

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

16 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

VOL. 16 ISSUE-2, APRIL 2025

Editor-In-Chief: **Dr. Vishwanath Bite**

Managing Editor: **Dr. Madhuri Bite**

www.the-criterion.com

AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Surviving Stress, Depression and Suicidal Thoughts: Lessons from *The Mahabharata*

Dr. Dharmapada Jena

Assistant Prof. in English,
Odisha University of Agriculture and Technology,
Bhubaneswar, Odisha.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15315766>

Article History: Submitted-24/03/2025, Revised-09/04/2025, Accepted-11/04/2025, Published-30/04/2025.

Abstract:

Stress and depression have become a key concern in today's world. "An estimated 3.8% of the global population experience depression" (Global Health Data). Depression and its psychological ramifications have badly affected people in India. Cases of stress, anxiety and depression are rising alarmingly, even more acutely in post-covid scenario. "Physical and mental illness, disturbed interpersonal relationships and economic difficulties" (Vijayakumar 291), unemployment and lack of access to education and healthcare are some of the main causes of stress and depression for Indians. The instances of suicide, resulting from depression, have become grave concerns that need an urgent attention. Now a days, mental health awareness is raised among Indians. Medical intervention and counselling are the felt need of the hour. In this context, *The Mahabharata*, in which "every conceivable human emotion" (Debroy xxxi) gets figured, happens to fill the void. The epic features innumerable instances of stress, depression and suicidal thoughts that affect the characters. Furthermore, it throws light on various coping mechanisms. This paper attempts to discuss how the epic represents stress, depression and suicidal thoughts. It will explore how the epic hints out ways to overcome such challenging mental situations, thus claiming its influence on mental health treatment in even today.

Keywords: Stress, Depression, Suicidal thoughts, The Mahabharata.

Introduction

With the rise of medical humanities, mental illness has become a point of discourse across the disciplines. Media, literature and public discourses have started voicing it and spreading awareness among people to understand and fight it. Mental illness is no more a “tenebrous and stigmatized” (Jena 962) topic anywhere in the world. The victims are openly talking about their stresses, anxieties, depression and trauma. Large number of cases of stress, depression and death causing thereof are being reported these days.

Stress is understood as a state of worry or mental tension caused by a problematic situation. The more serious and lasting condition of it is depression. Most of human conditions, in today’s world, seem causing stress and depression among people. “An estimated 3.8% of the population experience depression” (Global Health Data). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), “depression affects over 300 million people globally, and it is predicted to be the leading cause of disability by 2030” (Mehrotra 1). The situation is equally alarming in India. Cases of stress, anxiety and depression are rising disturbingly, even more acutely in post-covid scenario. “Physical and mental illness, disturbed interpersonal relationships and economic difficulties” (Vijayakumar 291), unemployment, lack of access to education and healthcare are some of the prime causes of stress and depression for Indians. The instances of suicide, resulting from depression, are of another grave concern. “The suicide rate in India is 10.3. In the last three decades, the suicide rate has increased by 43%” (Vijayakumar 291). This scenario needs to be urgently considered and measures to be undertaken. To a great relief, now a days, people are seeking medical intervention and counselling. A study of *The Mahabharata*, in the present scenario, seems beneficial as it has potential to exhume ways to understand mental illnesses, and prepare us to survive these.

“*The Mahabharata* is a living text that permeates contemporary thought and spirit” (Weisman 17). “*The Mahabharata* presents us with a veritable array of human characters, from the sublime to the ridiculous. No type of human emotion, no deed of valour, generosity, sacrifice or meanness is missed here” (Harshananda 329). The worth of the epic can be estimated from the fact that it embodies human life-situations and emotions in their totality. The religious, political, social and economic aspects of society get featured in the epic. further, it addresses the sensible issues of the society such as “gender and social discrimination, sexuality, female body politics, women disposition, marriage, kinship and so on” (Biswas 52). Research undertaken on *The Mahabharata* [Kahlon (2011, 2015), Cederman (2013), Sanyal (2015), Biswas (2016), Maitra and Saha (2016) and Vat and Tantray (2016)] show how patriarchy, traditions of gender relations, the notions of victimhood and agency have been contested. Kaipa (2014) discusses how the epic imparts the leadership lessons. The notion of “Uncanny” and “dead mother” (33), explored by Hildebeitel (2018), added a new dimension to the study of the epic. However, boundless other dimensions of the epic, specifically the way it deals with human suffering and turmoil, need serious academic engagement.

