urging the group to reflect on how mental well-being requires ongoing care and self-awareness, just as physical health does.

Unpacking Stress: Recognizing Its Manifestations

As the conversation deepened, the mothers articulated the varied ways stress manifests in their lives—the constant demands of caregiving, the isolation from social circles, and the unrelenting pressure to advocate for their children's needs. These shared narratives brought an undercurrent of solidarity, reinforcing the importance of creating spaces where mothers could express their vulnerabilities without judgment. The feminist lens illuminated the gendered burden of caregiving, acknowledging that while mothers shoulder the primary responsibility of care, societal structures offer little in return to support their emotional or financial well-being. Many of them had financial stability or jobs, yet their roles as women constrained their autonomy, reinforcing the idea that privilege and oppression can coexist. The session encouraged them to reclaim their voices and agency within these complex realities.

Expressive Arts Therapy: Transforming Pain into Symbols of Hope

To channel stress into creative expression, the facilitator introduced expressive arts therapy, explaining how art serves as a non-verbal language through which emotions can be processed and transformed. The mothers were handed sheets of paper and encouraged to write down their deepest fears, anxieties, and frustrations—the thoughts that weighed them down daily. In an act of release, they then tore these papers into small pieces, symbolizing the act of letting go. What followed was a powerful collective act of reimagining—using the torn fragments, they worked together to create collages of hope and resilience. Butterflies emerged, symbolizing transformation and freedom, while rainbows took shape, embodying hope and the promise of new beginnings. Each piece reflected the deeply personal yet universally shared journey of navigating hardships and reclaiming inner strength.

As they looked at their creations, a sense of catharsis and empowerment filled the room—what was once a manifestation of pain had been reconstructed into symbols of renewal.

Mindfulness: Finding Solace in the Present Moment

To further ground the mothers in the present and alleviate stress, the facilitator guided them through a simple yet profound mindfulness exercise—drinking a glass of cold water. They were asked to pay attention to the sensations—the coolness against their lips, the gentle movement of water down their throats, the feeling of refreshment that followed. This small act, often overlooked, served as a reminder of the power of being fully present, of slowing down amidst the chaos of daily life.

The Carrot, the Egg, and the Coffee Beans: A Lesson in Resilience

As the session neared its end, the facilitator introduced a metaphorical reflection—the story of the carrot, the egg, and the coffee beans. Each element reacts differently when exposed to boiling water—

- The carrot softens, representing those who feel weakened by adversity.
- The egg hardens, symbolizing those who become emotionally closed off as a response to challenges.
- The coffee beans transform the water, demonstrating the power of adaptation and positive change.

The group discussed their personal reactions to difficulties and how they could strive to be like the coffee beans—resilient, adaptable, and capable of transforming adversity into strength.

Reflections

The session concluded with a discussion on the importance of social support. The facilitator reminded the mothers that while their journey may feel isolating at times, they were not alone—they had each other, **a community of women who understood** and uplifted one another. Through an intersectional feminist lens, the session highlighted the multiple layers of struggle these mothers navigate—not just as caregivers but as women subjected to societal expectations, financial challenges, and emotional exhaustion. The act of creating art, practicing mindfulness, and reflecting on resilience served as a powerful step toward reclaiming their individuality beyond caregiving.

As the mothers looked at their artwork—butterflies ready to take flight, rainbows stretching toward brighter tomorrows—they left with a sense of renewed strength. Their struggles had been acknowledged, their voices had been heard, and most importantly, **their capacity to transform pain into power had been affirmed.**



Understanding Mental Health

Objective: To enhance understanding of mental health through the biopsychosocial model, recognize warning signs, take personal and collective responsibility for mental well-being

Materials Used: Paper, pens, markers, Hand labels marked "B" (Biological), "P" (Psychological), and "S" (Social), Chart Papers & Projector

The fourth session centered on self-awareness, mental health responsibility, and the interconnected nature of mental well-being. The slogan **"My Mental Health, My Responsibility"** became the guiding theme, emphasizing that while external challenges exist, individuals can actively engage in understanding and managing their mental health. Through interactive activities and deep reflection, the session highlighted how biological, psychological, and social factors collectively shape mental well-being, reinforcing the need for a holistic approach to mental health care.

Personal Reflections: Owning One's Mental Health

The session opened with a personal reflection exercise. Each participant was given paper and asked to design a cover page titled "My Mental Health, My Responsibility", using their preferred language and illustrations. As they decorated their pages, they were encouraged to recall moments of sadness and introspectively analyze the reasons behind them.

The facilitator introduced the biopsychosocial model, guiding them to break down their experiences into three dimensions:

- Biological Factors – such as hormonal changes, genetic predispositions, or physical health conditions that impact mood.
- Psychological Factors – including self-esteem, cognitive patterns, and past trauma influencing emotional responses.
- Social Factors – like family dynamics, financial stress, and societal expectations that shape mental well-being.

Many participants realized that their struggles were not just personal failings, but rather interwoven experiences shaped by various forces. This realization helped ease self-blame and opened the door to self-compassion and seeking support.

Biopsychosocial Model Activity

To physically demonstrate the interconnected nature of mental health, the facilitator conducted a group activity. Each participant received a label marked "B" (Biological), "P" (Psychological), or "S" (Social). They were then asked to form groups and tightly hold hands before attempting to navigate through a series of twists and turns set up in the room.

As the participants struggled to move while holding hands, they experienced firsthand how each element—biology, psychology, and social environment—impacts mental health in complex ways. Some groups found themselves stuck in difficult positions, unable to move forward, mirroring how life's challenges can sometimes feel inescapable. However, by working together, adjusting positions, and communicating, they found ways to untangle themselves and move forward. This activity highlighted a crucial lesson: mental health struggles are rarely isolated to one cause, and just as untangling the group required cooperation, addressing mental health requires a multifaceted approach.

