

# PSYCHE AND SPIRIT: connecting psychiatry and spirituality

Newsletter of the WPA Section on Religion, Spirituality & Psychiatry (SRSP)

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Editorial Board: Alan Fung and Peter J. Verhagen

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WORLD PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION

## Remembering our friend and colleague Dr. Avdesh Sharma (1956-2022)

Contents	Page
Tributes to Dr. Avdesh Sharma from members of the WPA Section on Religion, Spirituality and Psychiatry (SRSP)	1-8

### Peter J. Verhagen

This special edition of the WPA SRSP's Newsletter *Psyche & Spirit* is in memory of our chair (2020-2022), Dr. Avdesh Sharma. These tributes make one thing very clear: Dr. Sharma was an admirable, gifted man, an excellent psychiatrist, and a dear colleague.

When Dr. Sharma asked me why I thought he should be chair of the SRSP, I had a clear idea. In my opinion, after two chairs from Europe (the Netherlands) and one from Brazil, the three with Judeo-Christian backgrounds, we had to move to another continent and, most importantly, to another spiritual tradition. Dr. Sharma had, I was sure, the experience and wisdom to guide the Section in such an intercultural, interfaith encounter. Sadly, he was not given the time.

Peter J. Verhagen (NL)

Past secretary and chair of the SRSP (2003-2014)



(Above) Avdesh Sharma and Peter J. Verhagen, New Delhi 2018

**Alan Fung**

On behalf of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA) Section on Religion, Spirituality and Psychiatry (SRSP), I am sending my deepest condolences to Sujatha and Manasi – wife and daughter of Dr. Avdesh Sharma. Dr. Sharma was the incumbent Chair of our Section, and his passing is not only a great loss to our Section, but also to the field of spirituality and psychiatry internationally.

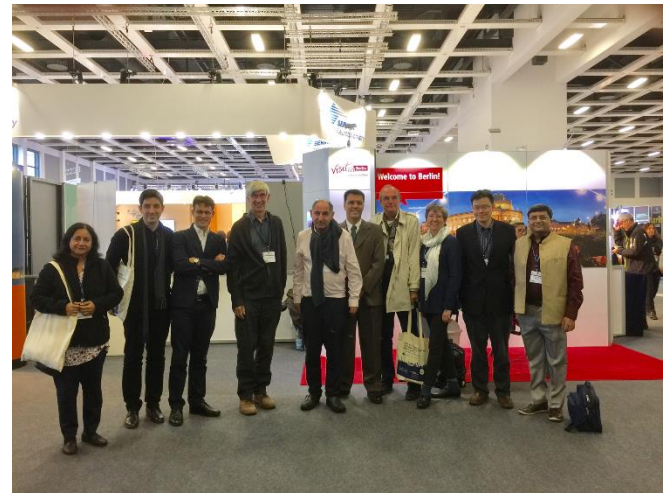
Avdesh joined the SRSP Executive Committee in 2014, becoming the Section Co-Chair in 2017, and the Chair in 2020. Here I will attempt to highlight a few of his numerous contributions to the Section.



**(Above) At the 2016 WPA International Congress of Psychiatry in Cape Town, South Africa. Avdesh chaired a round table discussion with faith leaders.**

At the 2016 WPA International Congress in Cape Town, South Africa, Avdesh and Sujatha initiated a day-long Round Table discussion with Faith leaders (on 20th November, 2016), which had faith leaders from twelve organizations and 15 mental health professionals – with the goal of generating some principles of interprofessional collaborations between mental health and spiritual care professionals. This was co-organized by Brahmakumaris. On the same day, public programs for interfaith leaders and mental health professionals were held at the Nelson Mandela Auditorium, Cape Town, organized by

Brahmakumaris in association with the WPA SRSP.



**(Above) Some members of the SRSP, at the 2017 WPA World Congress of Psychiatry, Berlin, Germany.**

At the 2017 WPA World Congress of Psychiatry in Berlin, Germany, Avdesh chaired a symposium titled “Culture, religion and spirituality in the promotion of mental health and management of mental illnesses”. The symposium was co-chaired by Dr. Norman Sartorius, a former WPA President and former Director of the World Health Organization's (WHO) Division of Mental Health. Avdesh also co-chaired the symposium “Interprofessional collaborations and education between mental health and spiritual care professionals as a pathway for achieving high quality, person-centred care” which I had chaired. He was also a speaker at another symposium on positive psychiatry and spirituality.



