



UNDERSTANDING THE NUANCES: NAVIGATING THE MENTAL HEALTH LANDSCAPE OF INDIAN ADOLESCENTS IN THE COVID-19 ERA

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ABSTRACT:

Background: The mental health of Indian teenagers was already a concern pre-pandemic, with notable issues and high youth suicide rates, as per the National Mental Health Survey of 2016. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, introducing online learning and reduced social interactions, have potentially exacerbated these concerns. Given this context, insights from psychiatrists become crucial to comprehending the evolving mental health landscape among Indian adolescents during these challenging times.

Aim: This research investigates the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on teenage students at Ahmedabad Secondary School. By analyzing students' self-perceptions and coping mechanisms alongside insights from Indian psychiatrists, the study aims to offer a holistic view of adolescent mental well-being during this crisis. The ultimate objective is to inform potential interventions and support strategies.

Materials and Methods: A dual approach was used. Firstly, questionnaires capturing self-perceptions, emotions, coping mechanisms, and the pandemic's impact were administered to students. Secondly, psychiatrists were surveyed to discern their observations on the mental health trends among teenage students.

Results: The student data revealed mixed levels of satisfaction in personal (53.5%) and school life (46.5%), with 62% identifying academic pressures as primary anxiety sources. The pandemic further exacerbated mental well-being challenges for 41% of students. On the clinician front, there was recognition of a significant number of moderate to severe mental health issues in adolescents. Cognitive-behavioral therapy was highlighted as the most adopted therapeutic approach.

Conclusion: The multifaceted challenges faced by Indian adolescents, compounded by the pandemic's effects, are evident. The importance of integrating school-centric interventions with therapeutic modalities, as indicated by the dominance of cognitive-behavioral therapy, cannot be overemphasized. Collaborative efforts among educational institutions, healthcare providers, and policymakers are essential to foster a nurturing environment addressing the mental health concerns of India's youth.

Keywords: Indian adolescents' mental health, COVID-19, Adolescent, Academic pressures, Cognitive-behavioral therapy

INTRODUCTION:

1.1. COVID-19 and its Unprecedented Impact: The COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, emerged in late 2019 and quickly transformed into a global crisis. Declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020, it has since affected millions worldwide, causing significant morbidity and mortality. Beyond its direct health implications, COVID-19 has reshaped various facets of human life, from economies to daily routines. For adolescents, the pandemic has brought about disruptions in education, due to school closures, and introduced them to the concept of remote learning. The lack of physical social interactions, combined with anxiety about the virus and its socio-economic consequences, has further intensified mental health concerns among the young population. In a society like India, with its dense population and socio-cultural complexities, the ramifications of such a pandemic are multi-layered, affecting not only the physical but also the psychological well-being of its adolescents.[1]

1.2. The Adolescent Phase and Its Significance: Adolescence, serving as a nexus between childhood and adulthood, is marked by substantial physical, emotional, and cognitive evolution. The World Health Organization classifies this critical period, spanning ages 10 to 19 years, as the foundational phase directing one's adult pathway. During this time, young individuals display a heightened susceptibility to their milieu, shaping their identities, convictions, and future goals [2].

1.2.1. India's Adolescent Demographic: India occupies a distinctive demographic position, encompassing nearly a fifth of the world's adolescents. This dynamic cohort is instrumental to the country's forward trajectory. Nonetheless, if not given due attention, this demographic strength could usher in profound challenges, particularly concerning mental well-being [3].

1.2.2. Modern-day Challenges of Indian Adolescents: Contemporary Indian adolescents navigate a realm vastly divergent from their predecessors, juggling the task of preserving cultural ethos amidst swift globalization. The intense scholastic rivalry embedded within the Indian educational framework frequently manifests as escalated stress, anxiety, and other mental tribulations. Societal impositions, peer judgments, and identity exploration further escalate these concerns [4].

1.2.3. Socio-cultural Underpinnings: India's societal architecture, extolling family ties, communal bonds, and reverence for seniors, while acting as a formidable support anchor, can occasionally impose undue strain. This is especially pronounced in arenas of academic accomplishments, vocational choices, and certain personal facets, sculpting an adolescent's psychological panorama [5].