Recognizing Warning Signs: Collective Responsibility

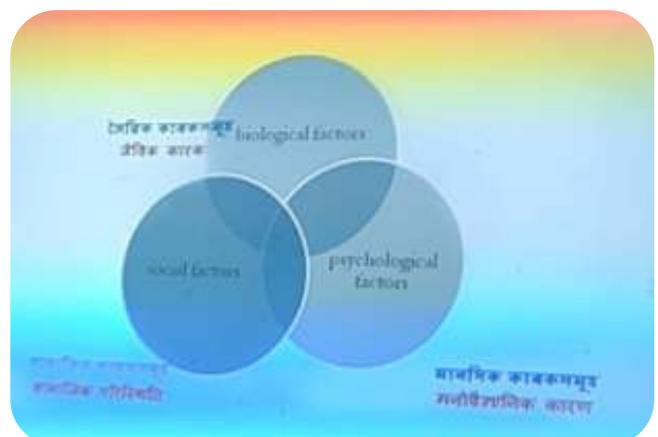
The session transitioned into an open discussion about warning signs of mental health challenges. Participants shared personal experiences and observations, while the facilitator highlighted key indicators, such as:

- Persistent sadness or emotional numbness
- Mood swings and irritability
- Social withdrawal and loss of interest in activities
- Changes in sleep and appetite
- Substance use as a coping mechanism
- Thoughts of self-harm or suicide

The conversation expanded to the unique challenges faced by individuals with disabilities, emphasizing that their mental health is often overlooked due to societal biases. The facilitator reinforced the collective responsibility to create an inclusive environment where mental health struggles are acknowledged, and support is accessible.

Reflections: Throughout the session, participants engaged in thought-provoking discussions and hands-on activities, deepening their understanding of mental health as a multidimensional experience. The slogan "My Mental Health, My Responsibility" resonated deeply, reminding them that while external factors influence well-being, proactive steps can be taken to build resilience. As the session concluded, participants left with a greater understanding of mental health through the biopsychosocial model, a sense of empowerment to recognize and address warning signs and a commitment to supporting each other and advocating for mental health visibility. The session was not just about awareness, **but about ownership**—embracing the idea that each individual has the power to take charge of their mental well-being, while also uplifting those around them.

Moments Captured



Peer Counselling

Objective: The objective of this session was to introduce participants to the concept of peer counseling and to familiarize them with counseling techniques, particularly active listening.

Materials Used: Whiteboard and markers, Projector

The session was a journey of reflection, learning, and skill-building, introducing the mothers to the world of counselling and peer support. The facilitator began by recapping previous discussions and activities, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of counselling as a practice of empathy and connection.

Understanding Counselling

The conversation opened with a discussion on what counselling means, allowing the mothers to share their perceptions and experiences. Some associated it with mental illness, while others viewed it as guidance and support. To clarify misconceptions, the facilitator drew inspiration from media and popular culture, particularly the movie *Dear Zindagi*, to illustrate how counselling differs from psychiatric intervention. The emphasis was on empathetic listening, confidentiality, and the power of a safe space where individuals can **share without fear of judgment**.

Developing Counselling Skills Through Activities

To make the learning experiential and engaging, the session incorporated two key activities:

Whisper Game – The Power of Attentive Listening : The session transitioned into a playful yet insightful activity—the Whisper game. As a simple message traveled through the group, it gradually became distorted, leading to laughter and realization. The activity highlighted how miscommunication can alter meaning, reinforcing the need for active, careful listening in counselling and everyday interactions.

Discussion on Active listening : Active listening is a skill that enhances communication, fosters understanding, and builds trust in the process of counselling. It involves fully concentrating on the speaker, understanding their message, responding thoughtfully, and retaining the information.

Discussion on Active listening : Active listening is a skill that enhances communication, fosters understanding, and builds trust in the process of counselling. It involves fully concentrating on the speaker, understanding their message, responding thoughtfully, and retaining the information. There are different types of active listening, including reflective listening, where the listener paraphrases or summarizes the speaker's words to confirm understanding; empathetic listening, that focuses on understanding emotions and perspectives; and critical listening, which involves analyzing and evaluating the message. By practicing active listening, the mothers discussed how this simple activity can help improve relationships, reduce misunderstandings, and create a supportive environment where they feel heard and valued.

Counselling Process through Role-Play : A visual presentation followed, outlining the step-by-step process of counselling, preparing participants for a hands-on exercise. In pairs, they took turns playing the role of both a counsellor and a client, practicing attentive listening, non-judgmental presence, and empathetic communication. The exercise encouraged them to observe body language, offer validation, and listen without interrupting, helping them grasp the nuances of providing emotional support without imposing solutions.

The Power of Peer Counselling and Collective Support

Beyond individual counselling, the facilitator introduced the concept of peer counselling, emphasizing how support systems within peer groups can foster resilience and collective well-being. Participants reflected on how mutual understanding, shared experiences, and emotional validation can create a sense of belonging and strength, helping them navigate their challenges together. The discussion naturally led to a deeper realization—peer support is not just about helping an individual, but about raising collective consciousness. By sharing their struggles and listening to each other, they were not only offering support but also recognizing that their personal challenges were interconnected with larger social realities. This awareness laid the foundation for collective action and empowerment.

Reflections

As the session concluded, the mothers reflected on the fulfillment and empowerment they experienced in supporting and being supported. Many expressed how the process of empathetic listening and sharing had created a space of healing and connection, reinforcing the importance of companionship in their journey toward mental well-being.

