



College Mental Health: The Need of the Hour

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Abstract

Academics-related stress and anxiety have never been given as much importance as they are being given now. The dialogue around student mental health is gaining traction in the face of changes being made in the country's education system, aside from the surge of problems drawn in by the social media consumption of students. Despite considering the normative challenges that students go through during the course of their higher education, studies have found a plethora of other mental health concerns that have the potential of marring students' lives in the long run and not just their performance on academic tests. The following article highlights these findings while also addressing the need for a refined and customized mental healthcare plan for college students.

Keywords: Academics, Student mental health, Academic anxiety, Indian education system

Introduction

India's education scenario has undergone a metamorphosis in the last 10 to 20 years- from there being a change in the dominance of Science and Commerce in the 10 + 2 system to children now actually having a multitude of career options and combinations to choose from, the narrative around education has led to a lot of liberal academic and vocational practices in the country. The concept and idea of formal education was very dim during the era of Generation X and Millennials. Formal education gained popularity and importance much later, and the height it has reached today has made it a necessity. Where parents, once upon a time, encouraged their children to pursue medicine and banking, are now pushing them (the children) to seek their individuality, something that would make

their child stand out from the crowd. The concept of work-life balance stemmed from this modification in the dialogue surrounding education. The addition of this aspect of individualism in the educational and occupational realm highlighted the underlying mental, emotional, and psychological concerns that used to keep people away from achieving a sense of passion and purpose in something that they put their everything into.

Parental involvement in children's education has also increased over the years as compared to older times. This has a lot of reasons spanning from the high investment parents make to cater to the child's educational needs to both- the parents and the child- being spoilt with a multitude of career choices. Parental involvement has been positively correlated with adolescents' academic and emotional functioning (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2013). Additionally, parental involvement in the form of parental advisory has been found to positively predict students' academic self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation (Fan & Williams, 2009). But there is a downside here, wherein too much involvement of parents hampers a child's growth and in worst cases adds unnecessary pressure on the latter leading to life-threatening consequences for them.

Student Mental Health in India

Considering the development that our nation has undergone with regard to accepting mental health concerns as real and genuine, it is important to acknowledge the fact that we are still very behind in our journey to accept it wholly and without any judgment. There are people, even today, who harbour the opinion that mental health issues are not genuine, and those who do present mental health concerns are doing so to attract attention i.e., faking or making up their symptoms. Then there is the classic "It is all in your head" dialogue that is very conveniently employed to dodge a conversation related to symptoms or traits of mental health disorders.

The National Mental Health Survey (NMHS) conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), Bangalore, in the year 2015-2016 reported a treatment gap of 84.5% for overall mental morbidity (Gautham

et al., 2020). This survey aimed to estimate and address the prevalence, sociodemographic correlates, and treatment gap of mental health disorders among the selected 12 Indian states. The survey found that the prevalence of mental morbidities was higher among men and middle-aged individuals hailing from urban locations and among the less-educated and lower-income populations. The treatment gap, as reported by this study, results from a variety of complex factors such as stigma, lack of psychoeducation, lack of availability of resources in a particular geographical area, power dynamics related to gender, and faith in traditional healing practices related to illnesses. One of the reasons for this treatment gap and the slow progress of mental health awareness in India is the lack of incorporating mental health facilities in the primary healthcare paradigm. Mental health first aid training should be made as common and as significant as CPR, shares Jamie Merisotis in an article for Forbes (Merisotis, 2020).

This lack of representation of mental health well-being in the narrative of our culture has led to countless problems being underreported and, in worst cases, unnoticed. Students are more often than not the victims of the stigma surrounding mental health well-being in India, due to which they are not only demotivated to seek help but also feel guilty or ashamed to procure support. College-going students are handed down more responsibility during their college years than before. The responsibility of selecting a vocational area of interest, sustaining one's academic performance in that field, landing a job; and on the personal front, there is the facet of romantic relationships, navigating the changed dynamics with one's parents, and on the whole, just acclimatizing oneself with the new environment where one is not being spoon-fed anymore. Pedrelli et al. (2014) mention how college is the time when many students explore their relationship with substances such as alcohol, cigarettes and marijuana, which, more often than not, lead to substance use and mental health problems due to new roles and responsibilities undertaken by and handed down to students, in addition to lack of parental supervision.

