

Mental Health Concerns of School Going Adolescents in India during the COVID-19 Outbreak through Tele-helpline services

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated mental health challenges globally. Adolescents on the cusp of adulthood, already grappling with significant developmental pressures and life changes, were further tested by the uncertainty created by the pandemic. This article aims to map and analyze trends in mental health concerns among adolescents in the post-pandemic era, based on calls received by the Manodarpan toll-free tele-helpline. The helpline was launched to provide psycho-social support to students, parents, and teachers through trained counsellors. The reported concerns relate to psycho-social issues such as a lack of skills to manage emotions, health-related problems, academic issues, difficulties with online classes, and anxiety related to studies and exams. The findings of this study will have significant implications for mental health practitioners and educators in providing support and planning policies related to mental health and well-being

Keywords: Mental health, Adolescents, Tele-helpline, Psycho-social, Academic, COVID-19

Introduction

Mental Health concerns of school students in India during COVID-19 outbreak increased due to several reasons. The virulent nature of the virus prompted a nationwide lockdown, disrupting everyday life and routines. Once the lockdown was lifted, strict rules and regulations on social distancing were enforced by the government, with fines for violations. These guidelines included avoiding social interactions, and large public functions like weddings were also restricted. As a consequence of these social distancing measures, coupled with the non-availability of vaccines, especially for children, schools had no choice but to shut down temporarily. This abrupt closure initially disrupted education, leaving

students without their usual routines and engagement.

However, the education system gradually adapted by transitioning to online classes. Despite this adjustment, the initial shutdown caused upheaval, and students faced challenges. While adults resumed work in hybrid modes, children often found themselves unattended and with limited to no movement outside the house. While the challenges in mental health of adolescents can lead to heightened emotional stress, feelings of helplessness, and fear, over time, these difficulties may develop into mental illnesses like anxiety and depression (Meherali et al., 2021). Furthermore, early identification of mental health risks is crucial to reducing these risks (Schulte-Körne, 2016).

Amidst significant efforts by the government, the education system in India made a crucial shift to online classes, providing a much-needed relief during the pandemic. However, this transition came with its own set of challenges. Loneliness, exacerbated by learning loss and uncertainty about the future (including board exams and career prospects), weighed heavily on the minds of school students, especially adolescents. The social restrictions imposed due to fear of infection and death further compounded their mental well-being concerns. Conversations around these issues impelled a search for solutions, as educators, parents, and policymakers grappled with how best to support students during these unprecedented times.

In order to address the holistic well-being of students, the government of India, launched the Manodarpan¹ initiative in July 2020. Through tele-helpline, this initiative aimed to provide psycho-social support to students, parents, and teachers with the help of trained counsellors from across the country. It is important to understand that tele-helplines have been playing an important role in offering convenient access and immediate assistance to individuals in need (S. Sriram et al., 2016). The current analysis is based on the data collected from calls received on the Manodarpan toll-free tele-helpline, which operates 12 hours a day (from 8 am to 8 pm) every day of the week.

Pandemic and its Psychological Implications

History tells us the occurrence of pandemics and the havoc caused on humanity as a consequence. The unpredictability of pandemics, coupled with the world's unpreparedness for such occurrences, remains the

biggest challenge for humankind. The sufferings caused by the pandemic have the potential to leave a deep impact on the psyche of individuals and societies for generations to come. These challenges are amplified many folds in contemporary global village realities. The Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) or COVID-19, with a high capacity to infect, made it a lethal virus in today's interconnected world. Unlike in the past, where geographical movement was restricted, the ease of movement and the social and economic interdependence of people have exacerbated problems due to the virus's spreading nature. Similar to previous pandemics, COVID-19 not only served as a serious medical threat but has also impacted the psycho-social welfare of individuals and societies worldwide. In the quest to contain the virus and minimize the loss of human life, the use of unavoidable methods has inadvertently created mental and emotional imbalances. The impact extends to the student's learning process and has also brought to light, the unpreparedness of the system for dealing with large-scale mental health issues and long-term challenges that can affect the individuals.