With newfound skills and a strengthened sense of community, the group left the session feeling uplifted and inspired, ready to carry forward their collective journey of growth, healing, and empowerment - : finding strength in one another

Moments Captured



Taking Care of Self

Objective: To emphasize the importance of self-care and introduce effective self-care practices for maintaining good mental health.

Materials Used: Presentation slides/ projector, Meditation cushions (if available), Music player and speakers and Space for dancing

Amidst the relentless responsibilities of motherhood, self-care often takes a backseat, overshadowed by the demands of caregiving. Yet, it is precisely in these moments of self-neglect that the importance of self-care shines the brightest. This session delved into the critical role of self-care in sustaining mental and emotional well-being, helping mothers recognize that self-care is not a luxury, but a necessity for resilience and balance.

The session opened with a heartfelt discussion on the significance of self-care, with mothers sharing their personal struggles in carving out time for themselves. The facilitator, drawing from personal insights and experiences, emphasized that taking care of oneself is an essential part of being able to care for others.

Exploring Accessible Self-Care Methods

Recognizing that self-care must be practical and sustainable, the session focused on five time-tested self-care methods, demonstrating how they can be easily integrated into daily life:

Meditation – Finding Calm in Chaos

Participants were introduced to simple yet effective meditation techniques, to promote mindfulness and relaxation. With nothing more than a quiet space and a few moments of focus, meditation emerged as a powerful tool for grounding oneself amidst daily stressors.

Reaching Out – The Power of Connection

The discussion emphasized the importance of seeking support from peers, family, or community members, reinforcing that self-care is not just an individual act but also a collective one.

Laughter – A Natural Stress Reliever

To highlight the therapeutic effects of laughter, the group engaged in a laughter exercise, experiencing firsthand the power of shared joy in lifting spirits and alleviating stress.

Listening to Music – An Instant Mood Booster

Music's ability to soothe, energize, and heal was explored, encouraging participants to incorporate their favorite tunes into daily routines for emotional release and relaxation.

Outdoor Activities – Movement as Self-Care

Outdoor activities, even something as simple as going to the market, offer a much-needed break from daily confinement, providing fresh air, social interaction, and a sense of independence. Discussions centered on how mothers could support one another by taking turns babysitting, creating a shared caregiving network that allows each of them moments of respite and self-care.

Self-Care as a Daily Practice

Through shared narratives and experiential activities, the session underscored that self-care is not reserved for rare moments of respite but can be woven into the fabric of everyday life. By prioritizing their well-being, mothers not only replenish their own strength but also model self-compassion and emotional resilience for their children.

As the session concluded, participants reflected on the profound impact of taking time for themselves, recognizing self-care as a beacon of hope in their caregiving journey—offering moments of rejuvenation, connection, and renewal amidst life’s myriad challenges.

Reflections

The session on self-care was a reminder that caring for oneself is not selfish but essential, especially for mothers navigating the demands of raising children with disabilities. Many participants reflected on how they often placed their own needs last, feeling guilty for taking even small breaks. However, through discussions and activities, they realized that self-care is not about grand gestures but about small, intentional acts—taking a deep breath, sharing a laugh, listening to music, or stepping outside for a short walk. The idea of outdoor activities, even something as routine as going to the market, emerged as a crucial way to break the cycle of isolation. The discussion on collective babysitting sparked hope, as mothers envisioned a support system where they could take turns, allowing each other moments of rest and freedom. Moving forward, they left with a renewed commitment to prioritizing their well-being, recognizing that by nurturing themselves, they could also be better caregivers, partners, and individuals.

The session culminated in a joyful dance session, where participants let go of inhibitions and embraced the moment through movement. Dancing to Bollywood and Bihu music, they reconnected with their **bodies and emotions, symbolizing the liberating power of self-care.**

Moments Captured



Recognising Mental Illness

Objective

The objective of this session was to equip participants with the knowledge to recognize signs of mental illness, address stigma, and foster a supportive community where seeking help is encouraged. The session was conducted by Dr. Pomi Mahanta from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

Materials Used: Documentary: "Nurturing Mental Health" from the television show Satyamev Jayate, hosted by Aamir Khan, Documentary viewing setup (TV or projector)

Recognizing Mental Illness

This session held deep emotional significance, unfolding in the shadow of a tragic loss—one of their own had succumbed to stigma and helplessness, leaving behind a void that many mothers carried as survivor's guilt. The weight of "What if we had done more?" lingered heavily in the room. In response, this session became not just a technical discussion but a collective act of healing, offering knowledge, reflection, and the hope of doing better for one another.

Documentary Screening: Nurturing Mental Health

The session began with the screening of Satyamev Jayate's episode on Nurturing Mental Health, which featured real-life stories of individuals struggling with mental illness and the stigma attached to it. The documentary highlighted how mental health issues often go unrecognized or dismissed, leading to devastating consequences. Watching these stories unfold on screen evoked a mix of emotions—recognition, grief, and a deeper understanding of what their friend might have gone through. Many mothers related to the experiences shared, realizing how common and yet invisible these struggles are.

Understanding Mental Illness and Its Signs

Following the screening, the facilitator guided a discussion on various mental illnesses, including Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Schizophrenia, and Depression. The focus was on recognizing signs and symptoms in oneself and others—such as prolonged sadness, withdrawal, mood swings, erratic behaviors, and indirect cries for help. This discussion served as a crucial learning moment, equipping the participants with knowledge to identify distress signals early.

