**The internal therapist**

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As awareness of mental health is gaining momentum in Pakistan, two things are happening as a result that have an opposite effect. One, more and more people are having open conversations about their mental health, they are seeking therapy or help from other mental health practitioners like psychiatrists, and realising that our minds need as much attention as our bodies do. That is productive and a great movement. The other thing which is counterproductive and also a result of this movement towards awareness of mental health is the tendency to self-analyse and self-diagnose with the help of Doctor Google. I mostly notice it in the younger population in their 20s and 30s, where in the first sessions they have already concluded what their mental health issues are. After many searches on google and finding some symptoms that they believe they have; they develop a very strong internal therapist. Let’s try to understand why that would be a problem.

So many times I get clients who sit across from me and tell me they have depression or they get panic attacks. Or they will very casually announce that their parents have narcissism or one that alarms me the most is, ‘Oh he is bi-polar.’

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I can see the internal therapist sitting across me, deeply entrenched in the self-diagnosis or the other-diagnosis, to serious mental health illnesses without any professional intervention. What is also interesting is that as therapists we do not believe in diagnosis. That’s the job of a psychiatrist.

I have to tread very carefully with a client like that. I am in a direct conflict with the internal therapist who feels he can make some sense of the therapeutic process by this analysis that is quite grey in nature in all honesty. There is no quantifiable way to assess the success and failure of therapy. There is no linear process and I would be surprised if all therapists have not now and then felt lost and taken this question to their supervisors: ‘What in the world am I doing in therapy?’ It is perhaps one of the most valid questions and paves the way for deeper work between the client and the therapist. It is an impasse that has lots of information.

As human beings, it helps us to be aware of things in black and white. It is easier to understand tangible realities versus intangibles for the lack of a better word. It is easier to sit with the knowledge that I have depression and it’s treatable with medication and therapy than to know if I am sad or in pain—or to call it a panic attack, denying the underlying chronic anxiety caused by difficult life situations.

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How this diagnosis helps is that this way, these issues can be defined as problems and solutions can be found to fix them. And this is the attitude that is always inculcated in us. Fix the problem. Find a solution.

The risk of an unaware internal therapist is that people amplify how they are feeling and thinking and unconsciously might start acting into it or move towards the wrong direction. The mind is a funny thing. If you wear tinted glasses, the world will not appear in the same hue. If you believe you have depression, which is a serious mental health illness and confirm the symptoms online through your own perception, there is a high probability and risk that you will start acting out some of the symptoms.

This is why with such clients, so much work is around helping them unlearn what they have learned. The idea is not to discount anything that the person is feeling but simplifying the language of symptoms or what they are going through makes a lot of difference. It’s helping them have a different perspective towards themselves and towards life. A little example would be that once in a session, a client started feeling anxious and believed that it was a panic attack. I supported him and brought to his awareness that this is just anxiety and they need to do nothing about it but sit with it and within two or three minutes, he started to feel calm. He then shared how believing it was a panic attack and having read about it online, the same sense of anxiety had been much more exaggerated and prolonged for him. After that he never had a ‘panic attack’.

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I would invite people to continue to pay attention to their mental health and If you are experiencing something, please seek professional help rather than letting your internal therapist help you. Through therapy you will surely develop one, but that would be one with awareness and an asset to your internal growth. There is nothing more harmful to the psyche than an unprocessed and inexperienced internal therapist.