These changes are normative and necessary, but they are appraised and perceived differently by different people. These differences make the availability of emotional support important for this particular population. For instance, the shift from secondary-level education to high school and from high school

to degree college is a major life event for students considering the change in the mode of education, level of difficulty, and change in environment, i.e., if the student is migrating to a different place for their education. Seldom are these shifts given priority from the viewpoint of mental health well-being. It is important for a student to go through these transitions for the sake of their personal development and to increase their aptitude to procure employment in the global knowledge economy (Noyens et al., 2017). But having a support system on the side makes these transitions seem less overwhelming if not easy.

Nicholson (1990) delineated a transition model with four phases- preparation, encounter, adjustment, and stabilization (Kynndt et al., 2017, p. 3). The preparation stage entails a period of orientation and preparation of the student for the new academic milestone; the encounter stage consists of experiences that a student undergoes with regard to their academic milestone. The adjustment stage refers to the changes a student goes through by virtue of their membership in a particular field of study and the accompanying experiences. Lastly, the stabilization stage marks the end of the transition phase, wherein the student has achieved a sense of stability as a result of having gone through the previous stages. This model provides a framework to understand the various stages students may be going through in their academic journey and does not depict a replica of every student's experiences. Some can smoothly navigate through these stages, while some take time to acquaint themselves with the system that they are a part of.

Transitions in the academic realm invite opportunities, thereby leading to growth. However, if the student has no means of noticing that critical moment, or is paralyzed to do so due to their mental health concerns, then there is no meaning to that transition.

The Pandemic

In comparison to the previous generations, the current generation has it easy due to the technological advancements that contemporary times have been blessed with; or so some think. Ever since the wake and fall of the Covid-19 pandemic, the everlasting idea of education was given thought and then a makeover due to the

absence of the traditional ways to execute the delivery of the same due to the pandemic. Conventions slowly started to fade away, and there was room made to make education a liberal space for students, to allow them to explore what best suited them. The pandemic-induced lockdown forced educational institutions to broaden their horizons and adapt to the new normal. Social media apps such as Google Meet, Zoom, YouTube, Webex, etc. gained popularity and were infused with frequent updates to suit the rising and novel needs of both students and teachers (Jena, 2020). Unfortunately, this did not address other concerns that took birth from the said event, such as financial constraints, limited physical interaction, and the downside of distance learning, such as feeling isolated, lack of motivation to study, absence of immediate feedback, etc. (LD Global, 2020).

The joy of being promoted to a higher grade without having to go through the process of writing an examination did not last for long among students as the uncertainty and unpredictability surrounding the pandemic, which eventually crept into the realm of academics and future career aspects, took over. Lockdown-induced changes such as the uncertainty related to one's decision to pursue a higher degree abroad due to the varying levels of severity of the pandemic across countries, lack of procuring field practice in occupations such as medicine, engineering, architecture, event management, and the like; changes within households such as having to share spaces and resources, financial crisis, changes in daily schedule due to lack of overall movement and mobility, etc. contributed to the declining mental and physical health of students.

These factors did not only bring the ever-existing mental health concerns to the surface but also acted as catalysts to increase professionals' motivation to address and actively work toward the well-being of students. A study conducted by Lipson et al. (2022) across 373 campuses in the United States found that during the 2020–21 academic year, more than 60% of students met the criteria for at least one mental health disorder. They also reported that there was a discrepancy in the demand and supply of counselling services in the country.

Another study conducted by Bhakat and Das (2023) during the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in India found that of the 413 students that participated in this study, about 75% reported severe depression, and 25% reported mild to

minimal depression. Additionally, about 49.6% of respondents suffered from moderate anxiety and about 10% from severe anxiety. This study also took into consideration the residing style and occupation status of the student's parents while analyzing the prevalence and prediction trends of mental health disorders. They found that students whose fathers engaged in secondary activities in their jobs were more likely to be depressed (84.7%, $p < 0.10$) than their counterparts whose fathers engaged in primary activities (76.1%, $p < 0.10$). Another significant finding highlighted the likelihood of anxiety disorders among students belonging to the OBC category (71.1%, $p < 0.10$), middle-income households (79.7%, $p < 0.05$), and families that incurred significant financial loss during the lockdown (64%, $p < 0.10$). All in all, this study found an increase in the mental health concerns of college and university-level students during the second wave of the pandemic.