1.2.4. The Digital Age and Its Implications: Concurrent with these traditional challenges is the proliferating tech influence. Today's epoch, dominated by social media and immediate communication, poses both challenges and prospects. While fostering global interactions and learning, it can occasionally result in cyberbullying, skewed body image notions, and sensations of ceaseless oversight [6].

1.3. Mental Health: Mental health, often misconstrued as merely the absence of mental disorders, represents a broader spectrum of emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It influences how individuals perceive themselves, manage stress, relate to others, and make life choices. Mental health is crucial at every phase of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood.

1.3.1. Components of Mental Health:

- **Emotional Well-being:** This pertains to the ability to navigate and express emotions effectively. It encompasses coping with challenges, recovering from setbacks, and fostering relationships [7].
- **Psychological Well-being:** This involves the acceptance of self, autonomy in actions and beliefs, the pursuit of meaningful goals, and the ability to adapt to change [8].

- **Social Well-being:** A mentally healthy individual exhibits competence in social interactions, feels connected and supported in community and relationships, and demonstrates empathy towards others [9].

1.3.2. Factors Influencing Mental Health:

Mental health is shaped by a multitude of factors including:

- **Biological:** Genetics, brain chemistry, and hormonal imbalances can affect mental health.
- **Life Experiences:** Trauma or abuse can lead to mental health problems.
- **Family History:** A family history of mental health disorders can be a contributing factor [10]

1.3.3. Importance of Mental Health: Sound mental health bolsters individual productivity and adaptability, enriches community integration, and enhances life quality. It also diminishes societal burdens related to disease disability and financial costs [11].

1.4. Statement of the Problem

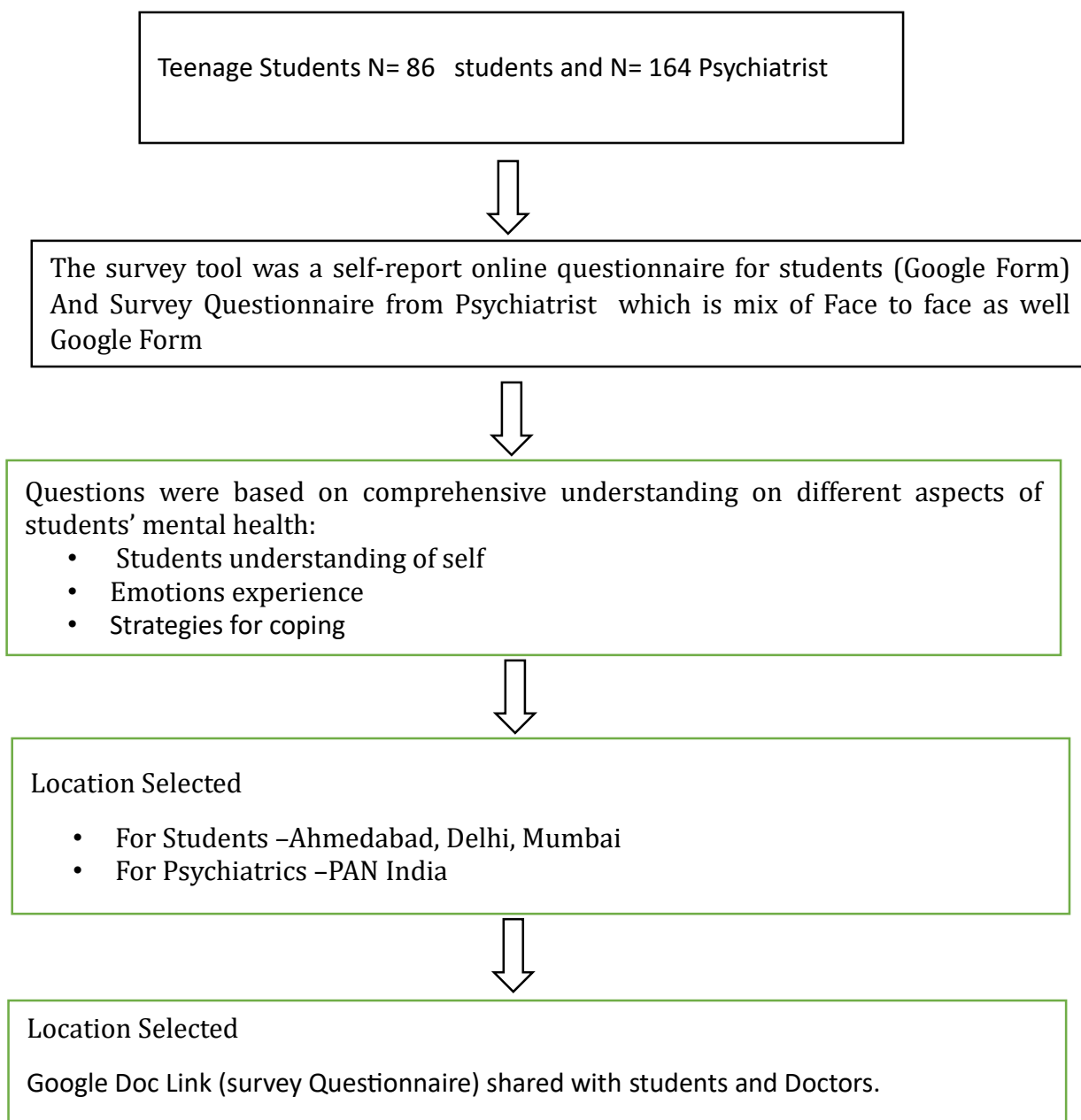
- The 2016 National Mental Health Survey indicated that 5% of India's population grapples with depression, and among adolescents between the ages of 13-17, the prevalence rate stands at 7.3%. The landscape of mental health challenges among this demographic encompasses depressive episodes, agoraphobia, intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, phobic anxiety disorder, drug use disorder, issues related to interpersonal relationships, ADHD, psychotic disorders, and behavioral syndromes [12]. Worryingly, statistics show that the suicide rates for Indian youth, particularly in the age bracket of 15-29, rank among the highest globally.
- Adding gravitas to these findings, the World Health Organization (WHO) has spotlighted that mental health disorders are responsible for 16% of the worldwide disease and injury burden for individuals aged 10-19. Globally, among adolescents, depression emerges as a primary cause of illness and disability [13].

