

# Prioritizing Mental Health among Students: A Growing Concern

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**Abstract – Students if nurtured and trained well, they have the potential to take the country to heights of glory. Being aware of this, all governments have focused on the education, development and training of the youth. Mental health essentially deals with cognitive behavior and emotional framework of their personality therefore reflecting our ability to cope with life hardships, stress, and challenges resulting into building of relationships with our fellow beings. Anxiety and stress are the leading causes of death among youth in India. Mental illnesses, if untreated, contribute to poor performance in schools, less employment opportunity and increased rates of suicide among youth. In India this Act was passed on 7th April 2017 with the objective of providing mental healthcare services for persons with mental illness.**

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## INTRODUCTION

India has often been described as population of the youth with nearly 50% of India's population being under the age of 25. Any nation having such demography of population has all the potential of growth, for the youth of today, as the saying goes, is the future of tomorrow. If nurtured and trained well, they have the potential to take the country to heights of glory. Being aware of this, all governments have focused on the education, development and training of the youth. One feature however, has been strongly lacking and that is focus on the mental health and mental well-being of this population which is the future of tomorrow. Statistics show that nearly 10-30 percent of these populations suffer from some or the other form of mental health issues and this is increasingly becoming a cause of concern for policy makers now with the increasing rate of anxiety, suicide, sexual harassment and increasing risk taking attitude amongst the students in India.

Mental health is related to individuals' behavior, their feelings and activities in their day to day life. Essentially it deals with cognitive behavior and emotional framework of their personality. Therefore mental health reflects our ability to cope with life hardships, stress, and challenges resulting into building of relationships with our fellow beings. Mental health is also a determining factor leading to physical health ailments.<sup>1</sup> A sound mental health preserves one's ability to enjoy life, maintain a balance in daily activities and achieve desired goals, thus contributing to family and the society. Presence of positive thoughts, a sense of contentment, working

productively, dealing with strain and bouncing back from adversity all refer to mental health. But the moment stress, anxiety, mood disorder, depression affect mental health, it becomes mental illness.

Mental illness affects adult population, teenagers and even children. When physical illness of the brain causes disturbances in thought process, behavioral patterns, energy and emotions it is referred to as Mental illness. A large number of students in India suffer from stress, anxiety, restlessness and find it difficult to cope with even ordinary demands of life. Anxiety and stress are the leading causes of death among youth in India. Mental illness, if untreated, contribute to poor performance in schools, less employment opportunity and increased rates of suicide among youth.

Suicide as a repercussion of hopelessness, stress, anxiety and depression among youth is heard very frequently these days. The reasons for suicides are attributed to academics pressure, workplace stress, social pressure, and impact of modernization, lack of social, economic and emotional support. In my opinion (derived from interaction with the young youth) clash of values / ideas in the relationships, nuclear family stress, progressive outlook of youth and conflict of ideas with family members, pre and post marital sex relationship are also important factors leading to mental illness and suicide among youths in India. In 2015, NCRB had reported that India had high suicidal rates where every hour one student committed suicide and this adversely impacts the wellbeing of people, families and societal development and growth.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-supp>

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wik>

vital and important for the Parents and the teachers of schools and colleges to promote mental health education and prepare our children psychologically and mentally to cope with the challenges in life. Suicides can be prevented provided policies and resources for mental healthcare are better utilized and promoted efficiently. Mental Health education should be given at early age to develop 'help seeking attitude' and problem solving behavior. Parents and teachers should promote the children to face challenges in life instead of solving them and offering the best to them. It kills initiative among youth to tackle their hardships. Teachers and parents should always be available to them once they seek the support but before that they must build up their confidence and awaken them towards challenges of life.