The Mahabharata, in which “every conceivable human emotion” (Debroy xxxi) gets figured, not only features instances of stress, depression and suicidal thoughts affecting its characters but also throws light on various coping mechanisms. This paper attempts to analyse how the epic represents stress, depression and suicidal thoughts and hints at ways to overcome such challenging mental situations, thus rendering influence on spreading positive health education and life sustenance measures.

Germes of Stress and Depression in *The Mahabharata*

The Mahabharata presents various stressful situations in which the Pandavas lived. The unexpected death of their parents, Pandu and Madri and “the unfair play at dice” (Ganguli,

Drona Parva 282) and its consequences were traumatic stressors for the Pandavas. The stress and depression of Yudhishtira can be easily read from his recollection: “I have been deprived of wealth and kingdom through gambling... by unfair means... they have sent me to distressful exile in this great forest, clad in deer skins. At present I am leading a distressful life in the woods in grief of heart” (Ganguli, Vana Parva 15).

The incident of Dussasana “dragging Krishna as a slave into the assembly” (Ganguli, Vana Parva 60) is no less than a depression. The Pandavas passed the subsequent years “in wakefulness and great sorrow” (Ganguli, Karna Parva 96). The tragic consequences of the game of dice, and the insult and humiliation perpetrated to Draupadi in the Kuru assembly by dragging her to the court during her season, “stained with blood, with but a single cloth on, trembling all over, and weeping” (Ganguli, Vana Parva 31) contributed immensely to her stresses. The epic portrays Draupadi as a witness not to a singular stressful event of game of dice, but to diverse incidents: the painful life in the forest during the exile, in the kingdom of Matsya, the assault by Kichaka in the presence of the wicked king of the Matsyas and the tragic death of her sons and grandsons. Such diverse experiences became the cause of her psychological stress and depression, though in a limited sense. For Kunti, casting away the newborn, Karna into the water of the river or the sudden demise of her husband, Pandu and co-wives, Madri were utterly distressful and for which she could not repair to sleep, a symptomatic behaviour of a depressed.

The Mahabharata enables us to see how the life of Karna was stressful and depressing. He faced negligence and insults from every quarter because of which his life became “destructive of [his] achievements and fame” (Ganguli, Udyoga Parva 281). The insulting words of Kripa, “sons of kings never fight with men of inglorious lineage” and of Draupadi, “I will not select a Suta for my lord,” (Ganguli, Adi Parva 289, 374) led to his stress and depression of which he could not come out. The same is observed with Drona and Ekalavya. Drona witnessed grave

insult and humiliation, owing to his poverty and inability to fulfil the needs of his son, Aswathaman. He had been constantly ridiculed of his humble background, even by his son's friends that haunted him repeatedly. Ekalavya also confronted scorn of his low cast and having aspiration to become a great archer.

The epic delineates how the death of his brothers and kinsmen became stressful and depressing for Duryodhana. He lost his peace of mind. "He began to pass the hours in meditation, scorched with grief and afflicted with sorrow on account of his (slain) brothers" (Ganguli, Bhishma Parva 167). The death of Bhishma, Drona, Karna and Dussasana, specifically, overwhelmed him and put him into a life of grave stress and depression. The incident of his brother, Duhshasana being killed, and his blood having been quaffed by Bhima pushed him to be completely stupefied. Ashwatthaman, on the other hand, witnessed to the unfortunate death of his father in the battle. Such an unfortunate death became his deadly stressor, a kind of psychological depression. The intensity of his turmoil can be understood from his lamentation: "My heart is now burning day and night. I fail to obtain peace... The thought of that slaughter is cutting all my vitals" (Ganguli, Sautika Parva 4). He was entirely moved and distressed by the demise of his father.