Confronting Stigma and Seeking Help

One of the most powerful parts of the session was the open conversation about stigma. Many mothers expressed how societal shame and fear of being labeled had often prevented them or others from seeking help. This discussion brought a profound realization—that silence and shame are often the biggest barriers to healing. The facilitator emphasized the importance of talking about mental health openly and normalizing seeking support.

Recognizing that awareness must be paired with action, information on government mental health services, particularly the Lokopriya Gopinath Bordoloi Regional Institute of Mental Health, Tezpur, was shared. The goal was to ensure that no one would feel alone in their struggles and that professional help is both available and accessible.

Reflections

As the session came to a close, the weight of the discussion settled in. For many, it was an emotional release—acknowledging grief, guilt, and responsibility in a way they hadn't before. The group reflected on the importance of looking out for each other and ensuring that no one else would have to suffer in silence. There was a collective agreement to be more observant, to listen more carefully, and to offer support without judgment.

Moving forward, the mothers resolved to create a safe space within their community—where conversations about mental health would not be hushed, where seeking help would be encouraged, and where no one would feel alone in their struggles. The session ended not just with knowledge but with a shared commitment: to recognize, to support, and to stand by one another—because mental well-being is not an individual fight, but a collective responsibility.



Becoming an Entrepreneur

Objective: To brainstorm and explore feasible livelihood options for mothers while ensuring they can still

Materials Used: Whiteboard and markers, Flipchart paper and markers, Documentary viewing setup (TV or projector), Pen and paper for note-taking

Amidst the ongoing challenges of caregiving, the final session focused on a crucial social determinant of mental health—economic empowerment. This session was born out of the **mothers' own demand**, as many of them, despite being qualified, found themselves unable to pursue livelihood opportunities due to the relentless responsibilities of care work. The patriarchal understanding of motherhood, especially for mothers of children with disabilities, compounded their struggles, making them feel guilty for considering their own needs. The financial burden of medical expenses, coupled with dependence on husbands, in-laws, or parents, added to their frustration. This session aimed to explore pathways toward self-reliance and financial stability, ensuring that livelihood aspirations could coexist with caregiving responsibilities.

Introduction and Discussion on Livelihoods and Mental Health

The facilitator opened the session by highlighting the significant role of economic independence in fostering mental well-being. The discussion underscored how financial stability not only alleviates stress but also instills a sense of purpose and agency. Mothers shared their personal experiences of feeling financially dependent and the emotional toll it took on their self-worth and decision-making power.

Brainstorming Livelihood Options

The group engaged in an interactive brainstorming session, identifying potential livelihood opportunities that aligned with their skills, interests, and time constraints. The discussion revealed a wide array of possibilities, including tailoring, homemade food businesses, online tutoring, interior decoration, yoga instruction, and freelance photography. The mothers carefully considered options that would allow them to earn while still prioritizing the needs of their children.

Documentary Viewing on Self-Help Groups (SHGs)

To provide insight into collective economic strategies, the group watched a documentary on Self-Help Groups (SHGs). The documentary highlighted how SHGs function as financial support systems, enabling women to pool resources, access loans, and start small businesses. The real-life examples of women who achieved financial independence through SHGs inspired many in the group to consider the feasibility of forming their own collective.

Discussion on the Significance of SHGs

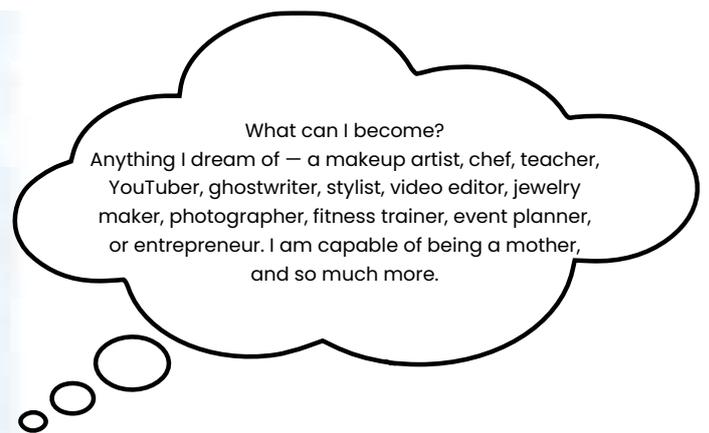
Following the documentary, the facilitator led a discussion on how SHGs could be an empowering model for the mothers. They explored the dual benefits of SHGs—not only as a means of financial independence but also as a support network where women could share skills, experiences, and emotional encouragement. Recognizing the immense potential of such collectives, the group considered initiating their own SHG as a step toward financial autonomy.

Reflections and Moving Forward

As the session concluded, a newfound sense of hope and empowerment filled the room. The discussions illuminated the reality that economic independence is not a distant dream but an achievable goal through strategic planning and collective effort. The idea of forming an SHG emerged as a tangible first step, offering not only financial opportunities but also a network of mutual support and solidarity.

For many mothers, this session was transformative—not just in terms of livelihood possibilities but in challenging societal norms that confined them to caregiving roles without financial agency. They departed with renewed determination, understanding that self-reliance is not selfish but essential. Moving forward, they committed to exploring these livelihood pathways together, proving that economic empowerment and caregiving can indeed coexist.

আমাৰ বাবে জীৱিকাৰ বিকল্প কি হ'ব পাৰে আমাৰ সকলো কামৰ সৈতে?



what could be the livelihood options for us with all our work?