2. Objectives of the Study: This study primarily seeks to delve into the intricacies of how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the mental well-being of teenage students, focusing on a sample from Ahmedabad Secondary School. By examining students' self-perceptions, emotional responses adopted coping mechanisms and experiences with online education, the research aims to offer a comprehensive view of their mental state. Furthermore, the research acknowledges the importance of expert insights, thus incorporating the viewpoints of psychiatrists from across India, ensuring a well-rounded understanding of the adolescent mental health landscape in the wake of the pandemic.

- Assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of teenage students from Ahmedabad Secondary School.
- Analyze students' self-perceptions during this period.
- Understand the emotional challenges faced by students during the pandemic.
- Examine the coping mechanisms adopted by students in response to pandemic-induced stress.
- Evaluate the influence of online education on students' mental well-being.
- Incorporate the perspectives of psychiatrists across India to provide a more holistic view of the situation.
- Offer recommendations and strategies based on findings to support adolescent mental health in such crises.

MATERIAL AND METHOD:

2.1. Data Collection: The survey collected data from 86 teenage students at Ahmedabad, Delhi, and Mumbai, Secondary School and 164 psychiatrists across India. Questionnaires were designed to capture students' self-perceptions, emotions, coping mechanisms, and the impact of the pandemic on their mental health. Physicians were surveyed to gauge their perspective on the mental health of teenage students.



RESULT:

The Survey results provide a comprehensive understanding of different aspects of students' mental health, the findings are presented under the following headings: Students' understanding of themselves, Emotions encountered, and Coping Mechanisms along with a bird eye view from physicians/psychiatrists who are actively involved in managing the mental health of students:

2.2.Students' Responses on Aspects of Mental Health: In a comprehensive survey undertaken to understand the mental well-being and coping mechanisms of teenage students, especially in the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, we received responses from 86 participants at Ahmedabad Secondary School. This evaluation delved deep into self-perception, societal influences, coping techniques, and the impact of pandemic-induced restrictions on their psychological state. The findings underscore several facets of their mental health:

➤ **Self-perception and societal influences:** Moderate satisfaction is observed in areas like body image (51.1%) and personal life (53.5%), while satisfaction with school life seems slightly lesser at 46.5%. Interestingly, most students felt a significant responsibility towards doing well (70%), indicating a sense of purpose or pressure. However, many expressed hesitations in seeking clarifications or asking questions (66.3%), and a substantial portion also found initiating

conversations challenging (36.1%). One of the alarming findings is the degree of peer pressure's influence, with 21% admitting to consuming substances due to such pressures or out of curiosity.