Majumdar et al. (2020) conducted a study with undergraduate and postgraduate students ($N= 325$) to compare the presence and changes in the physical and mental health of students before and during the lockdown using three self-report measures to study variables like sleep quality, presence of depressive symptoms and presence of body part/ somatic discomfort. Their results highlighted that students reported a significant increase in their gastrointestinal and hormonal problems during the lockdown when compared to before the lockdown. Reliance on electronic gadgets, especially mobile phones increased significantly among students during the lockdown for academic and connectivity purposes; this usage was more than the use of laptops and televisions. Sleep assessment found that students maintained their regular sleeping pattern, and in fact, slept more than they did before the lockdown. Confinement at home (among other significant reasons) led to a pronounced increase in depressive symptoms among students from 7.07% before the lockdown to 30.77% during the lockdown. Lastly, confinement at home and a sedentary lifestyle were reported as the main factors affecting students' physical health.

A study by Chhetri et al. (2021) focused on understanding stress levels and psychological imbalances of college students ($N= 1536$) during the Covid-19 pandemic. According to this study, factors such as problems with self-management, ongoing academic changes, and the lack of physical accessibility

to educational resources such as institutions were the major sources of stress among the participants. There was a positive correlation found between the inability to cope with the new teaching paradigm and the ability to withstand the vulnerability caused due to the pandemic. Lastly, of the total participants, about 6% experienced severe stress, 25% experienced an above-average stress level, and 45% experienced mild stress.

The above-mentioned studies summarize the downside of the pandemic in the academic realm pertaining to its effects on students' psychological well-being. The uncertainty that dominated almost every aspect of an individual's life, especially related to their education left a lot of them impaired in their ability to look out for themselves. Add to that the financial losses incurred by families, lack of accessibility to resources and a negative home environment for some- the pandemic left a scar and initiated a chain of mental health concerns for many students.

Role of Parents

As discussed above, parental involvement and support bring out the best in a student, especially when parents support their child's career choice. That acts as a reinforcement for the child to stay both- extrinsically and intrinsically motivated to excel in their respective field. Parents also feel obliged and responsible to not only be financially available for their child but also have a say in their child's emotional health related to the latter's career.

However, when the support and involvement of parents block what the child has to do on his/ her own or aspires to pursue, it can be detrimental to the child's emotional health and academic performance. Schiffrin et al. (2014) highlighted that college students (N= 297) who reported having over-involved parents also reported having significantly less life satisfaction and higher levels of depression. The term coined to describe this pattern of parental behaviour is Helicopter Parenting, wherein it entails the developmentally abnormal behaviour exhibited by parents toward their children. A study by LeMoyne & Buchanan (2011) highlighted that a high score on the helicopter parenting scale that the duo developed for

this study indicated a negative relation with psychological well-being and was positively related to the use of prescribed medication for anxiety and depression.

Coming to the Indian context, there aren't any significant studies that have focused on helicopter parenting in India, among the indigenous population. However, studies conducted with the Indian college-going population have found there to be gender differences in the way students experience and perceive academic stressors. For instance, a study by Bhukar & Harish (2010) found that the level of stress was higher among girls than boys in their sample of physical education and engineering students (N= 60). The reason for this difference was believed and found to be more restrictions and lesser options for girls in general, than boys. Another study by Reddy et al. (2018) highlighted that the fear of failure was higher among final-year undergraduate females ($m=12.29$, $S.D.= 7.39$) than their male colleagues ($m= 10.53$, $S.D.= 6.70$).

These studies conducted in the Indian setting don't provide reasons for there being gender differences among students pertaining to academic stress and anxiety. However, from a general viewpoint, it can be understood that parental expectations from their child to fulfil and live up to the gender roles may be a contributing factor to the declining student mental health in India.

Another aspect of the parent-child relationship could be the generation gap between the two parties. This gap, which consists of a lot of new inventions and changes, can be a source of discord between the two parties, owing to the lack of awareness and the haste around with which these changes have occurred, especially those induced by the pandemic.

To sum up, there is inadequate literature on parental involvement in the Indian setting, considering the important role parents play and are given in the narrative of a child's life in India.