The unprecedented and unplanned lockdowns imposed worldwide have not only triggered the fear of getting infected but also the experience of isolation, losing loved ones, and various unexpected challenges, leaving individuals with existential questions and looming anxieties. The effect on the Indian subcontinent was particularly extensive due to its large population and densely populated metro cities. The essential services were compromised, and hospitals were overly crowded. Everyday life was disrupted, educational institutes at all levels were closed, transportation was halted, and tourism was completely shut down. Even for

1. Under the 'Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan, Ministry of Education (MoE), Government of India (Gol)', the Manodarpan initiative was launched in 2020, to support on the psycho-social concerns of students, parents, and teachers during and beyond COVID-19.

essential survival needs, people were fearful to go out. To tackle the situations created by the pandemic, governments worldwide took measures to protect their citizens, addressing both physical and mental well-being. It is now evident that the pandemic has deeply affected the mental health of individuals of all age groups, including children and adolescents.

Adolescence and Concerns during the Pandemic

It is well known that adolescence is an age of development of abstract thinking, exploration of sexual identities, and the emergence of developmental skills to be used for coping and problem-solving (Erikson, 1963). When COVID-19 hit the world, adolescents, like everyone else, were restricted to staying at home and faced the consequences of disruption in everyday life. There were sudden changes in regular classroom interactions, including a transition to an online mode of learning with virtual classrooms and video conferencing. The lack of direct teacher-student interaction, along with limited access to resources, has impacted academic progress and played a crucial role in the learning loss of adolescents (Hammerstein, et. al. 2021). The impact was massive, particularly for those who faced socio-economic disadvantages, and belonged to low-income families, minority groups, and remote areas (Singh et al., 2020). Top of Form

As the situation evolved, educational systems attempted to address these issues and find solutions to support students' learning by redesigning lesson plans for remote delivery and exploring alternative evaluation methods to assess student performance. With this change parents had to take on more active roles in their children's education, supporting them with their studies while juggling work and other responsibilities. On the socio-emotional front, the

students were caught off-guard as were the parents. The unpredictable nature of the pandemic compounded by its highly infectious nature led to anxiety and fear of death amongst all beyond age, gender, socio-economic level, and so on.

It is evident that COVID-19 has brought efforts and discussions on mental health-related issues to the forefront. Adolescents, already particularly vulnerable to mental health issues due to significant developmental changes and challenges at this stage of life, were further strained by the uncertainty, loneliness, and confusion brought about by the situation (Singh et al., 2020). Uncontrollable situations caused by the pandemic created issues for adolescents, such as social isolation, disruption in daily routines, lack of in-person interaction with friends and peers, uncertainty about the future, and fears related to the spread of the virus, which only exacerbated the existing mental health issues (Caffo & Belaise, 2003). The restrictions on social movements and physical activities forced them to face their fears without peer support and the known and comforting touch of the school environment, increasing the sense of fear and anxiety among adolescents. As India is a vast country with a large population and cultural variations, the complexity of the challenges increases, as does the approach and implementation of remedies for managing the mental health and well-being of students. Top of Form

Importance of Mental Health and Well-being of Adolescents

Mental health is essential not only for physical well-being but also because it shares a symbiotic connection with physical health. Since adolescents are on the verge of embarking on their journey as young adults in society, concerns for their well-being are high.

The psychological challenges if left unaddressed today may create backlogs that can impact their well-being and, subsequently, their mental health. As adolescence is a crucial period for providing mental health and well-being support to develop social-emotional habits, it also lays the foundation for better mental health and well-being later in life.