- **Emotional well-being and coping:** The emotional spectrum of the participants seems diverse, with a notable number experiencing happiness (48.9%), but also considerable segments grappling with anxiousness (34.9%) and extreme emotions (31.4%). While traditional methods like yoga and meditation were employed by 23.2% as coping mechanisms, a significant proportion tried shifting their thought patterns to cope with stress (45.3%), albeit with varying success.
- **Impact of the Pandemic:** The ramifications of the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns have been manifold. 41% acknowledged a detrimental impact on their mental health, while 31.4% felt their academic performance took a hit. The transition to online learning presented challenges, including a lack of social interactions (31.4%) and difficulties in grasping online content (41.9%). A mere 8.1% found online classes both productive and enjoyable. The pandemic also brought about changes in communication preferences and disrupted regular routines, leading 55.9% to experience significant alterations in their sleep or eating habits.
- **Seeking Assistance:** The silver lining amidst these challenges is the growing awareness and acceptance of mental health needs. 22.1% of participants acknowledged the need for professional help or counseling during the trying times of the pandemic.
- These findings provide a profound insight into the intricate fabric of adolescent mental health, especially during an unprecedented global crisis. They underscore the significance of consistent support, understanding, and adaptable learning methods to ensure the overall well-being of our young generation.

Table 1: Summary of Survey Responses on Students' Mental Health and Well-being

Aspect	Percentage	Remarks
Satisfaction Levels		
Satisfaction with Body Image	51.1%	Over half expressed contentment with their body image
Satisfaction with Personal life	53.5%	Slightly over half are content with their personal life
Satisfaction with School life	46.5%	Less than half are content with their school life
Communication & Social Interaction		
Responsibility of Doing Well	70%	The majority feel a strong responsibility to perform well
Hesitation in Asking Questions	66.3%	Two-thirds show hesitance to ask questions
Difficulty in Initiating Conversation	36.1%	Over a third find it hard to start conversations
Complying with Peer Pressure	46.5%	Nearly half succumb to peer pressure frequently
Substance consumption (peer pressure/curiosity)	21%	One in five admitted to consuming due to curiosity/peer pressure
Frequent/Social consumption of substances	11.6%	Around one in ten engage in frequent consumption
Emotional and mental Well-being		
Self-trustworthiness	74.4%	Most students trust themselves
Perception of Receiving Social Support	74.5%	High perception of support from peers and family
Causes of Anxiety (Studies, Exams, Results)	61.6%	Major anxiety drivers identified
Lack of Concentration	37.2%	More than a third face concentration issues
Feeling of Happiness	48.9%	Almost half regularly feel happy
Feeling of Anxiousness	34.9%	Over a third regularly feel anxious