Coping Strategies

Having mentioned some of the common challenges students have been facing lately, it is worth understanding the various coping strategies they employ to

relieve themselves of the emotional discomfort brought about by the stressors. The most common coping strategy observed in recent times is the use of several intoxicants. Substances such as alcohol, cannabis, tobacco etc., have been common in our country for a very long time, but the pattern of usage and its trajectory has changed drastically in recent times.

The National Survey on Extent and Pattern of Substance Use in India (2019) conducted by the National Drug Dependence Treatment Centre (NDDTC) and the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Delhi, aimed to, as the name suggests, assess the extent to which various psychoactive substances were being used and consumed in the targeted 36 states and union territories, while also understanding the pattern of their usage. According to this survey, about 14.6% of the national population between 10 and 75 years of age uses alcohol, with greater prevalence among men (Ambekar et al. 2019).

Substance use and dependence take place in the face of poor social and economic conditions (Agarwal et al., 2013), along with the risk-taking and exploratory behaviours that accompany the developmental phase of adolescence and young adulthood. Dependence is a state of being physically and mentally preoccupied with the thought of the substance and having a strong urge to consume it. A secondary factor affecting substance intake behaviours among the student population is the availability of substances- the ease with which a substance is available, plus the element of social acceptance that is attached to it- reinforce the use of that particular substance for an individual.

Concerning college students, factors such as academic stress, emotional stressors like parental pressure, issues on the romantic end, and job stressors, all contribute to substances being used as an escape, as a means to escape reality momentarily. The use of substances also determines one's social membership, so if the substance use and dependence are not due to life stressors, there are very high chances that they may be due to peer pressure and conformity.

Some of the commonly used substances by Indian college students are alcohol, cannabis, tobacco (in the form of cigarettes), e-cigarettes, and vape. The tendency to want to find peace in a paper roll or a bottle is rampant among recent

generations. Such frequent use is treated as a cheaper alternative to therapy, or so some think. Using substances to find solace and perceiving them as a remedy for the mental agony one goes through has led to countless deleterious effects on the physiological and psychological health of students. Consuming substances without supervision, and often without proper awareness and knowledge about the substance and one's capacity, students more often than not end up in a negative and dangerous space- physically and emotionally.

A study by Vogel et al. (2020) focused on understanding the prevalence, symptom presentation and future vaping patterns of youths (students in twelfth grade) with e-cigarette dependence. Their results highlighted that e-cigarette dependence was more prevalent among those who had vaped in the past month than among those who did not. The findings were divided based on two groups- combustible cigarette use and e-cigarette use. The most common symptoms among these groups were found to be craving, urge and a strong need to use the substance; and the least common symptoms throughout the two groups were abstinence-related concentration and emotional problems. These findings in cohesion shed light on the possibility of these students being vulnerable to developing tobacco use disorder in the future. Another factor adding to students' vulnerability to substance dependence is anxiety disorders, wherein anxiety in its pure and comorbid forms was found to be predictive of substance dependence (Lopez et al., 2005).

Given the positive effects experienced by the consumption of mind-altering substances, it is important to understand the underlying reason for the same while also being mindful of its negative consequences on students; as Gabor Mate rightly said- "It is impossible to understand addiction without asking what relief the addict finds, or hopes to find, in the drug or the addictive behaviour". Professionals may not always deal with students who have an addiction problem, but understanding how a substance makes them feel may aid them to design an intervention that best suits the individual, a plan unique to their subjective experiences.

Conclusion

With a slow and gradual rise in the acknowledgement of mental health concerns in our country, it is imperative to address the student population as a separate entity and design customized care services for them. Student problems range from academic concerns such as learning disabilities, difficulty in procuring academic resources, and difficulty in adjusting to the new teaching paradigm to emotional concerns such as troubled interpersonal relations (with parents, peers and/ or romantic partners), lack of financial support, substance dependence, etc.

The list of these problems is a long one that requires special care and support. As college students venture out to fulfil their further academic and vocational milestones, maintaining a balance in every aspect of their lives becomes significant. It is also for colleges to take notice of the same and have counsellors to cater to students' mental health concerns. Addressing the discrepancy in the rate of demand and supply of mental health professionals in India is the first step in this journey, with undivided emphasis on the well-being of students.

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