The other characters such as Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, Bhishma, Vidura and Krishna had been through stress and depression. Dhritarashtra and Gandhari are found falling on the ground, "hearing those cruel words" (Ganguli, Shalya Parva 1) of their sons' death. On hearing the commencement of war, Dhritarashtra expressed, "[t]ell me, O Sanjaya, where shall I go? What shall I do, and, how shall I do it? These foolish Kauravas will all be destroyed... Oh, how may death come upon me?" (Ganguli, Udyoga Parva 125). This indicates the level of his stress and anxiety. Further, the sentence, "partially restored to his senses, he addressed Sanjaya," (Ganguli, Karna Parva 7) stands evidence to his depressed self. The woes of the Pandavas, the suffering of Draupadi and the great carnage in the war greatly affected Krishna, Bhishma and Vidura. All these led to their psychological turmoil and sleep deprivation, a symptom of

depression. Both Krishna and Arjuns, on the death of Abhimanyu, were “afflicted with sorrow and grief and frequently sighing like two snakes, got no sleep that night” (Ganguli, Drona Parva 148).

Suicidal Thoughts and the Survival Strategies

The victims of stress and depression oscillate between the crisis of life and death. However, the choice of death, Freud (1920) opines, seems to be an easier option for them. In *The Mahabharata*, some of its characters are seen having suicidal thoughts out of severe stress and depression. Duryodhana, for instance, opts out committing suicide against the prospected defeat in the battle in general, and the death of Karna and Dussasana, in particular. However, his suicidal thoughts vanished when he accepted the fact that “liability to death (of all living creatures) is said to have been ordained by the Creator himself. Death comes to all beings in course of time” (Ganguli, Shalya Parva 65). He accepted the inevitability in life. The depressed Dhritarastra, after hearing the consequences of the dreadful battle, wished to die instantly. His words, “I do not find the least advantage in cherishing it any longer,” (Ganguli, Adi Parva 13) stand testimony to his suicidal thoughts. However, he succeeded overcoming the choice for death by taking a recourse to destiny. Kunti was found harbouring a desire to die upon the unexpected demise of Pandu and Madri. However, the strong sense of responsibility of nurturing the children could not allow her to do so. She accepted everything to be ordained by destiny. Draupadi was resolute to put an end to her life due to the repeated humiliation and assault, amounting to utter distress and mental agony. Her words, “unfortunate as I am. I am yet alive ... I should die” and “I shall, surely, mixing poison (with some drink), drink it up, -- for I never shall yield to Kichaka” (Ganguli, Virata Parva 36, 39), confirm to her choice for suicide. Such a horrible choice of Draupadi can be viewed as the reflection of her acute helplessness and a strong resistance against the perpetrated humiliations. The proper counsel of Krishna, and the comforting words from others, to a certain extent, helped her to retain the

stability of her mind. The character like Uttara also had suicidal motif. She had harboured suicidal thoughts when she lost her husband, Abhimanyu, in the battle, and after realizing her child being killed in her womb by Ashwatthaman. For she expressed, “I am yet alive when I should die... with the permission of king Yudhishtira the just I shall swallow some virulent poison or cast myself on the blazing fire” (Ganguli, Aswamedha Parva 6. Counselling from others and particularly the aid of Krishna in saving the child from death helped her survive.