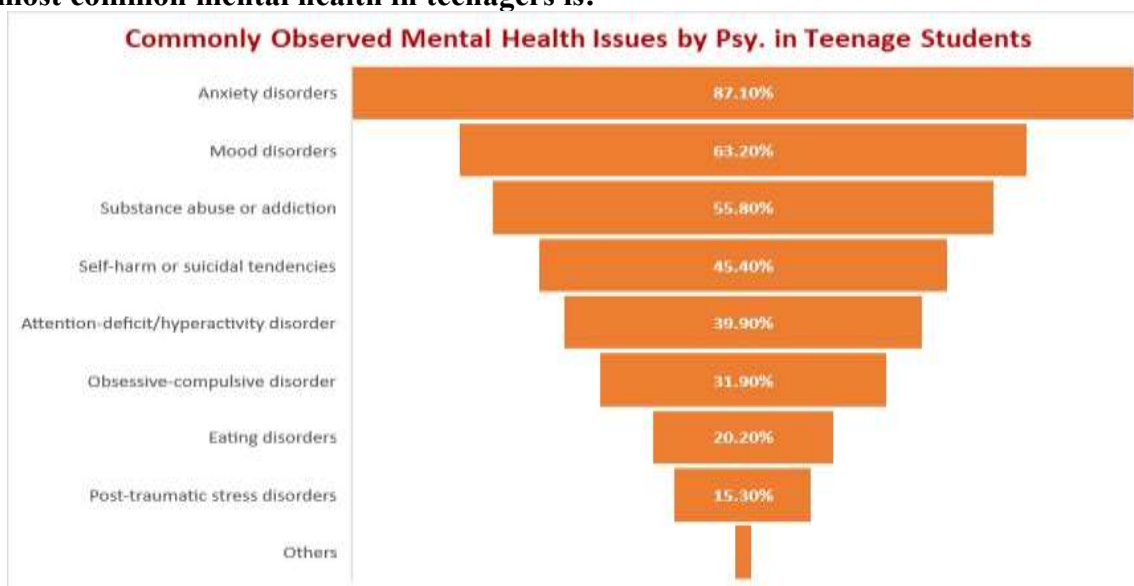
The feeling of Extreme Emotions	31.4%	Around a third experience extreme emotion
Coping Mechanisms & Pandemic Impact		
Use of Yoga and Meditation for Stress	23.2%	Yoga and meditation are used by almost a quarter of respondents
Attempt to Shift Thoughts for Stress	45.3%	Almost half try to shift thoughts as a coping mechanism
Lack of Social Interaction in Online Classes	31.4%	One-third miss social interactions in virtual classes
Difficulty in Learning Content Online	41.9%	More than 40% face challenges with online learning content
Feeling Hopeful in Stressful Situations	19.8%	Less than 20% remain hopeful in tough situations
Impact of COVID-19 on mental health	41%	Significant impact on mental health due to the pandemic
Impact on academic performance and grades	31.4%	Almost a third saw a drop in their academic performance
Productivity in online classes	8.1%	Only a fraction found online classes productive and enjoyable
Communication means during a lockdown	Messaging: 59%, Video Calls: 58%	Students primarily used messaging apps and video calls
Changes in sleep patterns or eating habits	55.9%	Over half noted significant changes in their routine
Felt the need for Professional Counseling	22.1%	Over a fifth felt the need for professional help during lockdown

- 1. Satisfaction Levels:** At the forefront of understanding students' well-being is gauging their satisfaction in various areas of life. Our findings indicate:
 - **Body Image:** A slight majority (51.1%) of students expressed contentment with their body image.
 - **Personal Life:** 53.5% of the respondents are content with their personal life.
 - **School Life:** Less than half (46.5%) are content with their school experiences.
- 2. Communication & Social Interaction:** Communication remains central to adolescent well-being:
 - 70% of the participants felt a robust responsibility to perform well academically.
 - A considerable 66.3% showed hesitance in asking questions, and 36.1% found initiating conversations challenging.
 - Alarmingly, nearly half (46.5%) often succumb to peer pressure, and 21% admitted to consuming substances like alcohol, cigarettes, or vaping due to curiosity or peer pressure.
- 3. Emotional & Mental Well-being:** The emotional landscape of the students was diverse:
 - A majority trust themselves (74.4%), and 74.5% perceive they receive adequate social support.
 - However, anxiety, especially related to studies, exams, and results, remains a significant concern for 61.6% of the respondents.
- 4. Coping Mechanisms & Pandemic Impact:** The pandemic has reshaped how students cope and interact:
 - Only 23.2% use Yoga and Meditation for stress, yet 45.3% attempt to shift their thoughts as a coping mechanism.
 - Virtual education has its challenges: 31.4% miss social interactions in online classes, and 41.9% find learning online content challenging.
- 5. Broader Impacts of the Pandemic:** The COVID-19 pandemic's overarching effects were evident:
 - It significantly impacted 41% of respondents' mental health.
 - 31.4% noticed a drop in their academic performance.
 - During the lockdown, students majorly turned to messaging apps (59%) and video calls (58%) for communication.