The nationwide lockdowns and decreased physical activities have led to increased sedentary lifestyles, affecting not only the physical but also the mental health of students. Psychological issues such as anxiety, depression, stress, loneliness, etc. seen a significant rise after the COVID-19 pandemic (Sarah et al., 2021). The UNICEF report *'Life in Lockdown'* in 2022 delves into the mental health and well-being of approximately 130,000 children and adolescents across 22 countries, seeking to comprehend the effects of lockdown on them. The document reports evidence of depressive symptoms, stress, anxiety, increased substance use, and other behavioral problems in children and adolescents after COVID-19. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, there were also noteworthy positive developments in mental health. These included increased quality family time, greater engagement in physical and recreational activities, and more personal introspection, all of which made positive contributions to individuals' mental well-being.

To address the concerns highlighted due to COVID-19, the Government of India is focusing on a comprehensive plan to boost economic growth, improve the quality of the healthcare system, adapt to the new digital world, and provide psycho-social support to the impacted citizens of the country. In this ever-evolving situation with changing pandemic impacts, it remains crucial for parents to stay informed, reach out for support when necessary, and

place a high priority on both their own well-being and that of their children. Building a strong support network and maintaining open communication with children can help them navigate challenging times more effectively. The findings from the "Mental Health and Well-being of School Students- A Survey, 2022" suggest that the students have experienced anxiety regarding studies, examinations and results. They have also reported a lack of concentration as the major reason for lagging behind in studies.

Due to the vulnerability of the adolescent group and the need to prevent risky behaviors, it is important to look out for and prioritize their mental health and wellness. The need for intervention in mental health is also visualized in the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020, of the Government of India. The NEP, 2020 emphasizes recognizing, identifying, and fostering the unique capabilities of each student and strengthening mental health and well-being in school education. Such implications can not only help the child in holistic development but also assist in identifying and providing interventions for mental health-related issues.

Objective

- The objective of the paper is to analyze the trends of mental health concerns experienced by middle and secondary-stage school students from July 2020 to December 2022, through data provided by counsellors in information sheets about calls received on Manodarpan tele-helpline.
- Methodology

Sample

The information collected was based on calls received from *July 2020 to December 2022* on IVRS through toll-free

tele-helpline calls from students across the nation, as part of the Manodarpan initiative, which primarily focuses on addressing psycho-social concerns of students, parents and teachers. A total of 2,356 calls documented under middle and secondary stage of education have been analyzed in the paper. Among these calls, 19.5 per cent were related to psychosocial concerns, while 80.5 per cent pertained to academic issues. The calls received on the helpline were recorded on performas by the counsellors who had received the calls and shared the details with Manodarpan Cell. The concerns of adolescent students are reported by counsellors from all four regions (north, south, east, and west) of India and collated by the Manodarpan cell in the form of information sheets. Furthermore, the information collected over 2.5 years (July 2020 to December 2022) was compiled and qualitatively analyzed. While the helpline concerns were studied within the context of the COVID-19 situation, the analysis identified trends across two significant domains, namely:

- (i) Psycho-social issues
- (ii) Academic concerns

Although the collected data is segmented into foundation, preparatory, middle and secondary stages, there were limited calls for the foundation and preparatory stages. This limitation is primarily because children in these age groups may not possess the maturity to fully comprehend and articulate mental health issues or actively seek direct assistance. Consequently, the study relies on calls from the middle and secondary stages.

Result and Findings

The data collected from the Manodarpan toll-free tele-helpline number is categorized into two major concerns: psycho-social and academic. The analysis is divided into three phases to

understand the evolving nature of these concerns during the pandemic: *Phase I (July 2020 to December 2020)*, *Phase II (January 2021 to December 2021)*, and *Phase III (January 2022 to December 2022)*.

Phase-wise analysis indicates the following results:

Phase I (July 2020 to December 2020)

Academic Concerns: Admission queries, challenges with online learning, concentration difficulties, exam and career-related stress, procrastination issues, and study methods.

Psycho-social Concerns: COVID-19-related anger management, sadness, anxiety, and family-related concerns. Higher academic stage students reported difficulties in online learning, exam stress, concentration issues, poor study habits, and career guidance.