Arjuna and Yudhishtira too went through suicidal thoughts. They thought of discarding life due to the events at the game of dice and the subsequent slaughter of their kinsmen. These characters, being grief-stricken and terribly in despair, could not consider life as a healthy choice, confirming them to be victims of suicidal tendencies. Yudhishtira’s words, “I shall forgo all food and drink, and without moving from this place ... shall dry up my life-breaths that are so dear... I shall cast off this body of mine” (Ganguli, Santi Parva 50), clearly imply his intention for death against the stressors. However, he did not end his life but took shelter under sincere repentance till his death. Comforting words from others also helped him survive the crisis. Arjuna’s suicidal thoughts were found to be emerging from the guilt that he did not interfere when Drona was slain so undeservingly by Dhristadhyumna. His words, “death has become preferable to me to life!” (Ganguli, Drona Parva 462), express his intent. He gravely repented for his guilt, and even wished to commit suicide. However, the counselling of Krishna helped him in a great way to survive against his suicidal intentions.

Survival Lessons from *The Mahabharata*

The Mahabharata, as analysed above, is of immense significance concerning teaching survival lessons to the victims of stress and depression. These lessons are:

- Proper counselling is the key to tackling stress, anxiety and depression
- Family or friends’ support is indispensable

- Realization or at times repentance can help overcome distress
- An empathetic attitude of the people around can act miraculously in walking out of depression
- Comforting words of others act as a panacea
- Taking recourse to destiny can also help retain peace of mind and stability at challenging times
- Acceptance of inevitability is necessary

All these life lessons that emerged through the analysis of the epic are potentially enough to be utilized as coping mechanisms in any given overwhelming situation in life. The techniques used by modern mental health care and counselling centres are among the listed. It can be said that the modern techniques have been inspired from our epics.

Stress Management Lessons from *Bhagavat-Gita*

Bhagavad Gita, which is featured in book 6 of *The Mahabharata*, contains 18 chapters with 700 verses (Slokas). It imparts life lessons through lord Krishna. It has been inspiring and influencing the lives of people across the globe. From Mahatma Gandhi to Einstein, all took recourse to *Gita*. Gandhiji confessed that whenever he “felt confused or faced a difficult situation which fails to show him the right path, at that time he used to take the support of *Bhagavad Gita*” (Mukherjee 1). Albert Einstein also stated that “he was so deeply inspired by the Bhagavad Gita that once he started thinking of on how God went about forming the universe” (Mukherjee 2). In today’s world, its importance cannot be undermined. It guides us wholly by showing paths at the hour of need. It enhances our self-knowledge and helps us attain inner peace. It brings to us the unwavering philosophies of life and of the world, and thus prepares us for the challenges of life. “The modern youth of the universe are currently experiencing a lot of stress, tension and worries. They gravitate to age quicker and inviting to

various illness and diseases. The teachings mentioned in the Bhagavad Gita can be utilized by helping them with positive vision of their own lives, from a different mindset cultivating them spiritually and by telling them lead to a quality and peaceful life” (Mukherjee 2). The influence of the *Bhagavad Gita* is beyond comprehension. It contains all life lessons and philosophies which contribute to enriching all existing knowledge and shaping all emerging thoughts. It can be argued that the modern counselling could have been emerged out the teachings of *Gita*.

The stress and anxiety of Arjuna, expressed in the battle field, were addressed by Krishna in the *Gita*. Beholding the kinsmen assembled and eager for the fight, Arjuna expressed: “my limbs, become languid, and my mouth becomes dry. My body trembles, and my hair stands on end. *Gandiva* slips from my hand, and my skin burns. I am unable to stand (any longer); my mind seems to Wander” (Ganguli, Bhagavat-Gita Parva 53). The uneasiness felt by Arjuna at that moment can be viewed to have been caused due to extreme stress and anxiety. In addressing such felt experiences of Arjuna, Krishna said, “this suits thee not. Shaking off this vile weakness of hearts, arise, O chastiser of foes” (Ganguli, Bhagavat-Gita Parva 54). Here, Krishna stands beside him as a friend and a guide and starts encouraging and motivating him to fight the battle. Encourage is the key to settle one’s stress and anxiety. However, Arjuna could not be settled for the battle with these encouraging words. It routed through a long process. Here, patience of the counsellor seems pivotal. As a counsellor, Krishna patiently listened to all the questions occurred to Arjuna and answered them one by one in the most convincing manner.