**(P.2 bottom right) From left to right: Avdesh Sharma, Alison Gray, Alan Fung, Sujatha Sharma; Berlin 2017**

One of the most important contributions that Avdesh had made to the WPA SRSP was being the Chair of the Organizing Committee of the 2019 WPA International Congress in Spirituality and Psychiatry (& 4th Global Meeting in Spirituality and Mental Health) in Jerusalem, Israel on December 1-4, 2019. The Congress drew hundreds of participants from 35 countries and received rave reviews.



**(Above) At the 2019 WPA International Congress in Spirituality and Psychiatry, Jerusalem, Israel. From left to right: Haim Belmaker, Avdesh Sharma, Herman van Praag, Peter Verhagen, Alexander Moreira-Almeida, Alan Fung.**

Avdesh also delivered a keynote speech on ‘Integrating Spirituality and Mental Health (and Dr. Sujatha Sharma on “Integrating principles of Rajyoga in psychotherapy”)



**(Above) Joy and celebration; Jerusalem 2019**

Building on the success of this conference, plans had been made to have further global meetings in spirituality and mental health on a regular basis – with the following one to be held in India. Unfortunately, with the COVID-19 becoming a global pandemic in 2020, it was no longer feasible to have in-person conferences. Avdesh had overcome these issues by initiating the 2020 Virtual International Conference On Spirituality & Mental Health / the 5th Global Meeting in Spirituality and Mental Health on December 20th, 2020. The conference was organized by the SRSP and in collaboration with the Indian Psychiatric Society (IPS) - and Avdesh had chaired the Organizing Committee. The conference was titled ‘Interface of Religion, Spirituality & Meditation with Mental Health, especially in turbulent times’. The Chief Guest was Dr. Afzal Javed (President, WPA) and Guests of Honor include Dr. P.K. Dalal (President, IPS) and Dr. Gautam Saha (President Elect, IPS). Among the many invited speakers was Dr. Dinesh Bhugra, former WPA President. Recording of the conference was broadcast on TV in India to over 1 million people by estimation.

Through Avdesh’s connections at the IPS and colleagues in India, the WPA Section also contributed to the International Yoga Day & Conference on Spirituality & Well Being on June 20, 2021 as a co-sponsor.

Even when he was unwell, Avdesh had provided welcoming remarks at our first virtual WPA SRSP meeting on November 12, 2021, when Prof. Christopher Cook (SRSP Executive Committee member; recipient of the 2021 American Psychiatric Association Oskar Pfister Award) gave the keynote lecture.

The impact of Avdesh’s many contributions can be felt beyond the field of spirituality and psychiatry. For instance, he played an instrumental role in the organization of the 3-day conference “Unlocking the Power of Being: Healing Self and Others” in October 2021 – which was organized by the Mental Health Foundation (India) in association with the AIIMS New Delhi

Dept of Psychiatry and RAHAT; with the theme of "spirituality as a means to enhance mental wellbeing in medical students and health care professionals".

In the book "Spirituality and Mental Health Across Cultures" (Oxford University Press in 2021), co-edited by Dr. Alexander Moreira-Almeida, Dr. Bruno Paz Mosqueiro and Dr. Dinesh Bhugra\*, I had the fortune to co-author a chapter with Avdesh and his wife Sujatha (among others), titled "Fruitful collaborations with religious and spiritual communities to foster mental health in general society: an international perspective"\*. In the chapter, one will find many more details on Avdesh's many contributions to the field of spirituality and psychiatry in India and beyond.

May the soul of Avdesh rest in peace. The SRSP will strive to continue carrying out Avdesh's vision of having spirituality as a key component of mental well-being, especially in terms of promoting collaborations between mental health professionals and spiritual/faith-based organizations "in attaining quality, holistic, cost effective, culturally acceptable care which is also humane" - as Avdesh and Sujatha had delineated in the aforementioned chapter.