Phase II (January 2021 to December 2021)

Academic Concerns: Admission queries, difficulty in online learning and communication, lack of concentration, fatigue, exam stress, poor study habits, and techniques. Higher stage students sought help for government forms, admissions, examinations, scholarships, e-pathshala, syllabus, study materials, board exam stress, and offline exam anxiety.

Psycho-social Concerns: Loneliness, sadness, loss of interest, anxiety, fear, worry, stress from high COVID cases, nervousness, irritation, excessive social media use, mobile game addiction, mood swings, and body image issues.

Phase III (January 2022 to December 2022)

Academic Concerns: Admission and entrance exam queries, NCERT books, online classes, entrance exam

preparation, study tips, and various exams like NTSE, CBSE, NEET, UP board.

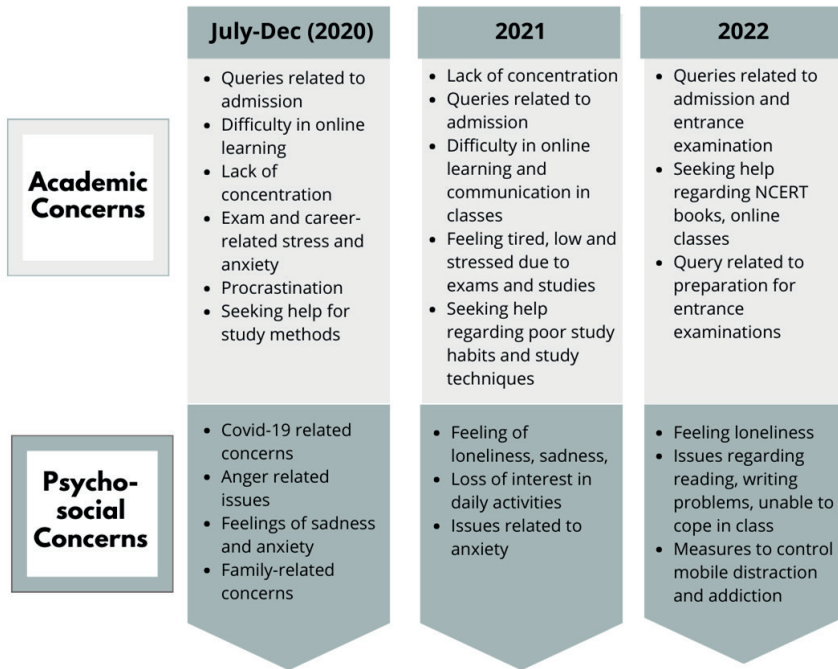
Psycho-social Concerns: Loneliness, overthinking, confusion, anxiety, depression, addiction to substances, video games, social media, mobile phones, adjustment problems due to family environment, sibling rivalry, friend misunderstandings, and body image issues.

Education stage-wise analysis showed the following results:

Middle Stage

Middle-stage students focused on academic issues such as admission queries, online learning adaptation, concentration problems, procrastination, and study habits. Amid these academic concerns feelings of sadness, loneliness, and anxiety often crept in, highlighting the importance of addressing both academic and emotional well-being to support these students effectively.