Arjuna goes on expressing his distress, “I do not see (that) which would dispel that grief of mine blasting my very senses, even if I obtain a prosperous kingdom on earth without a foe or the very sovereignty of the gods” (Ganguli, Bhagavat-Gita Parva 55). To this, Krishna said, “those... that are (really) wise, grieve neither for the dead nor for the living. It is not that, I or you or those rulers of men never were, or that all of us shall not hereafter be” (Ganguli,

Bhagavat-Gita Parva 55). Here Krishna's words of wisdom require special emphasis. What he means to say is that death is inevitable and it must be accepted. It is not wise to grieve on the prospect of death. He goes on to say, "for, of one that is born, death is certain; and of one that is dead, birth is certain. Therefore, it behoveth thee not to mourn in a matter that is unavoidable" (Ganguli, Bhagavat-Gita Parva 56). This sort of philosophical utterance can have enough power to drag one from the grab of stress and anxiety. Further, he emphasised, "who is the same in pain and pleasure and who is firm in mind, is fit for emancipation.... Regarding pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat, as equal, do battle for battle's sake and sin will not be thine" (Ganguli, Bhagavat-Gita Parva 56). The way Krishna counsels Arjuna with full conviction and profundity needs to be meticulously marked. It imparts us much about a counsellor and the art of counselling. His motivating words, "be thou, O Arjuna, free from them, unaffected by pairs of contraries (such as pleasure and pain, heat and cold, etc.), ever adhering to patience without anxiety for new acquisitions or protection of those already acquired,, " (Ganguli, Bhagavat-Gita Parva 57) have certainly brought about a positive change in Arjuna as a result of which he could come out of his stress and anxiety and finally started fighting. The importance of positive counselling of Krishna acts miraculously.

In today's scenario, counselling has acquired certain importance. The victims of stress, anxiety and depression are seeking it seriously to overcome their problems. WHO, Rogers (1942) and Maslow (2023) have emphasised the importance of counselling. "Psychological or personal mental health counselling allows you to talk about social, emotional, or behavioural problems that are causing you concern or interfering with your daily activities" (Behavioral Health). In this context, the teachings of Krishna, in *Gita*, can be indispensable in modern time when life has become full of challenges and stress. These lessons can be precisely listed here:

- Believe in yourself and your ability

- Be calm and focused
- Be mentally strong
- Do your duty and leave the rest onto the God
- Death is an inevitability as life
- Think beyond pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat
- Grieving is not a solution
- Be rational

These are some of the stress management lessons *Bhagavad Gita* teaches us and helps us lead a significant life.

Conclusion

The selected characters of *The Mahabharata* have been thoroughly discussed who have gone through a certain upsetting and overwhelming experiences in their lives that subsequently left them with serious questions of life and death. All the victims of stress and depression went through an unconscious desire to die, i.e., having the suicidal thoughts. However, all of them could come out of it. The narratives of *The Mahabharata* in general and *Bhagavad Gita* in particular have given us diverse survival strategies such as taking recourse to destiny, relying on support and consolation from others, and sincere repentance. The survival lessons highlighted will serve as a conduct manual for people in today's world in battling mental illnesses. *The Mahabharata* has influenced modern knowledge systems, science, technology and philosophy and it will continue to shape our thoughts and vision. The life lessons, embedded in *The Mahabharata*, particularly lessons that help surviving stress and depression continue to redefine mental health conditions, and offer pragmatic inputs into building sustainable practices to tackling mental health challenges.