(Adapted from a speech given on March 16, 2022 at an online memorial ceremony for Dr. Avdesh Sharma)

Alan Fung (Canada)  
Chair of the SRSP (2022 to present)  
Vice-Chair, American Psychiatric Association  
Caucus on Spirituality, Religion and Psychiatry

\*Fung, W.L.A., Shepherd, V.A., Chong, A.K.Y., Sharma, S.D., Sharma, A. Chapter 25. Fruitful collaborations with religious and spiritual communities to foster mental health in general society: an international perspective. In: Moreira-Almeida, Mosqueiro, BP, Bhugra, D. (Editors). Spirituality and Mental Health Across Cultures. Oxford University Press. 2021.

### Alexander Moreira-Almeida

Avdesh captivated us with his continuous and impressive enthusiasm, friendship and kindness. The WPA Section on R/S owns him a lot. He fought the good fight and, now, that God considered finished his mission on Earth, may He embrace our cherished Avdesh on this next step of spiritual life. Sujatha, may God comfort you and your family. Let's keep him in our memories, hearts, and prayers.

Alexander Moreira-Almeida (Brazil)  
Past Chair of the SRSP (2014-2020)  
Chair of the Section on Spirituality of the Latin American Psychiatric Association

### Christopher C.H. Cook

Avdesh will be much missed by all his colleagues in the WPA Section on Religion and Spirituality. I will remember him for his gentle manner and his kind heart. He was sensitive and compassionate, but also able to be firm where occasion required it. He had a strong sense of the importance of spirituality in psychiatry and in this was a good example to all members of our WPA section. May he rest in peace.

Christopher C.H. Cook (UK)  
Co-Chair of the SRSP  
Chair, Royal College of Psychiatrists (UK)  
Spirituality Special Interest Group

### Bruno Paz Mosqueiro

It is difficult to find words to express feelings, especially trying to communicate in other languages. But the gratitude to Avdesh makes us challenged to find ways to overcome those cultural barriers, willing to express our sincere and highest consideration to his lifetime work and contributions as Chair of the WPA Section on Religion, Spirituality and Psychiatry. With his loving, dedicated and inclusive presence, Avdesh will be missed in his leadership of meetings, projects and initiatives, leaving us a legacy of

partnership, kindness and commitment to the WPA work.

Religion and Spirituality have been increasingly recognized as essential aspects of many peoples lives. Avdesh lifetime work about Spirituality, Mental Health and Well-Being as a respected psychiatrist, captivating media communicator and esteemed leader, will be missed, always trying to built bridges and pathways between science and the needs of patients and community, trying to reach many people in times of suffering, mental health concerns, searching for spiritual strenght, relief and well-being. Reading to his words, talking about interprofessional collaborations between religious groups and psychiatrists, we can remind some of to his lifetime concerns with people and a humane health care practice: "We need to realize as mental health professionals, and the society at large, that disease, health, and well-being, form a continuum. The perceived causation for disease and its proposed management not only depends on science but also resources, especially human resources (...) It is hoped that other health/mental health professionals may also explore opportunities to collaborate with spiritual/faith based organizations around them in attaining quality, holistic, cost-effective, culturally acceptable care that is also humane"\*.

We keep in our minds, hearts and souls Avdesh's legacy of lived kindness, loving presence and commitment to foster the study, development and propagation of Spirituality and Mental Health field across the globe. And hope his family and close friends receive from us the gratitude and recognition for all his commitment and lifetime work.

Bruno Paz Mosqueiro (Brazil)  
Secretary of the SRSP  
Chair, Brazilian Psychiatric Association Section on Religion, Spirituality and Mental Health

\*Fung, W.L.A, Shepherd, V.A., Chong, A.K.Y., Sharma, S.D., Sharma, A. Chapter 25. Fruitful collaborations with religious and spiritual communities to foster mental health in general society: an

international perspective. In: Moreira-Almeida, Mosqueiro, BP, Bhugra, D. (Editors). Spirituality and Mental Health Across Cultures. Oxford University Press. 2021.

**Sarah Egger**

I have known Avdesh for many years and in fact invited him to be a speaker in one of our first accepted sessions the Royal College of Psychiatrists AGM on Spirituality in London. We shared the same spiritual path so that made us feel very much like brother and sister and I was able to meet him quite frequently when visiting India. His passion was making mental health issues understandable to the public and he used many methods to educate, reach out and bring comfort and strength to those struggling in this way. His own understanding of how spirituality could also be a great support to those suffering in this way was born out of the deep experience and wisdom of his own practice.

