

When the worldly words fail you, art can come to the rescue and bring to light the workings of the inner world, finds Sravya Attaluri

ARTICULATING MENTAL HEALTH

● Roshne Balasubramanian

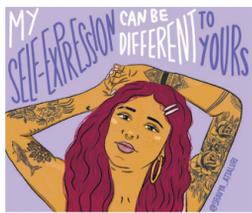
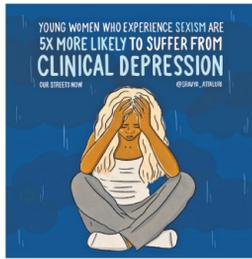
A pop of colours, strong visual narratives on mental health, self-care and feminism, and an underlying message of a search for happiness binding the myriad imagery together: Twenty-four-year-old Sravya Attaluri's art handle offers a delightful respite for those who are endlessly scrolling down and double-tapping on Instagram.

"My artistic journey began when I was an adolescent. I used to live in Korea. Then, my parents encouraged me to take up art classes. When I used to come down to Hyderabad, to visit my grandparents and extended family, I took up local art classes as well. Later, when I moved to Hong Kong, I dabbled in different techniques. This process allowed me to communicate my thoughts," shares the Hong Kong-based artist and graphic designer.

As a teenager, when Sravya lost her grandmother, it sent her down a spiral of grief and depression. "This grief was coupled with dysmorphia. It stemmed from the fact that no one in Hong Kong looked like me. I started feeling like something was wrong with my body. Slowly, a sense of loneliness crept in. I struggled and was unable to articulate it verbally. That's when art came to my rescue," she recounts.

When fellow students in her class were busy painting delicate flowers and colourful

“Many reach out to me to talk about their mental health. I just lend an ear and help people connect with the right resources”
—Sravya Attaluri, artist and graphic designer

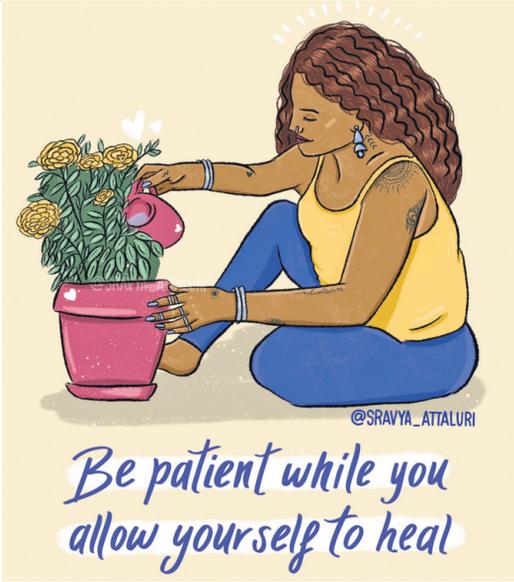


landscapes, Sravya was busy trying to visualise her grief and mental health condition through her artwork. "Girls who felt suicidal or had body-image issues became a recurrent theme in my works. While some teachers encouraged it, my artwork put off several people. This reaction to my work was what intrigued me to take a closer look at my artistic process," she details.

In the journey, Sravya realised that visualising, confronting and accepting the grief through her artwork was cathartic. "I started focusing on the pursuit of retaining daily happiness... which is hard work. This meant constantly checking in on yourself, doing yoga, and cutting out people

who were triggering. I slowly started spinning narratives about my journey," she says.

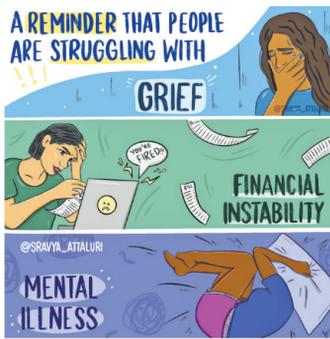
Through her 'Mental Health Art' page, Sravya has not only been sharing her journey but, in the process, helping those treading a similar path. "Many reach out to me to talk about their mental health conditions and share their stories. Sometimes, it's hard to strike a balance — to help people while keeping a check on your mental health. But I ensure that I follow up on therapy to manage my anxieties because if I don't care for my mental wellness, how can I help others? I am not a mental health professional. So I just lend an ear and help people connect with the right resources," she shares.



ART AND MISSION

Through her artwork, Sravya tries to find more ways to address mental health issues and the stigma around it. The idea is to make mental health more conversational. For details, visit Instagram page [Sravya Attaluri](#) or [www.artbysravya.com](#)

Art panels for a healthy conversation



There is no definitive end to her artistic process, which keeps metamorphosing. From the choice of colours, the words she weaves into her works to other visual and Easter-egg elements that are part of her art pieces, Sravya says she's mindful of what she creates. "When addressing serious issues, people tend to use reds and blacks as a sign of warning. But I wanted to use bright and happy colours and share light-hearted content. I wanted it to be approachable. I have also been trying to destigmatise dialogues on mental health by using casual tones and conversational language," she explains.

