

THE F.A.I.R. PROJECT

FAIRNESS: *AN OEUVRE OF A HEALTHY MIND*

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OVERLAYING FAIRNESS UPON A HEALTHY MIND

From 8one, to Fairness, to The F.A.I.R. Project

In its vision for creating a better world, 8one realised the importance of creating change that is holistic and inclusive. We created a framework of 8 goals, namely, Well-being, Gender Equality, Peace, Environment, Hygiene, Nutrition, Education, and Employment, to ensure that when change is affected in each of these areas, the benefit is cumulative and pervasive to all members of the society. The fact that this change should benefit all and not just a few, is and will always be at the core of all that we do.

Over the past many years, in our journey towards identifying the one human trait that could change the world and achieve this objective of making the world a better place led us to focusing and developing the Fairness paradigm. The trait of fairness, in our opinion, is not just important for those who inhabit the world today, but for all those who will inhabit this planet after us as well.

This paradigm inspired us to conceptualise The F.A.I.R. Project to further the concept of fairness as well as to open up a space for hosting conversations with other changemakers in an effort to imbibe the idea of fairness in their work.

Fairness is a construct of our minds

In our journey, we have understood that fairness is largely considered to be an intangible mental construct. It is important to acknowledge the fact that thinking in a fair and rational manner, differentiating right from wrong in each situation, and taking actions that are in line with the above, could be extremely complicated tasks. In order to carry out these tasks, we need to ensure that the part of our body that can comprehend this construct and perform each task is at its fittest and best.

Fairness is a choice of behaviour and like any other behaviour, it starts as a thought and then manifests into a belief. To that effect, only a healthy mind can comprehend the idea of fairness and distinguish the decisions it needs to make based on the parameters relevant to those decisions. Since fairness begins in the mind, its effectiveness depends on the individual's mental health to a great extent.

Most of us have grown up having the concepts of right and wrong oversimplified for us through our textbooks, parental teachings and religion. However, only when one tries to be fair in its true sense, is when we realise how complicated this process is to an untrained mind.

While there is a multitude of frameworks that explain how to train your mind and ensure its health, the key is to take charge of it. This writing is focused on the latter i.e. understanding the need to take charge of ensuring your mental health by understanding the challenges we face due to our conditioning. We will begin by acknowledging the shackles of convenience we have been conditioned to, the harm they cause and the need to break out of them. Subsequently, we will approach the nuances of mental health and the skills needed to manage it, taking the help of some simple analogies.

SEEKING CONVENIENCE: A CONSEQUENCE OF CONDITIONING

The Mind: Overworked, yet overlooked

We have all grown up acknowledging that the brain is the most powerful organ of the human body and yet it is incredible how till today, we do not actively take care of our brain the way that we take care of our hair and nails, both of which are inanimate parts of our body.

Additionally, anyone who has trained their body for physical activities such as cycling, swimming, dancing, driving, playing an instrument, or other similar tasks, understands that muscle memory is the key to learning these activities. It is thereby acknowledged that one primarily learns or improves in such activities by actively and repeatedly performing the tasks at hand.

It amazes me why the same meta is not applied towards what are otherwise considered as emotional, intangible 'tasks' such as being kind, being calm, being reasonable, and in this context, being fair.

If we acknowledge that the mind is the most powerful organ, then the disdain with which we neglect it and its potential is perhaps a testament to our conditioning for convenience, which collectively, is the world's most common trait.

Convenience is not a need, it is an imposition

It is essential to invest thought in understanding and acknowledging our mind's conditioning for convenience, and thereafter to realise the need to break away from it. The conditioning for convenience is the first and oftentimes, the most difficult task that we need to overcome to take charge of ensuring our mental health.

Our lives have been conditioned over centuries to seek convenience in every aspect of our living, be it seeking a cycle when we walk, a scooter when we cycle, a car when we ride a scooter, a helicopter when we drive a car. More often than not, it leads us to ignore the obvious if it helps us live a more convenient life.