We all feel the loss of this kind, generous and dignified soul who served so many unselfishly and bore the pain of his illness and struggles with his health so bravely.

We all send love to the soul as he continues on his journey- I know he will be held in God's love and protection and his future will be blessed.

Sarah Egger (UK)  
Executive Committee Member of the SRSP

**King Yee Agatha Chong**

I could still remember the warm welcome of Avdesh when I first join the WPA section on Religion, Spirituality and Psychiatry.

Deepest condolences to Avdesh's family.

May the love (愛) of Avdesh be in our hearts always."

King Yee Agatha Chong (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, People's Republic of China)

Executive Committee Member of the SRSP

## Kishan Porandla

Dr Avdesh Sharma was a multifaceted, evolved but humble human being with embodiment of Kindness. I used to call him as Avadesh bhai, because we both specially developed attachment in Brahmakumaries spiritual university where we traveled together for common cause. He served General public, by utilising press, radio, TV and various psychiatric associations of India, WPA, and other international organisations with various capacities. He and his wife Sujatha used all their all energies to propagate the Spirituality throughout their life. I'm confident Madam Sujatha and Daughter Manasi will continue the mission. Let us all pray for him and his family.

Kishan Porandla (India)

Executive Committee Member of the SRSP  
Chairperson, Spirituality-Mental Health  
Taskforce, Indian Psychiatric Society

## Rajashree Ray-Bandyopadhyay

Some people are born to inspire and influence others. Dr Avdesh Sharma was one such man who not only influenced others but left an indelible mark in their lives. My first personal meeting with Dr Sharma, was in 2020, on the Zoom Platform. The year 2020 will be remembered in history, for the pandemic which left the world bleeding, but for me this year had a silver lining as destiny brought me in association with a man, who transformed me. We worked together in organising an online International Conference in June 2020, and for the first few months, the relation and interactions were extremely formal. I would (and always did ) call him 'Sir' with great reverence, as was customary in India. He was always very soft spoken, and a great listener. What struck me was his simplicity, and patience to listen to any new ideas that I would bring forward in our discussions. Within a very short span of time, he mentioned his great confidence in my abilities to work for the promotion of Spirituality in Mental health care. What brought us close was our deep beliefs in Spirituality and

rather obsessional management qualities. I was his junior partner in organising two major online International conferences in Spirituality within a year and hosted an online 12 episode series on Spirituality and Mental Health. The last few episodes of this series in late 2021, was organised when his health was failing. He would still read my messages and I would wait eagerly to receive his signature flower icon message to say he approves of my plans. And he knew I would never finalise any episode unless he consented with his flower icon. It is hard for me to believe I will never see him again. I thank Almighty for giving me the opportunity to meet him once, when he visited Kolkata with his family in Jan 2021 and gifted me a crystal flower. I never knew how closely connected I was with Sir in the 2 years I had known him, till probably the day I heard he was in the arms of our Heavenly father, and I felt the pain of losing my elder brother.

Rest in peace in your lovely home Sir.

Rajashree Ray-Bandyopadhyay (India)

Executive Committee Member of the SRSP  
Co-Chairperson, Spirituality, Yoga and Mental  
Health Sub-Committee, SAARC Psychiatric  
Federation

## R. Srinivasa Murthy

Appreciation of Dr.

Avdesh Sharma

For the last 6 months, since the last telephone talk on June 14, 2021, I have been thinking of my association with Avdesh. It has been nearly 4 decades since I met him for the first time. I had moved from PGIMER, Chandigarh to NIMHANS, Bangalore in January 1982. Avdesh joined NIMHANS for M.D. Psychiatry during the same year. We were together for his thesis work.

