

On Saturday»

## Fielding hope

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AUG 03 - What gives us hope? What makes us hopeless? The answers to these questions are different for different people. Regardless, there are some images that are linked with human misery, and vulnerability—depression is one of them. Images which are used to reflect depression are probably identical globally—the image of a sad man or woman, head hung low—but there is little discussion about the negative effect of such images in intensifying social stigma in dealing with the problem. Facts related to depression are scary. Depression is the leading cause of disability. It affects over 121 million people globally and it is growing. By 2030, depression will be the number one cause of disability and morbidity worldwide. Because of social stigma, this problem is becoming a silent epidemic wherein less than 25 percent of those affected seek support and treatment. In Nepal, the situation is far worse. In fact, statistics are not even available.

Generally, images about depression are designed to portray the condition in terms of personal weakness and as a degrading experience. Globally, we have been using negative images to represent depression and as a result, over time, we have trained the public to associate unhealthy emotions and feelings with it.

In the context of a global crisis associated with depression, aiming to challenge the traditional and historical brand of depression, International Foundation for Research and Education on Depression (iFred) has launched a global campaign—'Field for Hope'.

It is the largest-scale international effort in history to focus directly on raising awareness about depression. The idea is to eradicate the stigma associated with the condition by planting sunflowers and replacing the image of the 'depressed' man or woman with that of sunflowers, shining radiantly in full colour.

This year, one million sunflowers have been planted around the world under this campaign. The hope is that people will slowly begin to associate the image of the sunflower with depression, working to end the stigma.

One might ask: why sunflowers in rebranding depression? According to the founder of iFred, Kathryn Goetzke, who is championing this global campaign, there are both scientific and emotional reasons for using sunflowers as the modern image of depression. Citing a famous expression by Harriet Beecher Stowe, an American abolitionist and author, Goetzke says, "Flowers have an expression of countenance, as much as man and animals. Some seem to smile, some have a sad expression, some are pensive and diffident; others again are plain, honest and upright, like the broad-faced sunflower and the hollyhock."

Since sunflowers grow towards the sun, it is popularly believed that they serve as a symbol of light and hope. So, this is an effort to link 121 million people living with depression worldwide with the symbol of light and hope. According to Goetzke, "Often, in depression episodes, the natural instinct is to hide in darkness and despair. We need to learn how to fight that instinct, so instead individuals work to find their own personal sunlight, grow upwards and outwards to heal."

People have developed many ways to deal with depression from yoga to medication and beyond. In the quest of searching for the best option, a brand for depression which represents hope may go some way in telling sufferers and survivors that depression doesn't have to be as dark as it is often made out to be.

Research has proven that sunflowers summon a positive reaction from both men and women, 100 percent of the time. That's why if the symbol for depression is the sunflower, perhaps the former could also begin to garner a more positive response in society. In Nepal, because the sunflower has yet to carry any real social or political

message, linking depression with the sunflower could quickly and effectively rebrand depression. Sunflowers, unlike depression, carry no stigma—only positive messages and images. In fighting social stigma and associated discriminations, positive images and symbols play a vital role. Take the example of breast cancer. For years, breast cancer was a highly-stigmatised disease, initially treated by radical mastectomies and other methods of cauterisation. Women with breast cancer felt ashamed. Due to negative perceptions associated with breast cancer, funding for breast cancer research and treatment was limited or non-existent.

In recent years, there has been a tremendous change in the perception of breast cancer. This was possible because of the shift of focus to prevention, encouraging women to take self-tests and using positive imageries of change. NGOs encouraged celebrities, businesses, educators, politicians, and the public, to get involved and wear pink ribbons as a positive and hopeful symbol. Today, the pink ribbon is an international brand and support symbol for millions. Thus, breast cancer was rebranded, opening up unprecedented interest among the general public, researchers, media, politicians and governments to promote awareness on this issue.

The mental health sector today faces the same situation that breast cancer faced a decade ago. That's why people like Kathryn and mental health activists around the world are geared up to replicate the success story of breast cancer in the field of mental health, starting with depression.

Posted on: 2012-08-04 09:27

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