### Academic Stress

Stress and Anxiety during students' life is one of the main factors among students to develop suicidal tendencies. The world today is one of cut throat competition and every school and college student is like a race horse, running with blinkers on, just to outperform the others in academics. The focus is on scoring "marks" and not learning. There is no effort to understand what a student wants and the skills of the student, rather the focus is on what skill is the need of the hour to get a good job in the market. Not just the students, even the parents are involved in the race, pressurizing their children. As a result if the student does not perform well, the pressure from school, parents and society pushes the child into depression and after every board results we have every media source carrying news of suicide deaths of students. One of the reasons behind this increased level of stress and anxiety amongst students is also the wrong parenting style of today which exhibits a strong peer pressure and a strong apathy to the mental wellbeing of the student. Even the school disciplinary measures are built around academic performance rather than the holistic growth of the student and a very wide communication gap exists between the student child and parents of today. Further, after completion of their studies, if they are not able to get good and respectable jobs to support their lives or meet their parents' expectations, life is meaningless for them. Left with no choice, they choose the path of self-isolation and in extreme circumstances, commit suicide. Those who are able to overcome this "Conflict of Interests" and are handled carefully with emotional support are fortunate ones. But few others being highly ambitious or having negative mind set fail to cope with stress and prefer to finish their lives. These students under the pressure of parents' expectations and peer groups need to be emotionally supported and counseled in normal as well as in crisis time.

In premier institutes -medical and engineering and even at places where coaching classes are conducted for entrance exams suicides are very

common. IIT Madras and Kota coaching centers, report the highest numbers of death of youth. The main reasons for such high suicide rates are stress, anxiety, sexual harassment, mental disorder, depression and personality disorder, which result in mental illness leading towards suicide. Students being unfamiliar and dissatisfied with their environment, lack of career opportunities and break up relationships tend to move towards suicide. Unfortunately our education system is not well planned and equipped to deal with student's mental health and over the year's depression, anxiety, suicides has been on the rise.

Some other visible or invisible factors for suicide attempts among youth can be cited as –

#### Social Factors-

- ▶ Social discrimination
- ▶ Social, physical or mental abuse
- ▶ Ragging and sexual harassment.

#### Personal issues-

- ▶ Substance abuse
- ▶ Serious medical ailment.
- ▶ Family history of suicide and exposure to suicidal behavior.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ Financial stress.
- ▶ Depression, mental health
- ▶ Family conflicts and incompatibility
- ▶ Poor communication or zero communication about their problems or feelings with parents.
- ▶ Irritable nature, loosing temper fast.
- ▶ The need for instant sense of gratification

#### Future challenges

- ▶ Fear of Career opportunities and failure.
- ▶ Poor academic performance.

### Reflections of Mental Health Disorder

Students suffering from mental health disorders show some visible symptoms such as –restraining from their participating in/ performing activities which they enjoyed earlier, absence from schools, declining academic grades, having short attention

span, and losing focus. In family set up, their reluctance to socialize with others, frequently skipping meals, refusal to discuss their future plans, sleeping too much or restlessness in sleep are the common signs of deterioration of mental health. Children's irritable behavior, losing temper without any cause are also alarming symptoms for parents to be cautious and alert. It is important for teachers and parents to be consciously aware of such symptoms and provide timely help support and counsel the students and help them tide over their mental illness and come out as happy and confident young individuals.

### **Mental Health Care Act 2017<sup>3</sup>**

In India this Act was passed on 7<sup>th</sup> April 2017 with the objective of providing mental healthcare services for persons with mental illness. It explains that people with mental illness have the right to live with dignity and they cannot be harassed or discriminated on the basis of caste, class, religion, culture and political ideologies.<sup>4</sup> Mental illness is a disorder in thinking, mood variations and distorted judgment. In this Bill, there is provision for constituting Central and state Mental Health Authorities. Under this Act, if a person suffering from mental illness tries to attempt suicide, he cannot be punished under the Indian Penal Code.<sup>5</sup> Until this Act, anyone who attempted suicide was booked and faced charges and prosecution.

### **Preventive Measures: Mental Health Strategy**

We must understand that feeling suicidal is not the nature of a person but a mere state of mind and this needs correction. If it is related to their mental disorder, it has to be treated. Mental health professionals, doctors, counseling centers, crisis centers and suicide prevention help lines can really do miracles by helping and supporting these emotionally distressed people.