Works Cited:

- Biswas, Pragnaparamita. "Interconnectivity of Marriage, Sexuality and Streedharma: Reflections through the Minor Female Characters of the Mahabharata." *Bharatiya Pragna: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Indian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2016.
indianstudies.net/V1/n3/v1n3s207.pdf
- Cederman, Helen. *Women in the Mahabharata*. PhD thesis, U. of Canterbury, 2013.
ir.canterbury.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10092/7556/cederman_thesis.pdf
- Debroy, Bibek. "Mahabharat Relevant Even in Modern Times." Talk at OLF-2016 in Bhubaneswar, *The New Indian Express*, 7 Nov. 2016.
newindianexpress.com/states/odisha/2016/nov/07/mahabharat-relevant-even-in-modern-times-1535832.html
- Freud, Sigmund. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." *The International Psycho-Analytical Library*, edited by Ernest Jones, no. 4, 1920, pp. 1-55.
- Ganguli, Kisari Mohan. *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa, Translated into English Prose from the Original Sanskrit Text*, 2006. Holy books,
holybooks.com/the-mahabharata-of-vyasa-english-prose-translation/
- Harshananda, Swami. "Mahabharata: A Study." *The Vedanta Kesari*, Sept., 1990. pp. 329-48. [rkmathbangalore.org/Books/Vedanta%20Kesari/\(1990,%20September\).pdf](http://rkmathbangalore.org/Books/Vedanta%20Kesari/(1990,%20September).pdf)
- Hiltebeitel, Alf. *Freud's Mahabharata*. Oxford University P., 2018.
- Jena, D. "Mental Illness, Trauma and Bollywood: Redefining the Role of Celluloid," *European Journal of Theoretical and Applied Sciences*, 1(5), 962-968, 2023.
[10.59324/ejtas.2023.1\(5\).83](https://doi.org/10.59324/ejtas.2023.1(5).83)

Kaipa, P. L. "Making wise decisions: Leadership lessons from Mahabharata." *Journal of Management Development*, vol. 33, 2014, pp. 835–846. doi.org/10.1108/JMD-06-2014-0061.

Kahlon, Maneeta. "Women in Mahabharata: Fighting Patriarchy." *Language in India*, vol.11, no. 11, 2011, pp. 529-537. languageinindia.com/nov2011/v11i11nov2011.pdf.

Maitra, Trina, and Nandini Saha. "Women in the Mahabharata: Pawns or Players." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL): A Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2016, pp. 83-92.

Mehrotra, Ritu. "Voices, Health," Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation. Global Health Data Exchange, 2023. vizhub.healthdata.org/gbd-results/

Mukherjee, Subhadeep. "Bhagavad Gita: the key source of modern management." *Asian J. Management* 8.1, 2017.

Rogers, Carl R. *Counseling and Psychotherapy*, 1942.

Sanyal, Srija. "Marginalized yet Empowered: A Study of Ekalavya and Karna from Mahabharata." *JELLH*, vol.3, no.2, April, 2015. ijellh.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/67.-Srija-Sanyal-paper-final-edited1.pdf.

Vat, Kranti, and Imtiyaz Ahmad Tantray. "Status and Sufferings in the Life of Draupadi in Mahabharata." *International Journal of Research in Economics and Social Sciences (IJRESS)*, vol. 6, no. 12, 2016, pp. 34-43. euroasiapub.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/3ESSDec-4259.pdf

Vijayakumar, Lakshmi. "Indian research on suicide." *Indian journal of psychiatry*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2010.

Weisman, Steven R. "Many Faces of the Mahabharata." *The New York Times*, sec. c, Oct. 27, 1987, p. 17. [nytimes.com/1987/10/27/arts/many-faces-of-the-mahabharata.html](https://www.nytimes.com/1987/10/27/arts/many-faces-of-the-mahabharata.html).

<https://montarebehavioralhealth.com/blog/8-benefits-of-mental-health-counseling/>

[https://hiberniumtherapy.com/abraham-](https://hiberniumtherapy.com/abraham-maslow#:~:text=For%20Maslow%2C%20it%20involves%20a,%20autonomy%2C%20and%20inner%20fulfillment.)

[maslow#:~:text=For%20Maslow%2C%20it%20involves%20a,%20autonomy%2C%20and%20inner%20fulfillment.](https://hiberniumtherapy.com/abraham-maslow#:~:text=For%20Maslow%2C%20it%20involves%20a,%20autonomy%2C%20and%20inner%20fulfillment.)

<https://www.visioncounselling.com.au/counselling-for-mental-health/>.