

1.0 Mental Health and Wellbeing: Vision for Empowering Students

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Abstract

Mental health has emerged as one of the most significant yet often disregarded aspects of student development in today's educational system. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines mental health as a state of wellbeing that allows each individual to realise their full potential, cope with daily stressors, work effectively and efficiently, and give back to their community. Despite this widespread awareness, millions of students worldwide continue to face silent challenges as a result of social isolation, familial expectations, academic pressure, and inadequate institutional support. This study looks at students' mental health and wellbeing from the perspectives of both India's revolutionary National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) and global health frameworks. It examines the complex nature of student discontent, pinpoints important contributing elements such as growing academic rivalry and familial expectations and critically evaluates the structural deficiency in guidance and counselling services in educational institutions. This study proposes a thorough, learner-centric strategy to empower students through strong mental health support systems, drawing on WHO standards, NEP 2020 provisions, and recent empirical research.

Keywords- Mental health, Wellbeing, Tele MANAS, Manodarpan

Introduction

“The aim of education is not only cognitive development, but also building character and creating holistic and well-rounded individuals equipped with key 21st century skills” National Education Policy 2020

Contemporary education is no longer measured solely by academic scores or cognitive output. As the National Education Policy 2020 articulates, the true purpose of education lies in building character and nurturing individuals who are capable, compassionate, and equipped for the demands of the twenty-first century . This vision places mental health and well-being at the heart of the educational process, not as peripheral concerns, but as foundational pillars of effective learning and personal development.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), “Mental health is a dynamic state in which people understand their potential, manage daily stressors, contribute positively to society, and maintain meaningful social ties”. It goes beyond simply being free from illness. This more comprehensive idea challenges the clinical perspective and reframes mental health as a human potential that facilitates learning, development, and social engagement. From a philosophical standpoint, this poses significant questions: Is mental health the same as well-being, or is it a prerequisite for it? These issues have serious ramifications for educational settings, forcing establishments to reconsider how they support the person at a whole.

A significant change in this direction is represented by India's National Education Policy 2020. It incorporates mental health into its holistic development philosophy, starting with early childhood schooling. The policy introduces structural reforms like counselling services, flexible assessment systems, and a 360-degree holistic progress card. It also promotes socio-emotional learning as an essential pedagogical dimension and views teachers as facilitators of emotional growth alongside intellectual development. When taken as a whole, these clauses demonstrate the institution's dedication to lowering academic stress and establishing psychologically conducive learning environments.

The state of student mental health is still extremely difficult in spite of these ongoing changes. Young people's psychological anguish is sharply increasing due to a variety of factors, including identity-related challenges, employment uncertainty, social transitions, academic expectations and family expectations. Students in higher education deal with compounded challenges, such as acclimating to new surroundings, exercising greater independence, and juggling growing personal and academic obligations. Socioeconomic disparities, deeply ingrained cultural expectations, and competitive examination culture all exacerbate these issues in India. An already tense position has become more complicated due to the expanding influence of digital technology and its associated risks of social comparison, excessive screen time, and weakening interpersonal ties.

In response, recent research promotes all-encompassing, system-level strategies that integrate mental health support throughout the whole educational ecosystem. These frameworks encourage educators, students, families, and institutional structures to work together to develop a long-lasting culture of wellbeing. Improving teachers' mental health literacy, building peer and community-based support networks, putting tiered interventions into practice, and fostering inclusive classroom environments that enhance a sense of belonging are all important components. This "whole-institution" approach views mental health as an essential component of education rather than as an extra service. In light of this, the current article aims to give a clear and practical view of mental health and wellbeing as crucial pillars for student empowerment.

Mental health and wellbeing

Although the terms "mental health" and "well-being" are sometimes used synonymously, but they have different connotations that need to be recognised. A person's internal psychological functioning, including their ability to think rationally, control their emotions, handle stress, and participate in daily activities, is referred to as mental health. It is essentially concerned with the functioning of the mind. In contrast, general life satisfaction, happiness, a sense of purpose, and the calibre of one's social interactions are all included in the broader idea of well-being. It encompasses environmental, social, and physical aspects in addition to psychological functioning.