This desire for convenience manifests itself in numerous ways, including but not limited to, greed to increase our convenience, selfishness to retain our convenience, laziness or fear to avoid stepping outside of our convenience, and envy and anger when viewing the convenience of others. We are conditioned to use our emotions to validate the convenient choice regardless of its consequences on us or those around us.

The claim that I would stake here is that the human mind does not have convenience at the core of its ability to reason and rationalize its action, rather, it is the conditioning that we have received over centuries, with intent or otherwise, from tribal lords, kings and queens, religious prophets, political parties, commercial establishments, and all those who have influence over us.

Century after century, our desire for convenience has been used to establish 'their' control over most of the human population. This desire has been passed on from generation to generation, making it that much more difficult to see that it is not an inherent human trait. However, it is possible to break free from its shackles.

NORMALISING MENTAL HEALTH: A DECONDITIONING PREREQUISITE

Reclaiming the narrative

The task before us is to move away from generations of conditioning, to a more balanced and human approach towards viewing our actions and overall existence. The ability to make this shift lies inside all of us, which is why, over the course of the rest of this piece of writing, I would like to focus on how we can recognize the power of our mind and do it the justice that it deserves in order to allow it to help us achieve what I continue to call a better and fairer world.

For generations, it has been acceptable to ask another individual "if they have lost their mind", or "if they are crazy", or "why can't they just be normal like everyone else", if what they express does not conform with the norms of the micro or the macro society.

This perhaps also stems from the fact that tangible memory has become the most widely recognised and promoted utilisation of the mind, while clearly ignoring what is otherwise understood to be intangible uses of the mind. The claim of emotions and human traits being intangible is one that merits challenge at some point. However, for now, it is adequate to acknowledge that it is these intangibles that potentially promote non-conformity and the consequent jabs on one's mental health.

Mental Health: The core of our being

Now let us take a look at what mental health means beyond the various theories, academic papers and clinical researches that to a great extent are difficult to comprehend for the individuals who have

not understood the basics of a healthy mind. For them, the start must be to recognise that it is not overly complicated but rather a simple concept which is at the core of each human's being.

Mental health is a subset of well-being, which is why, it is essential to first broadly understand well-being before we understand mental health.

There are numerous factors that impact an individual's well-being, but the existence of well-being is inherent in every individual. Detailed analyses of causes and correlations impacting well-being leads to overcomplication of what is otherwise a simple factor of being well.

To elaborate, if well-being had a scale of 0 - 100, to achieve 100 on that scale, everything in the universe must be perfectly balanced and geared towards ensuring well-being. Therefore, for any individual who is at the bottom of the well-being pyramid, the endeavour is always to go higher on the 0 -100 scale and find the point at which they are oblivious to incremental increases in well-being.

This pursuit of well-being is universal to all individuals, although the goals and methods of achieving it may be starkly different.

Unfortunately, most literature points to incongruent attempts to standardise a definition of well-being by incorporating concepts from myriad disciplines and creating a concoction of psychology, sociology, anthropology, biology, economics, health science and ethics, to create a universally applicable framework of the impact of objective factors such as demographics and socio-economic status.

The reason that I say this is unfortunate is because we know that both the definition and the factors affecting well-being are subjective and unique to everyone. Trying to standardise "what is well-being" and "what is needed to achieve it" not only leads to an overcomplication of the concept, but also distracts us from the actual task at hand.

The actual task at hand being two-folds: first, to accept the heterogeneity and randomness of the definition of well-being for different individuals, and second, to focus not on the "set of factors", but rather on the "mindset of actors" in this system, regardless of said factors being present or absent.

Simply put, instead of measuring the levels of well-being and the causes of its deficiency, we should focus on the mental makeup needed to achieve well-being and let the individual use those skills to the extent they deem fit.

However, instead of empowering those individuals lower on the well-being spectrum, we victimise them by outlining the deficiencies in their objective conditions without providing them a directive on how they should approach these deficiencies.

Balancing past cause with future action

Mental health, in the above context, refers to the mindset with which an individual responds to the deficiencies in their well-being. Conversely, the deficiencies in the desired well-being of an individual directly affects their mental health.