Sravya aims to help organisations and charities by en-

abling them to use her skills, besides her artwork, to further the cause of mental health and equality. "If someone sees my artwork at the right time, it could impact their day. I believe that art can change society and I would love to be part of that change," says the artist who takes inspiration from her multicultural upbringing and experiences.

"I have a global perspective. So, I mix and match everything. I am currently working on a series that focuses on men's mental health. However, I don't want to assume and reinforce any gender stereotypes. So, I am in the process of researching and listening to narratives from and of men," she says.

Conversations on a life of purpose after a divorce

● Vaishali Vijaykumar

courage," she recounts.

For someone who's been a regular in the popular conversation series of the *happynesswalas* — AVIS Viswanathan and Vaani — I'm used to having an intimate and reflective experience with a close-knit audience on the first floor of Odyssey, Adyar, every month. The viewers would be expected to take their seats exactly 15 minutes before the event commenced. While we munched on some biscuits, AVIS would take his position on the hot seat and get chatting with the guest speakers, while Vaani would stream it live on their social media page. But with the pandemic upon us, the duo moved their ventures to Zoom on April 8 with a conversation on 'How to love a crisis.' And since then, there has been no stopping them.

Within a few days, they were doling out a string of series — *Bliss Catchers*, *The Uncommon Leader*, *The happyness conversations* — for the lockdown. The hour-long sessions garnered viewers from all over the world. Their latest episode of *the happyness conversations* on June 27 featured the journey of Gazal Raina from darkness and pain to living a life with determination and ambition.

The story goes back to 2013 when Gazal made the life-changing decision to walk out of her marriage after having faced 18 years of abuse and violence. What she didn't see coming was that her ex-husband would keep from her only son. Even as her self-esteem had been tattered, she had to contend with fear and apprehension over the fate of her son's custody. It didn't start out like this, she shares. "It had been my decision to marry an army man when I was all of 19 years old; my parents were not happy. When I started experiencing abuse from my husband, I was in denial and always attributed it to something external. The incidents were nerve-racking. It crushed my self-confidence and battered my soul. I couldn't be upfront about it or confront him because I did not have the

With time, Gazal got an opportunity to work at a school in the army cantonment in Udhampur in Jammu and Kashmir. She completed her BA, MA and BED to take up the job. It was then, when her life was taking a purposeful turn, that she was able to finally end her marriage. Burdened by guilt, grief, and self-accusation; she decided to face life one step at a time, all by herself.

Gazal made a courageous choice and decided not to be a victim of her circumstances anymore. She sought help from her friends, family, and spiritual guides. Their support, and the perspective gained through volunteering services she had enrolled in, helped her to move on and unravel her life's purpose and live by it. "Nothing prepares you for a divorce. I was grappling with multiple emotional problems. The only thing I couldn't overcome was being alienated from my son.

The person is alive but the relationship is dead. That's when I felt a sense of failure seeping in," she narrates.

Yet, she didn't let it stop her. Taking all the hurt from her experience, she decided to work towards helping others like her. In 2014, she set up Bodhi — a support group for people who are single and dealing with traumatic separations. In April 2019, she set up Milaap — Support for Non-custodial Parents — an organisation for parents like her who are either denied access to their children or are estranged from them.

A slow, cathartic, process of healing followed, and Gazal decided to hold on to her hope. She eventually developed the resilience to face all kinds of situations boldly. "I'm still a student at the school of forgiveness. However, it teaches me that if I don't learn to forgive myself, then my son may not learn to forgive me. My idea of happiness now is being able to follow my heart, a life of peace and joy, and the sense of purpose the past six to seven years have given me. I want to take the message and importance of co-parenting to the whole world," shares Gazal.

CHENNAI DIGEST

FICCI Ladies Organisation launches incubation cell

FICCI Ladies Organisation's Chennai Chapter launched an Incubation Cell to help existing small businesses and budding entrepreneurs navigate their respective businesses post-COVID, recently. The launch took place with a webinar with senior speakers who spoke about MSMEs' plan for stimulating the Indian economy and the role of incubators in helping entrepreneurs, especially female entrepreneurs. The webinar began with an address by Dr Rajendra Kumar - IAS (Additional Secretary, Ministry of Electronics and IT (MeITY), Govt of India, and was followed by a conversation between Lakshmi Narayanan - Co-Founder, Cognizant, and Professor Ashok Jhunjhunwala, Institute Professor - IIT Madras. The talk ended with an interactive question and answer session.



Matter of pride: 21 days, lifelong support

● Express Features

Some studies claim it takes all of 21 days to form a new habit. A Bengaluru-based venture decided to use this nugget of information to help people become better allies of the LGBTQ+ community. Pride Circle, a diversity and inclusion consultancy, launched the #21DaysAlly-Challenge for Pride Month, which celebrates the community. The idea is simple: Participants are given 21 "micro tasks" that could take them anywhere between five minutes to 50 minutes.

