



Mental Health Awareness of Teenagers in India

Aanya Nanda

mypublishedpaper@gmail.com

Shikshantar School, Haryana

ABSTRACT

This research paper looks at the mental health issues faced by teenagers in India. It addresses the key challenges faced by teenagers, such as academic pressures, social pressures and the different ways of improving them. It talks about the ever-present concerns during the teenage years, such as competitive examinations, beauty standards, peer pressure, bullying and body image issues. The paper also assesses current support networks like iCALL and Tele MANAS and various school-based programs and comments on their efficacy. Through the examination of school-based programs and pressures faced by students, the research aims to increase awareness surrounding the mental health of students and the different ways of improving it.

Keywords: Mental Health, Teenagers, Competitive Examinations, Beauty Standards, Body Image, Student Suicide, Academic Pressure, JEE, NEET.

INTRODUCTION

According to WHO Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an important and crucial aspect of well-being, however it is often overlooked in India. "Dr. Brock Chisholm, the first Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), in 1954, had presciently declared that 'without mental health there can be no true physical health.' More than 60 years later, the scenario has not altered substantially." (Srivastava et al. 131). Even with increasing awareness of mental health, many continue to suffer in silence due to cultural stigma and a lack of seeking professional help. It is evident that Adolescence is one of the most crucial and special periods in life, in which multiple mental health issues originate due to stresses from academics, social expectations, and digital influence. During this transition from childhood to adulthood, many hidden problems, such as anxiety and depression, can come up due to the added pressures. "Of the global population, adolescents make up a significant portion, one in every six people is aged 10 to 19. It is estimated that every seventh adolescent suffers from a mental disorder." (World Health Organization). "Nearly 50 million Indian children suffer from mental disorders, and this number will increase if the adolescent population is considered as well." (Hossain and Purohit 415). "Deviant behavior, poor scholastic achievement, drug abuse and social maladjustment are among the most frequent problems detected in adolescence, having far-reaching implications for adult Development" (Singh et al.) "While the focus on infant and under-five mortality, immunization, and nutrition have contributed to the overall improvement of physical health, little emphasis is given to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CAMH) in India." (Hossain and Purohit 415). "Awareness and health literacy are two sides of the same coin. One study found mental health literacy among adolescents to be very low, i.e. depression was identified by 29.04% and schizophrenia/psychosis was recognized only by 1.31%. Stigma was noted to be present in help-seeking." (Srivastava et al. 131). "Signs of poor mental health are overlooked for several reasons, such as a lack of knowledge or awareness of mental health among health workers and also the stigma that prevents them from seeking help." (Hossain and Purohit 04).

The invisibility of mental health as compared to physical health prevents people from seeking help, some even in severe cases. India's suicide rates among young adults are some of the highest in the world. "Every hour, one student commits suicide in India, according to the National Crime Records Bureau report in 2015." (Hossain and Purohit 04).

"Depressive disorders become more prevalent, behavioral disturbances, such as suicidality, eating disorders, and substance abuse, begin to emerge in these years". (Hossain and Purohit 04).

"Suicide rates in 15-29-year-old Indian men are estimated to be twice that of the global average (25.5 vs 13.1 per 100,000), and rates in young Indian women, nearly 6 times as high (24.9 vs 4.1 per 100,000)" (Balaji et al. 2)

Academic pressures

The NEET and JEE examinations are one of the most crucial and competitive examinations in India deciding the future of millions of students every year. The results of these examinations are used to decide the admission of students into the most prestigious engineering and medical colleges in India. "With a population crossing over 1.2 billion and a Gross Enrolment Ratio of merely 12.4%, this is also a challenge for India to transform demographic dividend into an opportunity through education and training. Most often, these competitive exams cause high levels of stress and resultant psychological disorders in adolescents; thus, these situations demand proper coping and support mechanisms. Several research have established positive correlations of academic stress with different mental health conditions such as suicidal thoughts, anxiety, and sadness among students" (Sharma 102).

It is well known by now that these exams are one of the most prestigious and competitive exams in India. "The pressure to perform well in these exams starts early, often in high school or even earlier. Students are expected to excel academically and score high marks in their exams. The pressure to succeed in the NEET and JEE exams is even greater, as these exams determine the students' future career paths." (George 34). The city of Kota in Rajasthan is one of the most popular coaching hubs in the country. "More than two lakh students come to Kota every year to prepare for competitive exams like JEE for engineering and NEET for admission to medical colleges. According to published news, 24 students preparing for competitive examinations in Kota have ended their lives as of November 2023, which is the highest compared to previous years, whereas last year this figure was 15." (Sidana 72). High parental expectations, academic stresses and hectic schedules are some of the causes of these high stresses. "According to the National Crime Records Bureau report, suicide rate in India was 12/100,000 population and in Rajasthan state 6.9/100,000 population, in 2021." (Kumar and Yasir 29)

