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## Healing After Loss: Covid-19 pandemic spurred rise in family acceptance of mentally-ill patients

Chaitanya Deshpande

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Nagpur: Thousands of people with mental illnesses end up on streets each year, isolated from their families. They need, said Dr Bharat Vatwani, a Ramon Magsaysay Award-winning psychiatrist, who is on a mission to reunite them.

"Every year, Shraddha Foundation rescues around 1,000 such people from the streets, provides them treatment and works tirelessly to reconnect these individuals with their loved ones," said Dr Vatwani during his visit to Nagpur on Sunday.

### REUNITING THE 'LOST' ONES WITH FAMILIES

#### Stats of mentally-ill patients rescued and reunited with families over the years by Shraddha Foundation



Dr Vatwani sees a silver lining emerging from the dark clouds of the Covid-19 pandemic. "Families seem more accepting of their lost relatives lately. He observed.

He suggest this could be due to the loss many families experienced during the pandemic, making them more receptive to reuniting with loved ones, even those estranged due to mental illness.

However, the road to reunification isn't without obstacles. "The biggest challenge is the lack of government support for medication," Dr Vatwani lamented. Even after recovery, many patients need medication, but families struggle to pay for it. "This financial burden used to be a major reason families hesitated to take back their loved ones," he added.

Dr Vatwani shed light to the stories behind such patients. "Many leave their villages for city jobs, only to be exploited and lose hope," he said. The Shraddha Foundation team works to rebuild trust and reconnect them with their families.

The Magsaysay award winner wasn't very impressed with national biometric ID system, Aadhaar, in finding families.

"We rarely find success with Aadhaar," Dr Vatwani said. The systems relative newness and the lack of Aadhaar cards among many mentally ill individuals limit its effectiveness. The Shraddha Foundation relies on traditional methods details conversations and questioning – to gather information, he added.

Dr Vatwani estimates over 20 lakh people in India are homeless, with 10 lakh facing mental health challenges. He was optimistic though. "The good news is, most patients recover and can lead normal lives again," he said.

In Nagpur, Shraddha Foundation has collaborated with the Nagpur Psychiatric Society (PSN) and Dr Prakash Amte, who has provided space for their project. Dr Manish Thakre, President of PSN, highlighted their achievements. "We have already reunited 20 people and are working on many more. Dr Vatwani has done yeoman's work in this sector. PSN members, all leading psychiatrists in city, visit this centre and treat the patients," he said.