Instead of being equivalent, the two have an interdependent relationship. It is possible to think of mental health as a necessary condition for wellbeing: a person who is psychologically stable is more likely to feel content, have deep connections, and discover their life's purpose. But well-being goes beyond mental health to include other factors

including social support, the physical environment, and lifestyle decisions. Even if a student has no diagnosable mental illness, they may nevertheless have poor wellbeing because of ongoing stress, social isolation, or a lack of purpose in life. On the other hand, with sufficient help, a student coping with a mental health issue may continue to pursue personal objectives and meaningful relationships, maintaining some aspects of wellbeing.

Both ideas are influenced by circumstances and live on a continuum. For this reason, the National Education Policy 2020 tackles both at the same time; focusing on mental health through counselling, stress management, and socio-emotional learning while fostering general well-being through inclusive education, fair access, and encouraging institutional settings. Genuine student empowerment requires a holistic developmental framework that includes mental health and well-being.

Need of mental health and wellbeing for students

There has never been a greater pressing need to give student mental health top priority. As they simultaneously navigate identity formation, scholastic pressures, social transitions, and future-oriented decision-making, students occupy a particularly vulnerable place in the developmental arc of human existence. There are serious long-term repercussions for social, academic, and personal results if their psychological equilibrium is upset at this time.

Research indicates that mental health disorders initially appear before the age of twenty-four, making educational institutions crucial sites for early detection and preventive intervention. Adolescence and the early stages of adulthood are marked by fast emotional, cognitive, and social transformation, which increases psychological vulnerability. Students frequently report experiencing emotional instability, self-identity confusion, and difficulties transitioning to new academic and social contexts, all of which significantly impair their capacity to learn and thrive. The academic consequences of unaddressed mental health concerns are well-documented.

The cognitive processes that support successful learning are compromised by psychological distress, which also decreases motivation, concentration, and memory. Poor mental health increases the likelihood that students may get disengaged from their studies, accrue absences, and eventually give up on their academic endeavours. On the other hand, students who report feeling well about their mental health are more resilient, have better problem-solving skills, and are more engaged in their studies and creative endeavours.

Beyond personal results, mental health is a social issue. Psychologically secure students are more equipped to participate in their institutions' social life, build meaningful peer connections, and contribute to effective educational environments. On the other hand, neglecting a student's mental health can lead to social disengagement, interpersonal disputes, family problems, and in the worst situations, self-harm or suicidal thoughts. Thus, there is a significant societal cost to inaction.

It is not a luxury but rather a structural requirement for educational institutions to provide a comprehensive mental health support system that includes teachers, counselors, families, and peers. The first and most crucial step in creating an educational ecosystem that truly supports its students is acknowledging mental health as a shared institutional duty rather than a solely personal issue.

Reasons for unrest among students

There are multiple factors that contribute to student unrest, which is defined as a prolonged condition of emotional imbalance, discontent, and psychological distress. Individual vulnerabilities, family pressures, institutional shortcomings, socio-cultural expectations, and digital influences all come together to create it. Designing effective and long-lasting therapies requires an understanding of this complex nature.

The Multifaceted Nature of Student Unrest

Student unrest ultimately reflects the accumulated weight of numerous crossing forces, even though competition, parental expectations, and poor counselling are important causes. Psychological stability is systematically undermined by a combination of institutional rigidities, such as exam-centric curricula and inadequate social services, and individual variables, such as limited coping skills and emotional sensitivity. Financial stress increases the vulnerability of kids from economically disadvantaged households. The stigma associated with mental health in society discourages people from seeking help, which silences those who are most in need. The digital age, with its culture of constant comparison and meticulous self-presentation, has produced new kinds of psychological stress for which the existing support systems are often unprepared. Only by acknowledging this complexity and addressing it with equally comprehensive answers can institutions begin to create environments where every student has a genuine chance to thrive.