It is important to note here that the cause of these deficiencies may remain unknown to the individual or may be a consequence of numerous objective conditions unique to that individual. The emphasis then should be on the approach or the mindset with which an individual responds to the deficiency, because even if the cause is known, the strain on their mental health will continue to stay until that deficiency is filled.

Unfortunately, most research is focused on finding causes of strain on mental health, which though is essential, gives a very limited directive to the individual in terms of how to manage that strain.

It is usually believed that if the cause of the problem is identified, the problem is as good as solved. However, this hunt for causation overcomplicates the simple idea that 'a problem exists, and it needs to be solved, so action must be taken.' Instead, the narrative as it goes, is 'a problem exists, it needs to be labelled, its cause must be identified and its legitimacy must be judged based on universal standards.'

For instance, if someone is depressed or anxious, looking for a cause may lead to correlations between their psychological state and their income, race, marital status, childhood or any other objective condition. The moment that link is found to one or more of these, the same is conveyed to the individual in distress with the assumption that the solution to their problem is implicit in identifying the cause.

It is rather hilarious, because it seems as if we are saying that since a person is depressed because they are poor, to not be depressed they should stop being poor; if a person is angry all the time because they were neglected as a child, then they are supposed to travel back in time to get a new childhood, or that they and those around them are supposed to remember that it is their parents' fault every time they get angry.

What we have really done, is instead of solving the problem at hand, we have replaced it with another, apparently more convoluted one. Instead of teaching the person to lunge forward and take action to cope with depression or anxiety, we have asked them to go backwards and attribute their problem to an objective condition, which justifies the problem and relieves them of the responsibility to solve it.

Instead of training the mind to take action, we are teaching it to either blame their material conditions or wait for them to change, or both.

There is a darker side to this approach as well. When we cannot find an objective condition for an individual's distress, we often subject them to dismissal or ridicule. For instance, when a billionaire commits suicide, people are often heard saying 'why did they need to kill themselves, they had everything', or when the highest scorer in a class is seen anxious before the exam, classmates often see it as 'drama'.

The cause-and-effect approach makes us insensitive to the people who are 'seemingly fine' or rather 'should be fine' given their situation, when in reality, no one really is fine all the time.

Everyone has mental health issues

Everyone in this world has been sad. Everyone in this world has been happy without cause. Everyone in this world has felt anger and grief.

Everyone with a functioning brain will be affected by mental health issues even if their lives seem to have no 'reasonable cause' to explain it. The fact that mental health issues exist is the only universally applicable statement we can make. The cause, manner and intensity of these issues are subjective to each individual. The focus, therefore, should not be just on what caused it, but instead primarily on what to do with it now that it is here.

PATIENCE, PRACTICE, AND RETROSPECTION: A TOOLKIT

If we recognise that everyone has mental health issues, then we must also acknowledge that everyone can learn to take care of them. The latter half of the statement shifts the onus to an individual's intent and ability to learn the skills needed to ensure their mental health.

While the methodologies applied by each individual to ensure their mental health is strikingly unique given their unique circumstances, there is a common toolkit that each one of us can learn to employ in order to take care of our mental health.

In this part, we have addressed this toolkit, broadly comprising three key tools through three corresponding analogies.

I have personally found it really effective to think of mental health through analogies because it emphasises the simplicity of concepts, allows for free interpretation and doesn't force or distract us in trying to find a consensus between definitions, factors or causes.

As mentioned earlier, there are three analogies that reinforce the tools or skills I wish to discuss. They come in tangled earphones that teach us patience, cluttered rooms that promote practice and slow Windows 95/98 computers that remind us to retrospect.

Untangling Knots: A lesson in patience

We can think of mental health issues as knots in our own brain which impair us from thinking straight, confounding the process of making decisions or taking actions.

These knots are unknowingly created by us. The process in doing so is so subtle that we seldom realise it until much later. The realisation of these knots is almost as magical as our earphones getting tangled whilst sitting in our pockets. I use that metaphor because it fits perfectly to this problem.