One of the major incidents which sent shockwaves through the Indian students was the NEET exam of 2024. This exam had a major impact on the mental health of many students all over India. "The National Testing Agency (NTA), responsible for conducting the exam, has been criticized for its handling of technical glitches, lack of transparency, and questionable decision-making. The 2024 examination saw 67 students achieve a perfect score of 720/720, with 44 of them receiving "grace marks" despite answering a basic physics question incorrectly. The exam has also been criticized for its tie-breaking policy, which favors students who scored lower marks in certain subjects. Several students, parents, guardians, and subject experts alleged that the NEET paper was leaked on social media platforms, prompting students to demand the cancellation of the medical entrance examination". (Naik) This incident left a deep psychological impact on the students, many of whom were aspiring to become doctors. Notably, the mental anguish of students is palpable as they will be forced to study again, amidst a state of turmoil and distress. "Just a day after the NEET exam results were announced, an 18-year-old aspirant from Rewa, Madhya Pradesh, took his own life in Kota, Rajasthan. Sadly, this is not an isolated incident. This year has seen an alarming 11th case of suspected student suicide in Kota, following a staggering 26 cases last year." (Naik)

"Several studies have explored the relationship between academic stress and various factors such as academic anxiety, academic self-efficacy, burnout, depression, and coping strategies. Academic stress has been found to be positively correlated with academic anxiety and burnout, and negatively correlated with academic self efficacy. Female students, those with less educated parents, and those with poor academic performance are more likely to experience higher levels of academic stress". "One study in Chennai showed alarming statistics: the depressive symptoms reported among the NEET aspirants were at an alarming rate of 59.2%, and there was an overwhelming prevalence of anxiety at 100% . Pressure to perform, coupled with the general threat of failure and intense parental expectations, has been a contributor to stress in all these cases." (Sharma 104). "The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) estimates that 1% of suicides in India in 2021 were brought on by academic failure." (Kannan and Mala 1789)

Social Pressures

Today's teenagers deal with a complex mix of social pressures such as a need to fit in with their classmates, various beauty standards and maintaining a certain image on social media, all of which can take a serious toll on their mental health. With such pressures, many students resort to unhealthy coping measures such as drinking, smoking and substance abuse. "Most adults who smoke cigarettes started smoking as adolescents. Adult alcohol abuse can be similarly traced to drinking habits acquired during adolescence. Considerable attention has focused on the socialization of these health risk behaviors out of concern that adolescence is a period of heightened susceptibility to peer pressures" (Kiuru et al. 801).

"Most existing studies on alcohol use among the Indian youth revolve around findings based on male participants. Women face a more conservative attitude from both their family as well as society in terms of alcohol consumption whereas men are encouraged to 'Man up and drink.' According to a study conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2012 among the Indian population, the percentage of boys under the age of 15 who had not consumed alcohol previously decreased from 44% to 30% and from 50% to 31% for girls belonging to the same age group. " (Thakkar and Deb 2190-91).

One of the most common social stressors that teenagers suffer from is peer pressure. "Feelings of attachment, acceptance, belonging and other social needs intensify during this period which directly impact the amount of control exerted by one's peer group. Living under the control of one's peer group may lead to direct or indirect peer pressure, which can be defined as 'group insistence and encouragement for an individual to be involved in a group activity in a particular way' " (Thakkar and Deb 2191). Teens are often afraid of ridicule or mockery if they do not conform to the group norms which leads them to participate in harmful activities which include drinking, smoking, vaping etc.

Another major factor is unrealistic beauty standards and body image issues as seen on social media or television which put an immense pressure on teenagers to look a certain way. The need to be "fair skinned" or "thin" can make teenagers feel inadequate and lead to issues like low self confidence, eating disorders and anxiety. "Based on the traditional conception of Indian beauty, 'The ideal Indian woman is fair or medium-complexioned, has a narrow waist but wider hips and breasts, and has large eyes, full red lips, and long black hair that is either straight or wavy' " (Mittal and Choo 02). "Social media has the potential to continually expose teen girls to a barrage of visuals and content that encourage unrealistic beauty standards and create pressure to conform to those standards." (Palawat et al. 341). Peer pressure further exacerbates these expectations making teenagers feel pressured to conform to the standards of appearance being maintained by their peers or friend groups in order to be accepted. "A clear connection between poor body image and mental health problems has been found by research. Negative body image has been linked to an increased risk of eating disorders, depression, and anxiety, according to studies. Additionally, studies have shown that having a poor body image increases the likelihood of having suicidal thoughts and actions" (Bajwa and Chandola 6103).