Increasing Competition among Students

Competition is a major part of modern education. Through tests, rankings, and selective admissions, students are constantly evaluated against one another; this process turns education from a worthwhile endeavour into a performance competition. Many students eventually come to believe that their academic standing determines their own value. This creates ongoing worry, weakens intrinsic desire, and cultivates a persistent fear of failing. The pressure increases when the expectation to perform well is extended beyond the classroom into extracurricular activities. Burnout, emotional tiredness, and, in extreme situations, signs of clinical depression might result from extended exposure to such an atmosphere. Excessive academic rivalry frequently becomes a major barrier to advancement rather than a catalyst for it.

Family Expectations

The most important factor in a student's life is their family, yet when family expectations become unreasonable or inflexible, they become a cause of psychological stress rather than support. Many students believe that their parents' approval depends on their academic performance, which puts them under tremendous pressure to succeed even at the

expense of their own wellbeing. When students are steered towards careers that don't fit their interests or skills, it frequently leads to long-term discontent and a shattered sense of self. Guilt, low self-esteem, and emotional misery are frequently the results of failing to live up to expectations. Students may also feel quite alone if parents don't communicate openly and show true emotional empathy. Therefore, the nature of the expectations that a family communicates might become a source of disturbance rather than the family itself.

Lack of Guidance and Counseling

One major structural factor contributing to student unrest in educational institutions is the lack of organised guidance and counselling help. When properly qualified therapists are not available, students are left to deal with emotional obstacles on their own without the right resources or support, which frequently causes minor issues to turn into major mental health issues. Disproportionately high student-to-counselor ratios hinder meaningful individualised support, even in institutions where counselling is easily available. Due to a lack of appropriate preparation, teachers who are often the first to notice indicators of distress are sometimes ill-prepared to react appropriately. Anxiety over future paths is exacerbated by the lack of career guidance. This is made worse by the ongoing social stigma associated with mental health, which deters many students from getting any kind of assistance. These inadequacies add up to an insufficient support system that leaves students psychologically unprepared to handle the demands of academic life.

Multiple Academic Pressures

Secondary level students opt for multiple academic pressures in the form of school education and coaching for competitive exams like NEET and JEE for securing limited seats and high-value educational opportunities. Limited seats of top-level higher education institutions, intense competition among students, societal and parental expectations forces, students to pursue additional coaching beyond school from very early classes. Pursuing this decision comes at a very significant psychological cost. Managing both school and coaching simultaneously leads to long study hours, minimal rest and academic pressure. Continuous mock tests, practice work, extra classes beyond school foster anxiety, academic stress, fear of failure and emotional exhaustion among students. The lack of time for leisure, poor social interaction and personal development further intensifies feeling of isolation and burnout and places a heavy burden on student's mental health and their wellbeing.

Lack of Confidence

Many times, students face the problem of lack of confidence in their academic and personal abilities, they experience the feeling of self-doubt due to strong focus on outcomes rather than learning. Students' success measured in marks, ranks, grades, or selection questions students' capabilities and lowers their self-esteem. Due to experience of perceived failure, continuous comparison, weaker self-belief and lack of confidence students may start to fear making mistakes, and hesitate to take new tasks and challenges. This fear of failure limits students' willingness to explore, learn, express them or live freely in society. Lack of appreciation and undervaluing their capabilities are major contributors of such feeling among students, addressing this requires creating supportive learning environments, understanding

their feelings and mistakes can be seen as a part of learning, and students are encouraged to build self-belief alongside academic competence.

Poor participation in co-curricular activities

Student's poor participation in co-curricular activities is a growing concern among teachers and parents. Students often priorities academic pursuit over activities such as arts debates, music sports and cultural events, this results in reduced opportunities for holistic development of the students. In some cases, families and schools also unintentionally restrict co-curricular activities by reinforcing the mindset of valuing academic achievement over co-scholastic domain. Poor participation in such activities limits the development of important life skills such as communication, creativity, leadership, teamwork, and stress management abilities. Co-curricular activities are essential for well-rounded development and ensuring balanced development and wellbeing of the students.