What happens when we find that our earphones are tangled in knots? Do we look for evidences of its cause in our pockets? No. Do we directly pull at the ends of the wire? No.

Instead, we sit patiently with the earphones and catch whichever turn of the knots we see bulging and pull from there. With enough of these pulls the wires start to untangle. I am sure we have all tried to force it to open sometimes, but it is rarely to any avail.

It doesn't matter if you know how they got tangled in the first place. It may help in ensuring it doesn't happen again, but in that moment, the information lacks any use because you could blame the pocket or the laws of physics, but you still have to sit patiently with the tangled earphones and carefully untangle them yourself.

This is the primary task of ensuring mental health. To acknowledge that you are in charge of your mental health, not the external world, and certainly not the causes in the past. The external world and causes play an important role in detailing nuances, however, their role pivots on your recognition of being in charge.

A Cluttered Room: Practice forms habits

It seems like simple logic, and yet so many people neglect it because the need to find a tangible and universally accepted measure or cause has been the primary focus of almost all academic research which the common individual could not be less bothered with.

I want you to think about the room which you are in now. Notice the things in your room, there may be clothes, shoes, books, some pillows, bags or maybe a laptop or a computer. Look at everything carefully. All of these have some place in this room. Clothes in the closet or on the hooks behind the door, books on the shelf or the table, shoes on a stand or in a corner, and laptop in a bag or on a desk.

They may not be in 'that' place right now, but they do have place. Everything has place, but overtime, the room gets cluttered because we don't keep these things in their place. Clothes are on the bed, a shoe is missing, the books maybe scattered all over and eating dust, and the laptop has been left open for hours without use.

Gradually, this clutter keeps building up and you start to take more time to find anything in the room. You start losing things, you have difficulty moving or finding place to sit, and you start feeling bad about the mess and being in the room in the first place.

But this doesn't mean the room doesn't have place for all these things, it still does. So eventually, probably after being yelled at to clean your room, or a with a little pep-talk and help from your siblings or friends, you start picking up one thing at a time and putting it back where it should be. Though it takes a while, eventually, the room finally gets clean and balance is restored in the universe.

Our mind works exactly like this room. It has place for every thought and emotion. But eventually, everything starts to clutter and we start facing difficulty in finding that place in our head. The idea is to not turn away from the clutter or avoid it, but to slowly and sincerely take every thought and every

emotion, acknowledge that it has place in your mind and keep it there. You may revisit it later, but you have to keep it back where it belongs, just like you should have done with your room.

For example, there is a time for doubting yourself, but not in the middle of a test or an assignment. Similarly, every thought and emotion has place in your mind and if you see that a thought or an emotion is out of place, don't ignore it, just acknowledge that it has place and that you will revisit it later.

The room analogy not only reinforces the moral of the previous analogy which focuses on taking charge of one's own mental health but adds to it by expounding the congruency between mental health and hygiene.

Mental health is similar to mental housekeeping. It needs to become a habit for it to sustain.

Yet again, a focus on finding causes or objective factors would fail us because the analogy suggests that mental health care requires regular efforts irrespective of the presence of a problem.

In the former, we only begin the search when we see that something is wrong with us. Imagine if you only brushed your teeth when you saw plaque deposits. Brushing our teeth doesn't require daily evidence to convince us. Mental health shouldn't be postponed until we see evidence of its deterioration.

Defragmenting Windows 95/98: Advantages of retrospection

The third analogy is rather nostalgic, at least for some of us. If you have ever used a Windows 95 or 98 operating system, the word "defragmentation" might bring back a lot of memories of a long-drawn, manual process which was much more visual and satisfying than how defragmentation is done these days.

In case you don't know how it worked, defragmentation used to be a regular operation to reorganise the hard disk, make space for more data and increase the speed of the processor.

On a computer, data was stored on the disk in bits as it came and was stocked all over the place. Often times, similar data was stored in different places or in a different order, and it took some time for the computer to find the information it needed and thereafter retrieve it. If you kept storing increasing amounts of data, the computer started to slow down because the amount of work in retrieving the data from different places kept increasing.