Family members, teachers and the counselors should be actively engaged in listening to them to make the distressed realize their support and care. They need to be helped. Such empathetic gestures can easily solve the problems. At times, the person is not interested in opening up so it needs extra love, care and concern to help him to speak out.

Students and teachers should be honest to each other and openly discuss the problems. Teachers need to encourage students to open up instead of creating barriers for them by discouraging them to talk or making their problems public. All the Educational setup has to develop mental health support system both for students and teachers to accept their challenges and failures and cope with it. Every educational institution has to adopt an

approach to heal mental health, help the students to express in a positive and creative way.

It is the prime responsibility of any educator and family members to educate students and their children about mental health and the stigma attached to it. The educators need to develop skills, languages and strategies to help and support the students, if they ever feel them experiencing mental health disorders. All educational set up like schools or colleges have to create positive environment, where students feel safe to speak about their problems they are facing.<sup>6</sup> If needed, intervention or help from other organization, NGO's, counselors should also be sought for to engage students in doing what they like for example reading, nature walks, creating art, singing and dancing. Developing coping strategy-connecting with others and encouraging them to keep psychologically active and looking after their mental health should be prime concern for all.

Over the years to stop suicidal deaths, Government has taken initiatives to stop ragging in the campuses, formation of Women Development Cells, Anti sexual Harassment Committee, Equal Opportunity Cell and students' welfare committee to redress their grievances. But to deal with students mental health issues, no specific rules and models are suggested so far. The appointment of counselors should be made mandatory and teachers should also be trained in basic counseling techniques. A module integrating mental health components with school and college curriculum has to be established.

Not just students and teachers, we as a society of parents and peers, have also to be aware that mental health issues amongst students is a problem that exists today and it should be recognized and treated like any other disease. It is not something which should be treated as a matter of shame and brushed under the carpet. We have innumerable examples of individuals who have been leaders in life but have not done well academically. Moreover the world today is not about just academics. Not everyone needs to become an engineer or doctor. The economy today provides for multiple avenues for growth and creative opportunities which should be leveraged to help a student find his or her true potential and excel in their chosen field. Happy individuals alone can make a happy and strong nation.

### **CONCLUSION**

It is a disturbing fact to accept that India has large number of students facing mental, psychiatric and behavioral disorders. This is not a problem however that cannot be addressed. Helping build a positive mind set amongst them, creating a positive environment around them and accepting them as

3. The gazette of India, Ministry of law and Justice, April 7<sup>th</sup> 2017

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.betterhealth.>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ncpcr.gov.in/sh>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.nea.org/tool/5>

individuals with their own strengths and weaknesses can really help the students cope with anxiety, peer pressure, harassment of all kinds, and adjust in the competitive world as strong and confident individuals. Teens will never ask for help but through their changing behavioral traits like not sleeping well, eating less, self-isolating and losing interest in their previous activities, they silently ask for help from parent, teachers and friends. We as parents, teachers and society as a whole, need to be cognitive of these changes and support the teenagers to cope with the situation and come out with flying colors. We need to create a holistic program to develop skills and generate capacities to handle mental health for students, teachers, parents and the society as a whole. We have to be vocal for advocating social justice, recognizing mental illness as a problem that needs to be cured and not shunned as something shameful and evil. Every individual is entitled to Protection of their right to life by detecting and diagnosing their stress and preventing them from taking extreme steps. The vulnerable children and adolescents need care, training, treatment and if needed rehabilitation too.

A holistic approach is the need of the hour. While the first step has been taken by the introduction of the act, we need to have trained personnel in the academic institutions to help design workshops for creating awareness about mental health issues, educational institutions need to revisit their approach to education and focusing not merely on academics but on the overall growth and development of the student. Parents need to be coached too and an environment needs to be created where a student feels safe, loved, recognized and respected as an individual. Only then they can feel free to reach out for help and treat their illness. If not treated timely, this illness can claim the life of our youth leaving the nation weak and vulnerable. It is time for a wakeup call to prioritize the issue of mental stress and illness amongst the students of today and address the issue immediately and positively.

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