The **Empowering Mothers, Transforming Lives** training program was designed as an inclusive, participatory initiative to support and uplift mothers of children with disabilities. Recognizing the **intersecting challenges of caregiving, gendered labour, and social stigma**, the program adopted a peer-driven, community-based approach that centered the voices and lived experiences of participants. Through structured sessions focused on self-reflection, mental health awareness, stress management, peer support, and economic empowerment, the program sought to equip mothers with the tools, strategies, and confidence needed to navigate their caregiving journeys while also fostering personal growth, resilience, and collective empowerment.

A key feature of the program was its **participatory methodology**, which emphasized shared learning, co-creation of knowledge, and experiential engagement. Each session integrated interactive discussions, expressive arts, peer counseling exercises, and community-building activities, ensuring that participants were not passive recipients of information but active agents in shaping their own empowerment pathways.

The opening session established a **safe and inclusive space** where participants could share their experiences, aspirations, and challenges. Through guided reflections and interactive activities, mothers articulated personal goals and expectations from the program, setting the stage for a journey of self-discovery and empowerment. Building on the previous session's foundation, participants engaged in the Problem Tree activity, **collectively identifying structural barriers and personal challenges in their caregiving roles**. This session facilitated critical reflection on intersectional challenges, including gender roles, economic constraints, and disability stigma. Recognizing the emotional and physical toll of caregiving, the 3rd session introduced evidence-based stress management techniques, **including expressive arts therapy, mindfulness, and relaxation exercises**. Through experiential activities, mothers explored personalized coping strategies to sustain their mental well-being, reinforcing the importance of self-care as a necessary—not optional—practice in caregiving. The fourth session provided a biopsychosocial perspective on mental health, helping participants recognize signs of distress and strategies for well-being. By **destigmatizing mental illness and emphasizing community-based support**, the session empowered mothers to advocate for their own mental health needs and seek professional or peer-based assistance when necessary. Highlighting the importance of peer-led support systems, session 5, introduced active listening, empathy, and non-judgmental communication skills. Through role-playing exercises, participants practiced **providing and receiving peer support**, reinforcing the collective strength of shared experiences. This session laid the groundwork for future peer-counseling networks, reflecting a sustainable model of community-based empowerment. The session on self-care was a radical act of self-preservation and empowerment. Mothers **engaged in meditation, laughter therapy, and movement-based activities**, reinforcing the therapeutic potential of creative expression. By developing personalized self-care routines, mothers gained practical strategies for emotional regulation and stress relief.

Extending the discussions on mental health, the 7th session explored **different mental illnesses, their manifestations, and associated stigmas**. By sharing personal experiences and learning about available mental health resources, participants strengthened their capacity to support themselves and others in their communities. The final session shifted focus to economic empowerment, recognizing the financial constraints many mothers face. Participants explored entrepreneurship as a viable livelihood option, discussing business planning, resource mobilization, and skill development. By brainstorming potential ventures, the session **encouraged financial independence while balancing caregiving responsibilities**.

Valedictory & Conclusion: A Collective Path Forward

The valedictory session of the training program served not merely as a formal conclusion but as an **affirmation of resilience, solidarity, and collective empowerment**. The program, designed to provide psychosocial support for mothers of children with disabilities, underscored the intersecting structural and emotional challenges these women navigate daily. The culmination of the training was not marked by external facilitators but by the mothers themselves—active agents in their own empowerment—who **orchestrated a vibrant celebration of their journey**. Through music, dance, and shared meals, they reclaimed spaces of joy and community, transcending barriers of social exclusion and stigma.

This moment of collective expression was deeply significant within an intersectional framework, as it reflected not only the individual transformations of participants but also the interconnected struggles of caregiving, gendered labour, and disability rights. The personal narratives shared during the session reinforced the importance of peer support, highlighting how marginalized groups create systems of mutual care in the absence of institutional mechanisms. The mothers articulated their reflections on the programme, offering insights shaped by lived experience, resilience, and the imperative of community-driven interventions. Their testimonies emphasized that psychosocial well-being cannot be understood in isolation but is **deeply embedded in the sociopolitical context of disability, gender, and economic precarity**.

A significant outcome was the **formation of two self-help groups, ensuring sustained peer support beyond the training**.

The Empowering Mothers, Transforming Lives training program demonstrated that psychosocial well-being and economic empowerment **cannot be addressed in isolation**. By centering marginalized voices, leveraging lived experiences, and fostering sustainable community networks, the program laid a foundation for long-term resilience and systemic change. While the formal sessions have ended, the journey of empowerment continues, with participants emerging not only as caregivers and mothers but as **self-advocates, peer supporters, and community leaders**.

In Solidarity



3. Testimonials

প্রথমখন আলোচনাত আমি নিজৰ পৰিচয়ৰ লগতে উপস্থিত থকা সকলোৱে ইজনে- সিজনেৰ লগত মনৰ ভাৱ প্ৰকাশ কৰিছিলো। আমাৰ মানসিক স্বাস্থ্যৰ বিষয়ে বহুতো গুৰুত্বপূৰ্ণ কথা কৈছিল, কি দৰে আমি মানসিক স্বাস্থ্য ভালে ৰাখিব পাৰো তাৰো উপায় দিছিল। যেতিয়া আমাৰ কাৰোবাৰ ওপৰত অথবা নিজৰ ওপৰতো খং উঠে, কি দৰে নিজকে আমি বুজাব পাৰো সেই বিষয়ে আলোচনা কৰিছিল। আমি আমাৰ শাৰিৰীক স্বাস্থ্যৰ প্ৰতি কেনেকৈ যত্ন ল'ব লাগে সেই বিষয়েও আমাক অৱগত কৰাইছিল। আত্মসহায়ক গোটৰ জৰিয়তে মাতৃসকল কি দৰে আত্মনিৰ্ভৰশীল হ'ব পাৰে সেই বিষয়েও আমাক ধুনীয়াকৈ বুজাইছিল। নিজৰ প্ৰতিভাৰ উলিয়াই আমি নিজকে সমাজত কেনেধৰণে প্ৰতিষ্ঠা কৰিব পাৰো তাৰ বিষয়েও শিকাইছিল। তেখেতৰ এই ৮ খন আলোচনাই আমাৰ মনত সাহস আৰু প্ৰেৰণা যোগাই থৈ গৈছিল। সেয়েহে আমি দুটা গোট খুলিবলৈ সক্ষম হ'লো আৰু স্কুল পৰিসৰৰ ভিতৰতে কৰ্তৃপক্ষৰ অনুমতি সাপেক্ষে আমি প্ৰথম পৰ্যায়ৰ গোট আৰম্ভ কৰিলো। সকলোৰে পৰা আমি প্ৰেৰণা, মৰম, আৰু সাহস লগতে সাঁহাৰি পাইছিলোঁ। তেখেতৰ এই উৎসাহ আৰু প্ৰেৰণাই আমাক আগুৱাই যাবলৈ আত্মবিশ্বাস আৰু সাহস দিছে যে আমিও কিবা এটা কৰিব পাৰিম।