I had moved from PGI, which was strong on follow-up studies. When Avdesh expressed his desire to take up the subject of 5 year follow-up persons diagnosed with alcohol dependence, I was both excited and apprehensive. I was excited as it was an important area to be explored. It was apprehensive, in the pre-mobile world of 1980's, From my experience of follow up studies at PGI, I knew how challenging it would be to contact and follow up the patients. Avdesh was very clear and I went along. What happened was miraculous. Avdesh plunged into it an like an adventurer and the results proved worth all the effort. The findings were published in the NIMHANS Journal (*A. Sharma and R. Srinivasa Murthy (1988) A 4-5 year follow-up study of male alcoholism. NIMHANS Journal, vol. 6, No.2, p.111-113.*

Subsequent to the completion of postgraduation, Avdesh has been in Delhi. It is a matter of pride and admiration for me to see the career path. His contributions in the private sector, public mental health education and more recently in the area of spirituality and health have been monumental and unique. He is a person and professional like no other. I specially want to refer to the two public education activities on the Doordarshan

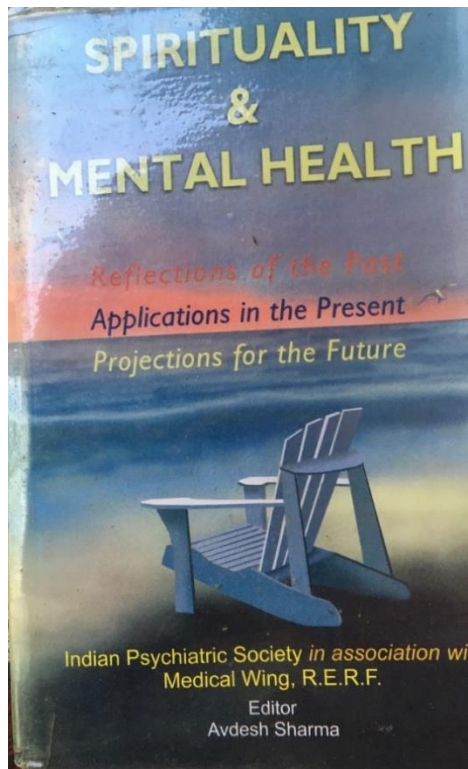
Dr. Avdesh Sharma of New Delhi has developed a very healthy way of working with Doordarshan and using this medium for mental health education. His speciality is to involve the general public in sharing their problems and expectations on the public TV. He is also very good in networking with a wide variety of professionals from different disciplines to present the differing viewpoints to the general public. As noted in an earlier section, the two programmes namely 'mind your mind' and 'maan ki baat' have served the cause of mental health immensely. *He is model for working with the public sector and utilising the available public services for spreading the mental health messages.*

**Mind Your Mind:** This the first and most extensive television based mental health education programme. This was taken up by the Doordarshan in the 1990's. The programme was technically led by Dr.Avdesh Sharma. The format was to bring to the public knowledge the different ways mental disorders can be present in the community ( through short interviews with the general public and presentation of typical mental disorders) and the expert experiences in terms of caring for the ill and treating the illnesses. There was also a feedback facility for people to share their experiences and seek further information.



**Maan Ki Baat:** An extension of the earlier effort of Dr. Avdesh Sharma in 2010-2011, on Doordarshan National in a different format is the Maan Ki Baat. The format is one of half hour programme of the anchor interviewing Dr.Avdesh Sharma (regular resource) along with a subject

expert. The programme covered a wide range of topics from the different mental disorders, emotional problems, life situations like old age and topics of promotion of mental health. This was a popular programme broadcast at a prime time slot. The strength is the format and the wide range of mental health topics covered. However, the limitation was the focus on more of professional solutions rather than self-help by individuals and families.



The other monumental contribution, with which I was associated is his leadership in **Spirituality and Mental Health**.

This is as important as the public mental health education. He contributed to this area, and continues to provide leadership in this area, in a number of ways. Firstly, his own personal journey and making spirituality an integral part of his life. Secondly, the publication of the book, **‘Spirituality and Mental Health- Reflections of the past, applications in the present and projections for the future’** (2009). This has three major sections, past, present and future by 39 contributors. It is a treasure of thoughts,

experiences, expectations and possibilities to make spirituality a part of everybody’s life.

The most recent contribution is through the World Psychiatric Association, as the leader of the Spirituality section.

There are other initiatives like the **Mind Specialists** by him and his wife Dr. Sujatha. Their daughter Ms. Manasi is following the parents path and making important contributions.

What I have seen of Avdesh and experienced in the last four decades of association, is a person of deep values, strong public commitments and an inquisitive mind. It has been a privilege to be part of his life journey.

My thoughts and prayers for his and his family’s wellbeing and bright future.

R. Srinivasa Murthy (India)