Figure-1: Concerns of Middle Stage Students



Secondary Stage

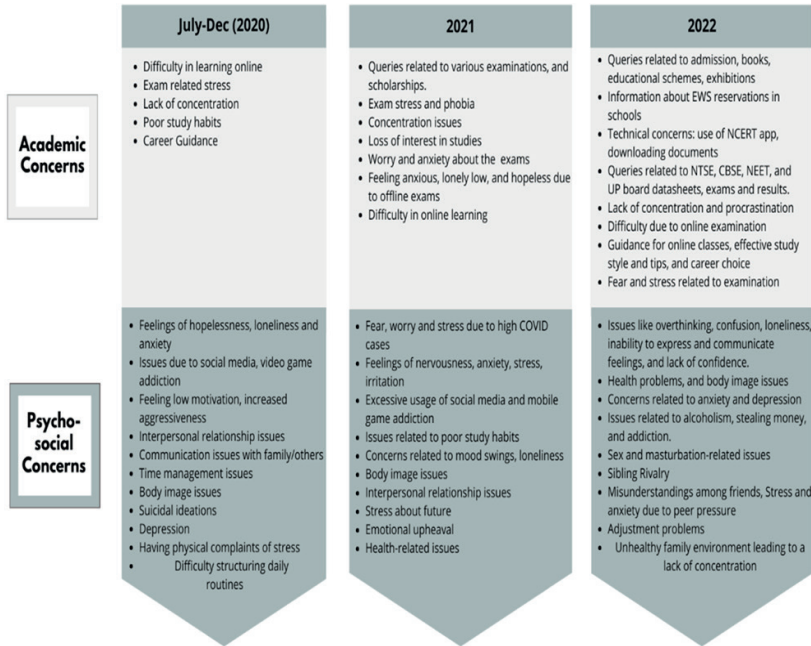
The secondary-stage students reported grappling with a diverse range of concerns, with both academic and psycho-social issues occupying a prominent place in their lives. The transition to online learning posed a significant challenge, leaving students struggling to adapt to this new educational landscape. The stress

stemming from exams and difficulties in maintaining concentration further exacerbated their academic woes. Moreover, secondary students were found to be increasingly contending with psycho-social issues, including body image insecurities, excessive use of social media, and addiction to mobile games. These digital distractions can contribute to feelings of loneliness and exacerbate concerns related to

anxiety and depression, which were also commonly reported throughout the years. As indicated in other studies, secondary-stage students

have showcased a higher prevalence of anxiety and stress compared to middle-stage students (Zhang et al, 2020).

Figure-2: Concerns of Secondary Stage Students



Analysis and Interpretations

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was felt in India in March 2020. Media reports were filled with the global impact of the pandemic, creating a climate of anxiety, fear, and panic. The news primarily focused on the loss of life and the struggles of hospitals and medicine supply chains to cope with the novelty and severity of the virus.

In this context, school-going students, initially happy about the closure of schools, began to fully comprehend the threat they were exposed to. The maximum percentage of calls received for academic issues (approximately 80 per cent) also indicates concerns such as stress and anxiety related to students’ academics, which they experienced once the impact of COVID settled in. The period from March to July,

traditionally the time for final exams and admissions, added stress to students in the middle and secondary stages. They grappled with the challenges of learning in an online mode, facing concentration issues due to virtual interactions in classrooms with teachers and peers. Students in classes 10th, 11th, and 12th were particularly concerned about how exams would take place and if the final results under such conditions would negatively impact their college or professional institution admissions (Barbayannis et al., 2022).

“The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Education,” a report by UNESCO (2022), also highlighted that a considerable number of students expressed anxiety regarding interruptions to their education, especially those from low socio-

economic backgrounds who exhibited lower confidence in independently completing school assignments. Common issues faced by students in the middle and secondary stages of education included challenges with online learning, academic stress, exam-related anxiety, lack of concentration, procrastination, and queries related to admissions, indicating the adverse impacts that academic stress can have on anxiety (Zhu et al., 2021).

The anxiety related to new teaching-learning and assessment methods led many students to seek counselor assistance for study methods, causing confusion and further increasing anxiety about their future. Students also sought counseling for career choices. On the social front, latent anxiety about the pandemic, fear of infection, and concerns about academic and career choices manifested in students' behaviors, leading to feelings of anger and sadness, among other emotions. As rightly stated in the report "On My Mind" by WHO, "Indeed, these are very challenging times for children and young people, and this is the state of their world in 2021."

Additionally, concerns related to the spread of COVID-19 were more prominent during both 2020 and 2021. These concerns included anxieties related to the health of oneself, family, and friends; restlessness and stress due to lockdown measures; feelings of loneliness and fear due to the pandemic (Brooks et al., 2020 & Enea et al., 2021); and worry and stress attributed to the high number of COVID cases.