- মালা ডেকা
পুষ্পা বৰা

আমি কৰা বৰ্কাম্পটো বৰ ভাল আছিল। তাত আলোচনা কৰা বহু কথা আমাৰ জীৱনৰ লগত জড়িত হৈ আছে। তাতে কোৱা কিছুমান কথা আগৰ পৰা জানিছিলো আৰু বহুতো নতুন কথা জানিব পাৰিলো আৰু শিকিলোঁ। আমি মুঠ ৮টা অধিবেশন কৰিছিলো তাৰে মাজত প্ৰথম অধিবেশন ভাল লাগিছিল কিয়নো আমি তাত নিজৰ কথা নকয়, আমাৰ মাজত থকা অভিজ্ঞতাক সম বন্ধু-বান্ধৱীৰ পৰিচয় দিছিলো। মোৰ বাবে চা-চিনাকি কৰা এটা নতুন অভিজ্ঞতা আছিল। তাৰে পিছত আমি বেলেগ বেলেগ বিষয়ৰ ওপৰত অধিবেশন কৰিছিলো। খঙ-ৰাগৰ অধিবেশনটো যে ইমান ধুনীয়া হ'ব ভবা নাছিলো। তাতে আমাৰ কাৰ ওপৰত খং উঠা লিখি, ফালি ধুনীয়া ক'লাজ বনোৱা হৈছিল। ক'লাজ কেইখন ৰামধেনু, পখিলা, গছ, মেঘৰ আকাৰ দিয়াত বহুত ধুনীয়া দেখা হৈছিল। আত্মনিৰ্ভৰশীল হোৱাটো আজিৰ দিনত কিমান দৰকাৰী আমি শিকিছিলোঁ। শেষৰ দিনা আমি সকলোৱে হাঁহি-স্মৃতিৰে নাচি-বাগি, গান গাই অধিবেশনটো সমাপ্ত কৰিছিলোঁ। ধন্যবাদ মেঘালী বাইদেউ, আমাৰ লগত ভাল সময় অতিবাহিত কৰি আমাক নজনা কথা শিকোৱাৰ বাবে।

- এগৰাকী মাতৃ সহ অভিজ্ঞতাক

আলোচনা কেইখনত উপস্থিত থাকি মেঘালী বাইদেউৰ কথাখিনি শুনি বহুত ভাল লাগিল। কিছুমান নজনা কথা শিকিলো, বহুতো জানিলো, সাহস পালোঁ। বাইদেউৰ পৰা আগলৈ আৰু শুনিবলৈ পাম বুলি আশা কৰিলোঁ। শেষত এটা কথাই কওঁ যে আপোনাৰ ওচৰত চিৰকৃতজ্ঞ হৈ ৰ'ম।

- ৰুমী দাস

"মাতৃৰ মানসিক স্বাস্থ্য" - শীৰ্ষক আলোচনাখন আগষ্ট, ২০২০ ৰ আৰম্ভ হৈছিল। অতি কমেও ৮ টা খণ্ডত এই শীৰ্ষক আলোচনাখন চলিছিল। এই আলোচনাখনত আমাৰ মৰমৰ ড° মেঘালী সেনাপতি বাইদেউক লগ পাইছিলো। তেখেতৰ আটাইকেইটা খণ্ডই খুবেই গুৰুত্বপূৰ্ণ আছিল। আলোচনাখনৰ পৰা আমি ইয়াকে শিকিলো যে সমস্যা আছে বুলি, দুখ আছে বুলি ভাৱি শুনি এঠাইতে বহি সময় নষ্ট কৰিব নালাগে। জন্ম হৈছে যেতিয়া সমস্যাবোৰক লগত লৈ হ'লেও জীৱনত আগুৱাই যাব লাগিব। হাঁহি- ধেমালিৰে নিজৰ অন্তৰ্ভিত কৰ্মৰাজিৰ দ্বাৰা জীৱন অতিবাহিত কৰিব লাগিব আৰু বিশ্বাসী মানুহৰ লগত মনৰ কথা প্ৰকাশ কৰি বন্ধ হৈ যোৱা ৰাস্তাবোৰ মুকলি কৰিবলৈ প্ৰয়াস কৰিব লাগিব।