4.2. Physicians Responses on Aspects of Mental Health

✓ Survey 164 psychiatrists in India; to see how the health fraternity handles the situation of mental health in teenage students in their OPD Setting and the results are

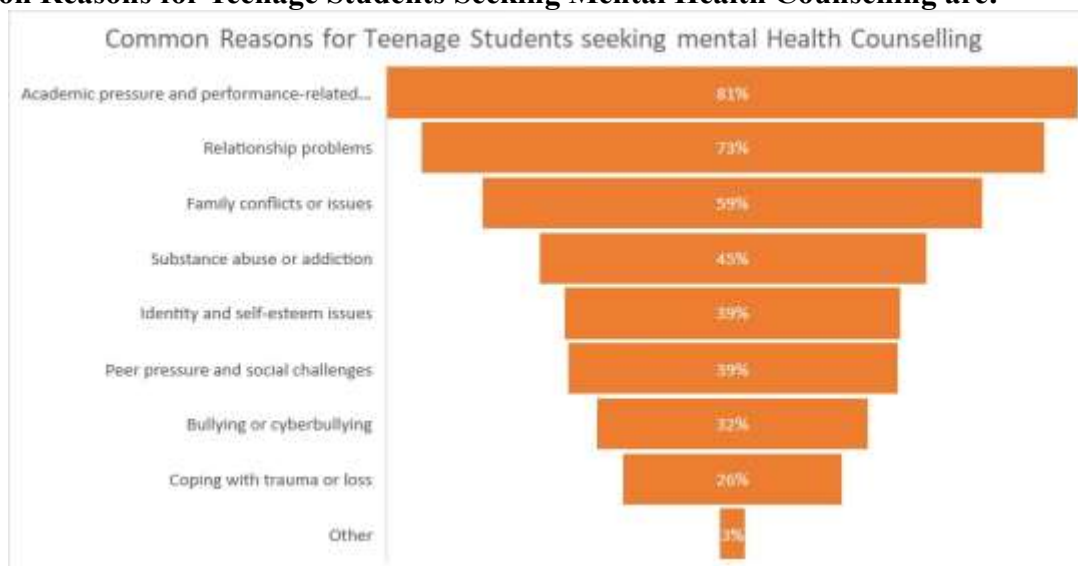
The most common mental health in teenagers is:



The severity of mental health issues in the teenage students

- ✓ Severe-30.8%
- ✓ Moderate -38.9%
- ✓ Mild-30.3%

Common Reasons for Teenage Students Seeking Mental Health Counselling are:



Commonly used counseling methods or therapeutic approaches are:

- ✓ Cognitive-behavioral therapy-83.9%
- ✓ Dialectical behavior therapy -31.1%
- ✓ Family therapy -51.6%
- ✓ Mindfulness-based therapy-34.8%
- 65.2% of Physicians or Psychiatrists believe that the COVID-19 Pandemic significantly impacted the academic performance of teenage students.

- 48.8% believe that the shift to online classes has contributed to an increase in mental health issues among teenage students. This shift led to Increased anxiety and stress (84.4%) and Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness (33.1%).

Common coping mechanisms suggested by Physicians and Psychiatrist are: Engaging in hobbies and activities they enjoy, seeking support from friends and family, using social media as a means of connection, and participating in online support groups or forums

THE SURVEY UNCOVERED CRUCIAL INSIGHTS INTO STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH:

Key Findings from Student Responses

- **Satisfaction Levels:** While a majority of students feel responsible for performing well in their lives, only 47% report satisfaction with their school life. This discrepancy highlights the need for a more supportive school environment.
- **Self-Trustworthiness and Seeking Support:** A positive aspect is that most students trust themselves and are open to seeking social support, a factor that can protect their mental well-being.
- **Anxiety Triggers:** Anxiety is a prominent issue among students, with 62% attributing it to academic pressures, particularly studies, exams, and results. This finding calls for more comprehensive stress management strategies within the education system.
- **Coping Mechanisms:** Students employ a range of coping mechanisms, with 38% attempting to shift their thoughts and 23.2% turning to yoga and meditation. These strategies show promise and highlight the importance of providing students with tools to manage stress effectively.
- **Impact of the Pandemic:** The pandemic has significantly impacted students' mental health, with 41% acknowledging its adverse effects. Challenges include a lack of peer interaction, difficulties in online learning, and impaired academic performance. These issues need to be addressed promptly to mitigate the pandemic's lasting impact.