Poor interaction among family members and others

There are multifaceted causes of student's unrest and their poor mental health. Academic pressure, poor lifestyle, unhealthy habits, excessive technological engagement significantly altered social behaviour of the students. Social media platforms create an illusion of connectivity, which impacts their face-to-face interactions with friends, family and social circle. A student's academic load, tight study schedule leaves minimal time for interaction with parents and family. In addition, some of the psychological factors like stress, anxiety, and fear of judgement push students towards societal withdrawal and isolation. Altogether, these factors create a situation where students feel disconnected, mentally stressed despite being surrounded by people or being active on social media for long hours.

Significance of Good Mental Health for Student's Wellbeing

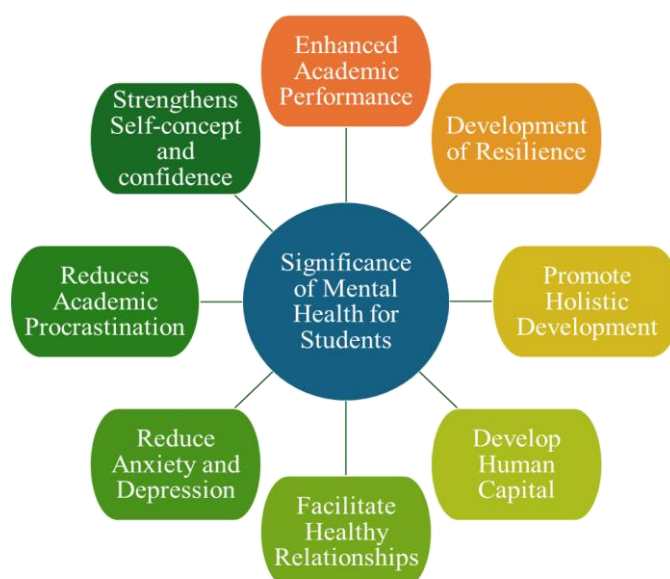


Fig: 1 Showing significance of good mental health for students well being

Source: Author's creation.

Initiatives for good mental health and wellbeing

Global level initiative: International coordinated efforts led by the international organizations like WHO, UN, UNICEF, etc to improve mental health and well-being to access mental health at global level. Some of the global initiatives are as follow:

Global Mental Health Action Framework: Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2030 is an effort of the World Health Organization (WHO), this framework shifted mental health care to community based services from institutional settings and emphasized to make it a part of primary healthcare. This plan focuses on low-and-middle income countries where mental health services are limited.

Who live life?

This programme is initiated for suicide prevention in 2018 as a world level framework.

There are four key areas of this programme:

- Limiting access to means of suicide
- Responsible Media Reporting to prevent sensitisation
- Life Skills development in Adolescents through learning opportunities
- Early identification and Support for people need immediate support due to high risk

World Mental Health Day: It has been observed on October 10 every year since 1992. The day is observed to spread awareness towards mental health, provide better understanding of mental health related issues and mobilize support for affected individuals at global level.

Sustainable Development Goal 3.4: Target 3.4 of SDG emphasized to reduce premature mortality from non-communicable diseases by $\frac{1}{3}$ and promote mental health and well being by 2030. This target aims to integrate mental healthcare to the primary healthcare system for promoting preventive and community-based approaches.

Government initiatives: Government of India has made notable contributions in mental health and wellbeing through various initiatives. This figure shows the timeline of mental health related initiatives taken by the Indian government.