সেয়েহে আমাৰ শ্ৰদ্ধাৰ বাইদেউলৈ অশেষ ধন্যবাদ, আমাক ইমানখিনি সাহস দিয়াৰ বাবে আৰু দুখবোৰ হাঁহিলৈ ৰূপান্তৰ কৰিবলৈ আমাক উদগনি যোগোৱাৰ বাবে। ভৱিষ্যতে তেখেতৰ পৰা এনেকৈয়ে বহুমূলীয়া পৰামৰ্শ পাম বুলি আশা ৰাখিলোঁ।

- শশীমা দাস

'শামুকৰ পেটত মাণিক জন্মে' - এই কথাষাৰ নিশ্চয় আমি জীৱনত এতিয়ালৈ এবাৰ হ'লেও শুনিবলৈ পাইছোঁ। ইয়াত অন্তৰ্নিহিত হৈ থকা ভিন্ন অৰ্থৰ মাজত মই আমাৰ মাতৃসকলক দেখা পাওঁ। দেখা পাওঁ, তেওঁলোকৰ নতুনত্বক আদৰাৰ অদম্য ত্যাগ, সাহস আৰু স্বাৰ্থহীন এক চাক্ষুস চৰিত্ৰক।

'মাতৃত্ব'ৰ কোনো নিৰ্দিষ্ট সীমা হয়তো নাথাকে। প্ৰতিগৰাকী নাৰী সম মাতৃয়ে জীৱন দলিচাখনত নিজৰ ব্যক্তিগত পৰিচয়ৰ লগতে আন পৰিচয়ৰ মৰ্যদাও সমানেই গ্ৰহণ কৰিবলৈ আগ্ৰহী, সচেতন অথবা বাধ্য হোৱা দেখিবলৈ পাওঁ, য'ত তেওঁলোক কাৰোবাৰ ছোৱালী, কাৰোবাৰ ভগ্নী, কাৰোবাৰ পত্নী, কাৰোবাৰ বোৱাৰী হোৱাৰ লগতে মাতৃত্বৰ পৰিচয়ো অৰ্জন কৰে।

আন বহু কাৰক সহিতে সচৰাচৰ এইটোও দেখিবলৈ পোৱা যায় যে ব্যক্তিগত, পৰিয়ালকেন্দ্ৰিক অথবা সমুদায়কেন্দ্ৰিক ভিন্ন বাধা-বাধকতাৰ বাবে আমাৰ মাতৃসকলে নিজৰ পৰিচয়, ব্যক্তিত্বৰ প্ৰতি যত্নপৰ হ'বলৈ সুবিধাকণ নাপায় অথবা বিভিন্ন পৰিস্থিতিৰ বাবে তেওঁলোকে মুকুতাৰ দৰে হৈওঁ এটা খোলাৰ ভিতৰত সোমাই থাকিবলগীয়া হয়। তাৰ মাজতেই কোনোৱে চেষ্টা কৰে অথচ খোলাটো একুৱাই ওলাই আহি নিজৰ উজ্জ্বলতাখিনি আনে উপলব্ধি কৰাৰ নিচিনাকৈ হয়তো নিজেই কৰিবলৈ কেতিয়াবা অলপ সময়ৰো অভাৱ হোৱা দেখা যায়। এনে বহু কাৰকৰ বাবে আমি মাতৃসকলক বহু সময়ত জিৰণিবিহীন হোৱা অনুভৱ কৰোঁ।

তাৰ প্ৰতি লক্ষ্য ৰাখিয়েই আমি শিশু সাৰথিৰ তৰফৰ পৰা মাতৃসকলৰ মানসিক স্বাস্থ্যত গুৰুত্ব প্ৰদান কৰি এক পৰিৱেশ সৃষ্টি কৰিবলৈ চেষ্টা কৰিছিলোঁ, য'ত তেওঁলোকে তেওঁলোকৰ মনৰ অনুভৱ, সপোনৰ লগতে এনে বহু কথা আলোচনাৰ মাধ্যমেৰে প্ৰকাশ কৰাৰ সুবিধা পাইছিল। নিজৰ জীৱনটোত ঘটি থকা বহু কাৰকক সমতুল্যভাৱে কেনেকৈ উদযাপন কৰিব পাৰে তাৰ বিষয়ে এক কথোপকথনৰ শক্তিশালী মাধ্যমৰ চিনাকী কৰোৱা হৈছিল, য'ত মাতৃসকলে তেওঁলোকৰ লুপ্তপ্ৰায় উজ্জ্বলতাখিনিক পুনৰাই উজ্জীৱিত কৰাৰ সুবিধা পাইছিল। আমাৰ এই যাত্ৰাৰ মুখ্য সহযাত্ৰী ড° মেঘালী সেনাপতি বাইদেৱে আমাৰ মাতৃসকলক অনুভৱ কৰোৱা আত্মসচেতনতাই বোধকৰো সকলো মাতৃকেই বৰ্তমান তথা ভৱিষ্যতলৈ জীৱন-যাপনৰ পৰিৱৰ্তে জীৱন উদযাপন কৰিবলৈ সহায় কৰিব।

শেষত কওঁ, আমাৰ মাতৃসকলৰ বাবে সহনশীলতা, ধৈৰ্য্য, ত্যাগেই কেৱল চিনাকী নহৈ তেওঁলোকৰ ব্যক্তিত্ব, দক্ষতা, প্ৰতিভা ইত্যাদিৰে তেওঁলোকৰ আত্ম পৰিচয় আৰু বহল হওঁক।

~ জয়াশ্ৰী ভৰালী

4. Additional readings and resources

Additional Readings :

Woodman, A. C., Mawdsley, H. P., & Hauser-Cram, P. (2015). Parenting stress and child behavior problems within families of children with developmental disabilities: Transactional relations across 15 years. *Research in developmental disabilities, 36, 264-276.*

- Parents of children with developmental disabilities (DD) face higher psychological stress, often linked to their child's behavioral challenges. While many studies focus on how a child's difficulties increase parental stress, fewer examine how parental stress, in turn, affects the child. This study followed 176 families over 15 years, tracking interactions between child behavior problems and maternal stress from early childhood to adolescence. Findings revealed a dynamic, two-way influence, where both child-driven and parent-driven factors shaped each other over time. These patterns varied across life stages, highlighting the evolving nature of parent-child interactions in families of children with DD.

