

*Plants may be  
the new safe  
space for your  
mental well-being*

# **PARENT A PLANT FOR YOUR MENTAL HEALTH**

**BY: BHAVYA MALHOTRA**



**W**e may often think of plants as silent, unfeeling entities that solely react to the elements. However, a remarkable revelation emerges— these nonverbal, green inhabitants can resonate with the caring sounds of their human guardians. Not just this, seeing the plants grow and tending to them, their human caretakers forge a deep connection with them quite akin to what parents have with their children. This unique bond has given rise to a trend in which people proudly call themselves 'plant parents'.

### THE SCIENCE BEHIND PLANT PARENTING

Plant parenting is the act of adopting and looking after a plant like you would for a pet or a child. Rooted in the principles of horticultural therapy that harnesses the therapeutic potential of plant-based and garden-based activities under the guidance of trained therapists, this concept has

emerged as a powerful tool for enhancing one's overall mental health.

Karthikeyan Vijayakumar, founder of Horticultural Healing Centre, Bengaluru says this therapy has been used in a well-structured form in India. "Depending on the mental health concerns of a person, the horticultural therapist designs a specific plan with activities based on that person's preference and needs," he says.

### MANY TAKERS FOR PLANT PARENTING

As a child, Suruchi Chetal, 43, Bengaluru, grew up in a house with a backyard brimming with all kinds of greens. In her teens, she was given the duty of watering the plants every day and she liked keeping a variety of plants. A freelancer in the education sector, Chetal is a parent as well

as a plant parent living in a city where flats are the norm and gardens are not. However, the limitation of space has not stopped her from growing indoor and outdoor plants.

Chetal is not the only one for whom this love started young. Gobinda Baidya, 63, Faridabad, was drawn to gardening since his boyhood days. Now a retired civil engineer, he takes care of his plants like his own children. Even when he is not home, Baidya ensures to make some arrangements for them. "That attachment with them is where real pleasure comes from," he says. "Because if they survive, you survive."





## PLANT PARENTING IS A RITUAL

"I Both Chetal and Baidya have a morning routine in place for their plants. Baidya's morning begins by meticulously "observing their growth" and ensuring they receive the perfect nourishment to preserve their vibrant colours. Chetal particularly loves to wake up to the greenery around her, provide nourishment to her plants and spend time with her green babies. Her gentle touch, she says, holds the key to their sense of belonging in their environment. Baidya does not talk overtly to his plants, he is "always talking to them in his heart".

Being an artist, Chetal finds different ways of caring for her plants including finding the right planters and making the right space for them. She is a keen learner and loves to discuss with other plant parents about different seasonal plants and ways to care for them. "Styling is one thing, but I also prune the leaves as required. I love doing that," she says.

Chetal has around 10 plants at a time for the past seven years earning her a reputation in the neighborhood as a sanctuary provider for green residents.

## BENEFITS OF PLANT PARENTING

Baidya likes to be a present parent for his plants irrespective of tough situations in his life. He likens plants to children who are dependent on adults to stay alive. It is my ritual

to go for a walk each day before nurturing my plants so I come back in an uplifted mood. "Because why should my bad day affect them?" he says.

"I love watching seeds turn into saplings," says Chetal. Being the catalyst for a plant's growth brings her a sense of pride and enhances her self-esteem. "You have nourished a plant from a sapling, and you feel a sense of achievement in that," she says. In Chetal's neighbourhood, it is a common activity to exchange pictures of plants on a WhatsApp group and sometimes adopt from each other. "When others witness the growth of my plants, I feel good, I like that," she adds.

Caring for plants is a type of pro-social behaviour humans engage in— it is caring, helping or doing something for someone

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else while recognising their needs and experiences. In 2020, researchers Yao Meng and Gang Meng found that pro-social behaviour helps to enhance mindfulness instead of rumination, which is often related to stress, anxiety and depression.

Consequently, Baidya and Chetal have unknowingly nurtured their emotional and mental well-being through their dedicated care for their plants. The act of being present and actively nurturing their plants has brought them a profound sense of serenity.

Chetal, for instance, considers it a stress reliever, often immersing herself in simple activities like removing yellowing leaves when she needs a mood boost. "You are just sitting with them for an hour once a week or you are decorating their planters, it helps to be away from any kinds of stress in your mind or surroundings," she says.

A 2018 research by the American Society for Horticultural Science found that horticultural activity had a stress-reducing effect with a decrease in the blood pressure of the group involved in it. They exposed half the individuals to a transplanting activity and the remaining to a mobile-based task of an equal level of physical activity and duration.

To reduce stress in individuals with depression, and children with autism experiencing sensory difficulties,

Vijaykumar uses plant parenting to allow the person to become fully conscious and focus on a pre-fixed target: the plant. "The person gets physical, mental and cognitive benefits including relaxation, emotional control and muscle flexibility through the activity," he says.

### IS IT FOR ME?

Plant parenting requires a lot of attention and observation, says Baidya. Vijayakumar says it as one of the best activities to include in one's lifestyle. Chetal suggests adding novel ways like styling to feel connected to your plants.

Vijayakumar shares some learnings which may be beneficial for plant parents:

Spend at least 15 to 20 minutes a day at a stretch with plants or in the garden

Smell your favourite fragrance from the garden or indoor plants every day. This should be done once in the morning after waking up and once before going to bed

Engage in an activity that requires you to use soil at least once in three days

Make friends with the plants by being consistent and sharing your thoughts with them every day

Talk sincerely and observe the plant for responses

Self-reflect and observe, including how you feel. In case there are positive outcomes one can opt for a more structured horticultural therapy programme with trained therapists

For a beginner, Vijayakumar asks to make consistent efforts and observations at least for a week to understand the effect of nature on oneself.