"The tasks are small enough that people can pace them over 21 days or attempt a couple of them together," says Srinivas Ramaswamy, co-founder of Pride Circle. Having started on June 1, the initiative has so far called for tasks like read a coming out story of an LGBTQ+ individual, introspect

why you want to be an ally, learn about LGBTQ+ laws in your country, watch a queer film, follow community individuals on social media and so on. Currently, the initiative, which was launched on a global scale, has over 5,000 participants, including individuals, companies like NASA, Infosys, IBM, Intel, etc, and schools and educational institutes like Indian Institute of Management (Ranchi) and Tagore International School (Vasant Vihar). Participants from countries like Sweden, the Netherlands, Serbia, USA, UK, Thailand, South Africa, Singapore, Japan, China and Australia are also taking part.

Since one of the objectives is to take conscious steps to recognise and neutralise biases and stere-

otypes about LGBTQ+ community, each task also goes up with a list of resources for people to check out. "Each completed task can fetch you points and then there are bonus tasks and referrals for extra points," says Ramaswamy, adding that new tasks are added every week day, at 12 pm IST. A separate leaderboard for individuals and companies has also been created. Registrations are still open for the challenge, which concludes on July 1, with winners being announced on July 15. "Our top 10 individual winners will get gift vouchers from our reward partners," says Ramaswamy, adding that companies will get a certificate of appreciation and a badge.



AVIS Viswanathan and Vaani in conversation with Gazal Raina (bottom left)



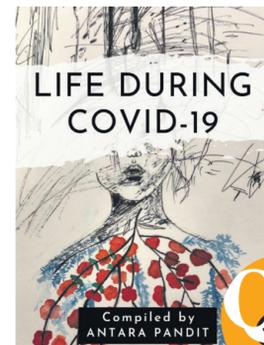
TALES FOR POSTERITY

● Naaz Ghani

Even in the early days of the coronavirus outbreak — when the infection was spreading from country to country faster than we could learn from each other, when almost every government seemed to be two phases behind and trying to catch up, when health-care systems around the world were scrambling to keep up their services even as their people succumbed to the disease, and people from all walks of life found themselves stranded (indoors or on the road) — the powers that be had turned to the wisdom of earlier generations and their learnings from past pandemics. From the bubonic plague to the Ebola outbreak, meticulous documentation of stories from the front offered enormous insight and, for the common man, much

hope. This time around, author and blogger Antara Pandit has taken it upon herself to introduce the world to a few stories of this pandemic. Her e-book titled *Life During Covid-19* is an anthology of experiences of people from around the world. With the book set to be launched by the end of the week, Antara talked to CE about the journey that led to this creation. Excerpts follow:

What led you to compile an anthology?
The idea of putting together a collection of experiences came to me a week after Lockdown 1.0 began. I bounced the idea off a few close friends and there was such positive feedback. So, I immediately developed a few guidelines for an e-book, which would allow people to acknowledge what they were going through. The response was overwhelming! In less than two



months, 60 stories were received, edited, and compiled.

How important do you think it is to share our stories at a time like this?
I am a person who believes that sharing personal experiences can change lives. This is the foundation for all the work that I do, and the way I live my life. So, it was no different with

COVID-19 and the lockdown. Within the first few days, I could see the upheaval that was taking place worldwide, and I knew people would be looking for various ways to deal with what was happening. Be it frontline workers, educators or parents, every person has a story to tell. As a writer, I am conditioned to always look inwards, reflect, and acknowledge my own stories before I can write about them.

My vision for *Life during COVID-19* is twofold — 1) For it to be a reminder to all the contributing authors that they have impacted a life somewhere by sharing their journey, and 2) For the stories to be a source of strength and inspiration for everyone who reads it, now and in the future. I want the book to be viewed as a piece of history that helps forge connections.

Are the stories featured in the book from people you know personally?

Many of the contributing authors who have written for the book are known to me — family, friends, distant acquaintances. However, when word about the e-book spread, strangers from all over the country started mailing in their stories. These authors are from different generations and all walks of life. The youngest writer is eight-years-old.

While the stories may be as diverse as its authors, what is the one thing that stands out with all of them?
Each author has selected a specific 'category' — pregnancy, personal growth, duty and sacrifice, safety, social connections and relationships, business, healthcare, and more — to record their experience under. Each category is a separate chapter with multiple stories under it. There are 14 chapters in the book. While each story is unique, the one common thread that jumps out at you and ties them all together is the immense strength and persever-

ance that people have shown in adapting to life as we know it right now.

How has it been like to plan a launch over a Zoom call? Not easy! But we are all making the best use of technology right now. I am used to doing Zoom meetings every day but webinars are a completely different ball-game! So, I am currently doing multiple test runs to make sure that there will be no technical glitches that day. The event includes 13 author readings, so everyone being on the same page is key. I have realised how lucky I am to have an amazing support system and a group of friends who have been helping me with this.

The book launch is on July 4 at 6.30 pm
Webinar link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84600269166?pwd=T0RlZmx3bXdlIWhlIFB2RwWSs4ZjZlTzZ09IDz84600269166>
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