Insights from Physicians and Psychiatrists

- The survey also sought input from medical professionals actively involved in managing the mental health of students. Their responses provide a deeper understanding of the situation:
- **Prevalent Mental Health Issues:** Anxiety and mood disorders, substance addiction, and suicidal thoughts are the most common mental health issues affecting teenage students, according to physicians.
- **Severity of Mental Health Issues:** A concerning aspect is that physicians report a substantial number of teenage students with moderate to severe mental illnesses.
- **Impact of COVID-19:** Physicians largely agree that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the academic performance of teenage students, contributing to increased anxiety, stress, and feelings of helplessness.
- **Counseling Approaches:** Cognitive-behavioral therapy is the most commonly used therapeutic approach for addressing mental health issues among teenage students, followed by family therapy and mindfulness-based therapy.
- **Coping Mechanisms:** Physicians suggest various coping mechanisms for students, including engaging in hobbies, seeking support from friends and family, and using social media for connection.

DISCUSSION:

Adolescence is a period marked by profound physical, emotional, and cognitive transformations. It is a time when the individual not only grapples with an evolving self-concept but also with the complexities of the larger societal framework. The data from the survey provides valuable insights into these very dynamics, presenting a multi-faceted look into the mental and emotional states of students.

(i) Self-perception: The way adolescents see themselves plays an integral role in their mental health. A positive self-concept, comprising self-acceptance, self-worth, and self-efficacy, can be a protective factor against various mental health challenges. It can help adolescents navigate life's challenges more effectively, making them less susceptible to conditions like depression or anxiety. A negative or unstable self-concept, on the other hand, can make them vulnerable.

(ii) Relation to Others: Adolescence is also characterized by an increased importance of peer relations. The lens through which students see themselves about others has profound implications for their mental health. Feelings of belongingness and acceptance can boost self-esteem and provide emotional support. Conversely, feelings of isolation or peer rejection can lead to emotional distress and, in extreme cases, can even predispose to conditions like social anxiety.

(iii) Life Satisfaction: This three-pronged aspect of personal, academic, and societal satisfaction offers a holistic view of the adolescent's world. Satisfaction in these areas is not just reflective of current well-being but can also be predictive of future mental health states. For instance, academic dissatisfaction might not just indicate current stress but could be a precursor to future anxiety or depressive disorders.

(iv) Feelings Experienced: The range and depth of feelings experienced during adolescence can often be overwhelming. Emotions, both positive and negative, are amplified during this period due to hormonal changes and increased cognitive processing about self and the world. Understanding the emotional landscape of adolescents can shed light on potential risk factors and areas of intervention.

(v) Anxieties and Challenges: These are inevitable parts of growing up, but their nature and intensity can vary. Today's adolescents face a unique set of challenges, from academic pressures to social media-related issues. Identifying common anxieties can help in tailoring interventions and preventive measures.

(vi) Coping Mechanisms and Emotional Management Techniques: This is arguably one of the most crucial aspects of the survey. Adolescents with effective coping mechanisms are more resilient and better prepared to handle life's challenges. Understanding what strategies are commonly employed can guide schools, parents, and mental health professionals in imparting these vital life skills.

CONCLUSION:

The intricate matrix of adolescent mental health in India, as revealed by the survey, underscores a pressing need for immediate and strategic action. Given the dual challenges posed by the developmental stage of adolescence and the added pressures from the COVID-19 pandemic, the vulnerabilities are evident. Now, more than ever, there's a paramount necessity for a cohesive and integrated approach that brings together educational institutions, healthcare professionals, and policymakers. By forging such alliances, we can aim to create robust and responsive mental health infrastructures. This is not merely about addressing challenges; it's about investing in the nation's future. Ensuring the psychological well-being of the youth today will lay the foundation for a resilient, productive, and thriving nation tomorrow.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST:

The authors have stated that they have no conflicts of interest.

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