Defragmentation thus worked like solving a Rubik's Cube. All similar colours had to be brought together to easily separate them from one another. The hard disk data is thus reorganized to store similar pieces of information together so it can be retrieved faster.

Our brain also has a memory component which stores life data, like experiences, habits and learning, and retrieves it as we need. The life around us keeps placing data in the relevant part of our brain in an 'as-is where-is' manner. Given the resilience of our brain to retain functionality, it takes a while before we realise that it has slowed down.

Defragmentation is a lesson in looking backwards and retrospecting to see if we have the space and equipment to deal with oncoming changes.

In the mental health context, it means retrospecting to see if we have equipment such as knowledge or support to keep our mind on its feet to respond to new life data. It involves looking backwards, but not as far back as looking at the cause, to measure the inventory of our skills and the insights we need to continue our pursuit towards well-being.

DEFEATING OUR CONDITIONING MAKES US EQUAL

Untying knots, cleaning up rooms and defragmenting PCs requires patience, practice and retrospection, respectively. All of these are key skills when taking care of one's mental health. There are various techniques to learn these skills, popular ones of which are mindfulness and meditation

exercises. These may not suffice for some people who are better helped by therapy, with some others often needing medication.

In each of these cases, the ultimate goal is the same, to sustain our pursuit of well-being, despite the changes in one's objective conditions.

The unfortunate reality is that when we encounter a problem in this pursuit, we ourselves, or others around us, asked us to change our paths and reconsider our goals instead of facing the problem, because it is the convenient way out.

Here is where our conditioning to seek convenience kicks in every time we face a problem, for more often than not, taking responsibility is not convenient. Therefore, we end up blaming the past or the circumstances of this pursuit, or the goal itself.

If we do it enough, if we shift accountability enough, change paths enough or discard goals enough, we will eventually fall into the habit of avoiding problems as they arise, instead of accepting them and breaking through them. Our conditioning to avoid inconvenience is so well-designed that it leads us to a false sense of achievement and gratification. We can keep avoiding problems, and yet go on to lead reasonably good lives.

But we can only keep doing this until all other alternative paths are closed, which is how trauma works. In trauma, such as losing someone we depended on to live, we have no choice but to face our problems head on. There is no alternative path left anymore, and we have no choice but to accept the fact that they are no more with us and to build up the requisite mindset irrespective of the cause that risked our well-being.

The narrative we are conditioned to overestimates the impact of the past and underestimates our ability in the present.

The narrative we need, challenges us to accept accountability of training our minds in the present with patience, practice and retrospection, in an effort to equip it for challenges in the future.

This narrative extends to all of us, not just those who have encountered trauma or distress. This is because it understands that the only universality that exists is that everyone faces mental health problems.

Resultantly, it removes the hierarchy between individuals based on their objective conditions and brings them all on a level plane with a universal objective to maximize their well-being. It is by establishing this equality, that this new narrative of mental health will aid us in creating a fairer world.

TAKE CHARGE FOR A HEALTHIER MIND AND A FAIRER WORLD

I have seen numerous people in distress and trauma, questioning if it is fair for them to be in such a state. The world, at the risk of being too philosophical, is random in its impact, and the certainty of randomness is one of the ways in which it attempts to ensure fairness.

To be fair to the world around us, and to teach the world to do so, we need to be fair to ourselves first. The initial step, therefore, is to accept the randomness and focus on the response to it rather than focusing on the cause of it. Once we acknowledge that we are accountable for our own well-being, both mental and physical, we can retain a sense of authority in this randomness. This authority is required to be able to make decisions against our conditioning towards convenience.

It is with this authority, that we can choose fairness because fairness is, above all, a choice, and choice requires authority over self. Those who continue to be bound by the conditioning of convenience will always find it difficult to choose to be fair.

Fairness requires courage. Courage demands accountability to oneself. And accountability to oneself is a trait of a healthy mind. Therefore, it is key that we understand that mental health is the starting point of creating a better and fairer world, and not a consequence of it.