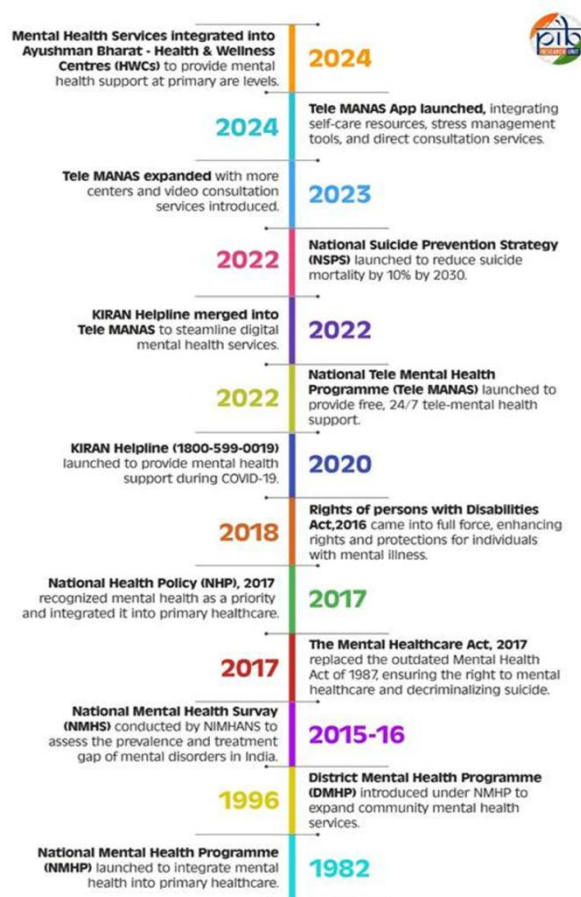


Fig: 2 Timeline of Initiatives taken by the Indian for Mental health and wellbeing. **Source:** PIB webpage.

Tele MANAS

In the union budget 2022 government of India announced Tele Mental Health Assistance and Networking across States (Tele MANAS) to provide 24 by 7 toll free 14416 tele-mental health services as a digital component of the National Mental Health Programme (NMHP) across 36 states and UTs of India. It is a two-tire system. Tier 1 comprises the State Tele MANAS calls, which includes trained mental health specialists and counsellors. Tier 2 comprises specialists at District Mental Health Programme (DMHP) and Medical College resources for providing physical consultation or eSanjeevani for audio visual consultation. Tele MANAS services are available in 20 plus regional languages along with Hindi and English. In 2024 Tele MANAS mobile App was launched. Students dealing with following issues can get assistance for their mental wellbeing through Tele MANAS toll free number and mobile App.



Fig: 3 Mental Health Concerns for which Tele MANAS provide assistance

Source: Author's creation.

Pariksha Pe Charcha

In 2018 the prime minister of India initiated this annual interaction with students, teachers, and parents on examinations to reduce exam stress and overcome anxiety. It is a part of the Exam warrior's movement which promotes holistic development of the students and stress-free learning. Stress free examinations, emotional resilience, holistic development of students aligning with NPS concept of experiential and conceptual learning framework is promoted by this initiative. Pariksha Pe Charcha encourages students to view exams positively, promote confidence, disciplined preparation and resilience through the 'Be a warrior not a worrier' mindset.

Manodarpan Initiative

For the mental health of students, teachers and parents, the Ministry of Education of India launched the Manodarpan initiative under Athmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan. To provide psychological support, this initiative towards a wide range of activities. The Ministry of Education has created a website containing advisory for the student at school and universities, teachers, parents and school system, practical tips, posters, videos, do's and don'ts, FAQs and online query system.

Also, a national toll free helpline number 8448440632 is established to provide counselling on phone for helping students to cope up with mental health issues of their daily life. On this number trained and experienced counsellors and psychologists help students to address and resolve their mental health and psychological problems.

District Mental Health Programme (DMHP)

This program is initiated under the National Mental Health Programme and currently operational in 767 districts across India. Aims of this programme includes early detection, effective management, and treatment of mental health conditions at the school and university level with the help of counselling at educational institutes, workplace for stress management, and, life skill education. Furthermore, the program emphasizes Suicide prevention services and information, education and communication activities for generation of awareness and removal of stigma associated with mental illness, thereby promoting a more supportive and informed societal environment.