Resch, J. A., Mireles, G., Benz, M. R., Grenwelge, C., Peterson, R., & Zhang, D. (2010). Giving parents a voice: A qualitative study of the challenges experienced by parents of children with disabilities. *Rehabilitation psychology, 55(2), 139.*

- This study explored the challenges faced by parents of children with disabilities. Through focus groups with 40 mothers, four key barriers emerged: limited access to information and services, financial struggles, difficulties with school and community inclusion, and lack of family support. These challenges largely stem from a mismatch between caregiver needs and available resources. Rather than the disability itself, it is the absence of adequate environmental and systemic support that makes caregiving more difficult. Strengthening these support systems could greatly enhance parental well-being.

Nugroho, D., Graham, N., Baghdasaryan, B., & Ljunggren Elisson, M. (2022). Resources to Support Marginalized Mothers of Children with Disabilities: Guidelines for Implementation. *UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti.*

- Mothers play a vital role in supporting children's learning at home and school. However, the COVID-19 pandemic intensified this responsibility, particularly for marginalized families, deepening existing educational inequalities. This document introduces resources designed to assist mothers of children with disabilities in inclusive education.

Dew, A., Collings, S., Dowse, L., Meltzer, A., & Smith, L. (2019). 'I don't feel like I'm in this on my own': Peer support for mothers of children with intellectual disability and challenging behaviour. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities, 23(3), 344-358.*

- This article explores the experiences of mothers participating in peer support programs while raising a child with intellectual disabilities and challenging behavior. Such programs can enhance family well-being and offer benefits at personal, interpersonal, and community levels. Interviews with 13 mothers revealed three key factors that made peer support effective: the presence of a dedicated coordinator, diverse engagement strategies, and careful matching of support partners. Mothers valued flexible support options tailored to their needs but found sustaining one-on-one peer support difficult due to daily caregiving challenges. These insights highlight the importance of structured and adaptable peer support systems.

Darley, S., Heath, W., Cohen, G. D., & Darley, M. (2007). The expressive arts activity book: A resource for professionals. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.4.1.

- A collection of art, music, and movement-based exercises that parents can use with their children to foster emotional expression, reduce anxiety, and strengthen family bonds.

Blum, K. (2015). The boy who could run but not walk: Real hope for children with early brain damage. Pegasus Books.

- Dr. Karen Pape, a renowned neonatologist and clinical neuroscientist, challenges conventional beliefs about childhood brain damage and neuroplasticity. Drawing from decades of research and clinical experience, she explores how early brain injuries, such as cerebral palsy, do not necessarily lead to permanent disabilities. Pape advocates for innovative rehabilitation approaches, emphasizing early intervention, persistence, and a shift in medical paradigms to offer real hope for children with neurological impairments.

Bertelli, Y., Silverman, J., & Talbot, S. (Eds.). (2009). My baby rides the short bus: The unabashedly human experience of raising kids with disabilities. PM Press.

- My Baby Rides the Short Bus is a collection of deeply personal essays by parents navigating the realities of raising children with disabilities. Edited by Yantra Bertelli, Jennifer Silverman, and Sarah Talbot, the book challenges traditional narratives of disability and parenthood, offering raw, honest, and often humorous accounts from parents who don't always fit the mold of the "perfect advocate." Through these diverse voices, the anthology explores themes of acceptance, struggle, love, and the fight for inclusion, providing a candid and unconventional perspective on parenting in the face of systemic and societal

References

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5. Where to Seek Help: Mental Health Institutes and Helplines

Mental Health Institutes and Helplines

Guwahati Medical College & Hospital (GMCH), Department of Psychiatry Guwahati, Assam :Offers psychiatric consultations, counseling, and mental health services for individuals, including mothers of children with disabilities.

Phone : +91 361 245 8007

MIND India – Institute of Positive Mental Health & Research : A mental health and counseling center offering individual therapy, parental counseling, and support for mothers of children with disabilities. R.G. Baruah Road, Guwahati, Assam

Contact: +91 88223 73101

Marwari Hospitals – Department of Psychiatry :Provides mental health services, including therapy for stress, depression, and anxiety, with a special focus on women's mental health. Guwahati, Assam

Contact: +91 70990 66004 / +91 70990 66013

Lokopriya Gopinath Bordoloi Regional Institute of Mental Health (LGBRIMH) : A major mental health institute in Assam offering specialized services, including telemedicine support. Tezpur, Assam

Helpline: 9531205252 (24x7 Mental Health Support)

Health City Hospital – Department of Mental Health and Behavioral Sciences Provides a range of psychiatric and psychological services, including therapy and counseling. Khanapara, Guwahati, Assam

Contact: +91 86389 95504

iCall (TISS) – Mental Health Helpline : Free and confidential mental health support service run by Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS). Helpline: +91 9152987821

NIMHANS (National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences), Bengaluru Phone: 080-26995000 / 5100 / 5200 / 5300 / 5400

VIMHANS (Vidyasagar Institute of Mental Health and Neuro & Allied Sciences) Nehru Nagar, New Delhi-IMobile: +91 9818797286, +91 9650725925, +91 9999691507, +91 9999691508