Bullying remains as one of the most harmful and damaging social issues that teenagers deal with. It leaves deep emotional scars that can severely affect their mental health, confidence and self-esteem. "It was observed that name-calling or using bad words were common forms of bullying observed among adolescents next to physical bullying. For instance, Kshirsagar et al. (2007) reported that the most common types of bullying were teasing and giving discriminatory or offensive labels and nicknames to others.

Similarly, Malhi et al. (2014) reported that 16% of their sample were victims of direct bullying or physical bullying and 34% were victims of name-calling." (Thakkar et al. 255). Bullying and peer pressure are closely interrelated and can lead teenagers and adolescents to participate in harmful behaviour or become victims of it.

Improving student mental health

With such diverse cases it is essential to support the students who are suffering. “ In 2018, the Ministry of Human Resource Development introduced the 'Samadhan' initiative, which provides counseling services to students preparing for NEET and JEE exams. Additionally, many coaching institutes have also started to focus on the mental health of their students” (George 54). Getting support from a person who is outside of their immediate environment often helps teens disclose sensitive information which they cannot share with their parents. iCALL is a psychological helpline which provides free counselling services over telephone, email or chat. Through a team of skilled and trained mental health professionals, the School of Human Ecology at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences provides free telephone and email-based counselling services to people experiencing emotional and psychological distress, regardless of age, language, gender, sexual orientation, or other issues (School of Human Ecology, TISS – Mumbai). Similar to iCALL there is also a government helpline called Tele MANAS which is an active 24/7, toll-free service that provides mental health services. Tele MANAS is a two-tiered system. Tier 1 comprises the State Tele MANAS cells, which includes trained counsellors and mental health specialists. Tier 2 comprises specialists at District Mental Health Programme (DMHP)/Medical College resources for physical consultation and/or eSanjeevani for audio visual consultation. (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare). “Developing resilience, building self-confidence, and giving students tools to handle pressure will dramatically impact the student's emotional and academic well-being. A holistic approach such as this facilitates the development of healthy, empowered students but also a much healthier educational environment.” (Sharma 105). “Schools provide an ideal setting for the promotion of mental well-being, not only because children spend so much time there, but also because they are the primary setting for the development of relationships with peers and adults. Also, schools allow regular access to all children, which means that preventative strategies can be adopted that avoid stigmatizing those who are vulnerable to mental health problems” (Hornby and Atkinson 3).

“It is required to promote school based mental health programme (Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram) with the help of counsellors, visiting mental health nurse, psychologists aiming at health-promoting school environments, evaluating psychological problems and providing referral to appropriate service and also fostering life skills of students” (Thippaiah et al. 325). There is also a need to establish compulsory screening checks for students in schools and tuition/coaching centres especially during times of high stress such as exams. “Subsequent identification of the high-risk individuals through screening checks may be referred to the mental health services to get necessary psychopharmacological treatment.” (Thippaiah et al. 325).

CONCLUSION

This research paper took an in-depth view of the mental health landscape and resources available to students, specifically Indian students. Teenagers today are experiencing a challenging environment characterized by academic competitions, competitive examinations, bullying, peer pressure and unrealistic beauty standards. Of the global population, adolescents make up a significant portion, one in every six people is aged 10 to 19, therefore this is an important undertaking. This research paper is especially important in the Indian landscape where nearly 50 million nearly 50 million Indian children suffer from mental disorders.

According to published news, 24 students preparing for competitive examinations in Kota have ended their lives as of November 2023, which is the highest compared to previous years, whereas last year this figure was 15. This should highlight the need to provide proper mental health resources to those students who are struggling. One study in Chennai showed alarming statistics: the depressive symptoms reported among the NEET aspirants were at an alarming rate of 59.2%, and there was an overwhelming prevalence of anxiety at 100% .

Another topic which was highlighted in the research paper were the social pressures faced by today's teenagers such as peer pressure, body image issues, beauty standards and bullying. These issues profoundly affect their mental and emotional well being. The side effects of bullying were also talked about in this paper. It was observed that name-calling or using bad words were common forms of bullying observed among adolescents next to physical bullying. Malhi et al. (2014) reported that 16% of their sample were victims of direct bullying or physical bullying and 34% were victims of name-calling.

The paper also went into the details of various resources available such as iCALL and Tele MANAS which were checked to be active by the researcher, and 24/7 available free counselling services.

Research in psychology is ever evolving and new cases come to light everyday. This paper focused on the mental health of students appearing for competitive examinations and social pressures faced by them. However, future researchers can take up research on mental health challenges and pressures faced by first year college students and beyond. Additionally this research paper did not go into the obstacles faced by different genders, castes, and ethnicities; future researchers can be intersectional in their approach.

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