School Based Initiatives

School Health and Wellness programme (Ayushman Bharat): The Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education jointly implemented this program to adopt a holistic approach of student well-being including mental health and emotional health. This program was started in February 2020 with the aim to promote health, prevent diseases, and improve wellness among school going children in government and government aided schools. As “Health and Wellness ambassadors”, two teacher's one male and one female preferably are designated, as per the guidelines of this programme. They engage with school children to cover 11 distinct thematic areas through joyful activities for one hour every week.

Adolescence Education Programme: The vision of this programme is to nurture aware, responsible and empowered adolescents in all CBSE secondary and higher secondary schools through life skill development. This programme empowers adolescents to manage their adolescent health issues and concerns, including avoidance and risky behaviour.

NCERT Guidance and Counselling services: NCERT provides counselling manuals, guidelines, and helpline support particularly at the time of examinations to reduce exam related anxiety and promote mental health practices among school students.

Overall, In India, school based mental health programmes focus on early identification, prevention, care, awareness generation and life skill development of the students and become an integral part of the schooling process.

Why is care delayed?

A number of structural and societal obstacles contribute to the delay in receiving mental health care. A major contributing element is people's reluctance to talk about their problems or seek professional assistance due to fear of stigma and unfavorable labeling. Additionally, a lot of people don't fully comprehend early warning indicators like anxiety, stress, or depression and frequently don't notice them until the illness gets worse. Additionally, there is a severe lack of trained psychologists and psychiatrists, especially in impoverished and rural areas, which limits prompt access to care. Additionally, there is insufficient integration between mental health services and primary healthcare, which limits access to early support. As a result, a lot of people go untreated for extended periods of time, which causes their illness to worsen. Help-seeking behaviour is further delayed by low

awareness and existing cultural beliefs. People may choose to ignore their symptoms or rely on unofficial sources of support in place of medical attention. These delays have a detrimental impact on social, intellectual, and professional functioning in addition to personal well-being. Despite the importance of early intervention, these obstacles still prevent timely care. Increased awareness, better accessibility, and more robust integration within the healthcare system are necessary to overcome these obstacles.

What happens when care is delayed?

The consequence of delayed mental health is often severe and affects not only the individuals but also their family, friends and society at large. If the stress, anxiety, or depression is not treated at the initial level then such mental illness turns chronic that are harder to treat. Untreated mental illness also leads to higher risk of disability and suicidal tendency among individual affected with mental illness and may find difficult to perform daily activities, maintain relationships, sustain employment etc and require more complex intervention for treatment. The impact further extends to the family distress and financial burden of expensive and prolonged treatment and leads to tension, burnout among family members. Among young people, delayed treatment leads to disruption and discontinuation of education, poor academic performance, absenteeism, and thereby affecting their long-term career prospects and personal growth.

The mental health situation is alarming in India, as it bears a large share of global suicide deaths. Social stigma and labelling, limited awareness, restricted access to mental health services, and insufficient infrastructure prevent individuals from accessing timely care and interventions. Addressing these gaps is crucial to address this mental health crisis.

Summarization

The study highlights how important mental health and wellness are to students' overall growth in today's educational institutions. It sees mental health as a multifaceted notion that encompasses the capacity to effectively handle stress, work efficiently, and make significant contributions to society. Despite its increasing significance, a lot of students struggle psychologically because of social isolation, high parental expectations, and academic pressure. The National Education Policy 2020 framework is linked with global mental health perspectives to investigate these concerns. Significant institutional inadequacies are identified, most notably the dearth of guidance and counseling services in educational contexts. The study also emphasizes how students' stress levels are raised by growing academic competitiveness and changing social expectations. It makes the case for implementing a more inclusive, learner-centered educational strategy that puts students' emotional health first. Additionally, there is a major emphasis on the necessity of including mental health support into the educational framework. To successfully address these issues, the study recommends raising awareness among educators, parents, and legislators. It promotes bolstering institutional support networks to guarantee prompt action. All things considered, the paper offers a thorough plan for empowering students through the creation of a nurturing and psychologically sound learning environment.

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