Phase I concerns revolved around difficulty in adjusting to a new routine, shifting from offline to online classes, feeling bored, and losing interest in everyday activities. Phase II exacerbated these issues, leading to feelings of stress, tiredness, and low energy, as supported by the findings of "Mental

health and Well-being of School Students- A Survey". In line with the concerns of Phase III, the report "Life in Lockdown" by UNICEF (2021) states that "Social isolation and loneliness during lockdowns contributed to a range of outcomes, including depression, irritability, anxiety, stress, alcohol use, and sedentary behaviors." Psycho-social issues in this phase seemed to have intensified, with students reporting loneliness, overthinking, adjustment issues, depression, and an inability to express feelings, among other problems.

Students sought support for handling feelings of loneliness, sadness, and loss of interest in daily activities. Students in the secondary stage of education called counselors to seek support on various government forums for admission, examinations, and scholarships. During this phase, students had also started using and accessing the digital world for resources on learning, showing their increasing comfort with the online medium, as reflected in secondary stage students calling to ask about e-pathshala. However, the exposure and familiarity with the medium were not entirely positive, as many students called counselors to seek help in handling addiction to social media, mobile games, etc. School syllabus and study material-related concerns were also common.

Queries related to admission were reported in all three years, indicating uncertainties about the admission processes and difficulties of remote education. Seeking consistent assistance and information regarding admission processes also highlights the necessity of providing information in a more effective manner. Overall, the data not only highlights that the vulnerable period of COVID-19 has left adolescents with psychological stressors, which can have long-lasting implications, including procrastination and increased

coping depletion (Sirois, 2023), but also underscores the significance and need to address these concerns proactively through appropriate interventions, counseling, and support systems. Given that schools are among the most crucial settings for mental health promotion and protection among children and adolescents, they can assist in providing students with the knowledge, skills, competencies, and lifestyles necessary for them to thrive (WHO, 2022).

Conclusion

The role of tele- helpline for mental health and well-being during the COVID outbreak cannot be overemphasized. Not only did it provide remote accessibility, which was especially important during lockdowns and travel restrictions, but it also allowed people to prioritize their mental health while minimizing the risk of COVID exposure. Manodarpan has also played a crucial role in providing psycho-social support through its tele- helpline service.

The major findings from the analysis of data received from the Manodarpan helpline highlight that adolescent students in the middle and secondary stages have experienced significant negative impacts from the pandemic, posing challenges to their overall well-being. Initially, during 2020, the fear of infection and loss of loved ones, along with the shift to a new medium of instruction, disrupted adolescents' everyday harmony, affecting their mental health. The analysis also indicates that, later in 2021 and 2022, the extended lockdown and social isolation instilled feelings of loneliness (Christiansen et al., 2021 & Cooper

et al., 2021), stress, depression, and unidentified anxieties. On the academic front, the learning loss, combined with the decline in social skills, will have long-lasting effects that will be evident in the years to come, both on a personal and societal level.

It can be said that the negative impact of the pandemic on students' mental health is evident, and schools and parents need to recognize and address these issues in their own ways. Nonetheless, there is room for hope and positive signs emerge when children seek assistance after recognizing that certain issues could disrupt their daily lives and potentially affect their mental and physical well-being. This reflects a growing sense of self-awareness among young individuals. The data source, consisting of forms filled out by counselors on the tele-helpline, had limitations, as some forms were not adequately completed or shared by counselors, resulting in data loss. The major limitation of the study was the absence of quantitative data, which could enhance the generalizations of the analysis. Additionally, detailed case studies would have helped in data triangulation, making the study more informative and in-depth.

In conclusion, addressing the potential long-term consequences of the challenges mentioned earlier is crucial and need of the hour. It is imperative for educational institutions, policymakers, and communities to allocate resources and efforts toward remedial education, mental health support, and initiatives aimed at reducing educational disparities.

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