



Research Paper

One Step Ahead: Surveying Patterns of Adolescent Mental Illness in Delhi-NCR

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this study is to assess the nature of psychological issues faced by Indian adolescents and suggest interventions to improve happiness and well-being. The sample comprises of 672 middle school students and 830 senior school students from Government and Aided Schools in Delhi who were from a lower to middle socio-economic stratum. A specific questionnaire was developed using questions adapted from various existing psychological and mental health tests. As a part of The Happiness Project, a non-profit organisation, the survey was administered in 7 schools and data was collated using frequency count and converting it to percentage. Results found that cognitive and biological difficulties, mood difficulties, anxiety, self-harm, substance abuse and dissatisfaction with appearance were big issues in both, middle and senior school. These issues could impact all aspects of an adolescent's life, including academics, relationships and physical health, which would lead to even worse psychological issues.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, happiness has been given several definitions. In the book, 'The How of Happiness', Sonja Lyubomirsky defines happiness as "the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one's life is good, meaningful and worthwhile". Wellbeing, as explained by Martin Seligman in his book 'Authentic Happiness', is a combination of 5 measurable elements- positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and purpose, and engagement. The definition of happiness upon which this research is based was proposed by Lyubomirsky et al in 2005. They stated that "a happy person is someone who experiences frequent positive emotions, such as joy, interest, and pride, and infrequent (though not absent) negative emotions, such as sadness, anxiety and anger. These negative emotions could be considered psychological disturbances to mental health. Mental health refers to our cognitive, behavioural, and emotional well-being. This research primarily focuses on negative emotions, including depression, anxiety, bullying and body-image related issues.

Depression is defined as a mood disorder characterized by prolonged periods of feeling sad and low and experiencing a loss of interest in activities one typically enjoys. Depression is extremely common in teenagers due to various challenges they are constantly facing, such as parental pressure and bullying by peers. The relationship between bullying and depression in teenagers was studied by Uba, Yaacob and Juhari in 2010. Participants included 242 teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17 (mean age=14.67, standard deviation= 1.27) from secondary schools in Selangor, Malaysia. Levels of depression were measured using Children Depression Inventory (CDI), while the Peer Relationship Questionnaire (PRQ) was used to test the amount of bullying in schools. Results showed a strong, positive correlation between bullying and depression in teenagers ($r=.296$, $p<.01$). Another study was conducted in 2009 by Indian Psychologists- Bansal, Goyal and Srivastava. Their aim was to assess the prevalence of depression in teenagers studying in public schools. The sample consisted of 125 students studying in the 9th grade. Using the psychological instruments GHQ-12 and BDI, a cross-sectional one-time observational study was conducted in order to detect early symptoms of depression. Results showed that 15.2% of the teenagers were facing some form of stress while 18.4%, which is a very large number, were found to be depressed. Further investigation found that the causes were most likely fights with parents, academic pressure and beatings at home. It is important to understand the levels and prevalence of depression in teenagers because of the negative implications it can have on their academics and social life. Jaycox et al conducted a study in 2009 to see the impact of depression on friends, school and physical functioning. The sample was made

up of 4713 teenagers from Los Angeles and Washington of which 187 displayed signs of probable depression. A longitudinal study was conducted on these teenagers which included interviews with the teenagers and their parents to learn about their school functioning, parental support and days of impairment. Researchers found that teenagers with probable depression reported more impairment in all aspects of their lives and that there was a long-lasting impact of depression on friends, family, and daily functioning.

Depression is often accompanied by anxiety. The APA defines anxiety as “an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure”. Teenagers are put through several stressful situations such as examinations and fights, however, when the adolescent experiences anxiety for a long period of time, that is when it can be considered a disorder. The prevalence of depression and anxiety in school going students was studied by Preeti, Singh and Kumar in 2017. 200 Indian students from rural socio-economic backgrounds were given a Hindi translation of the Depression and Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS). The results suggested that there were high levels of both disorders in students and they also stressed on the importance of detecting the issues early so that they can be prevented. Another study was conducted in 2017 which aimed to determine which gender, male or female, experienced higher levels of anxiety. 30 students from grades 6-12 were asked to answer questions on the Teat Anxiety Scale developed by Dr. VP Sharma in 1971. The results showed that males had higher anxiety levels than females due to the excessive pressure on them to support their families and are more competitive in nature. Another comparison that was drawn was between the anxiety levels in adults and teenagers. 30 males- 15 adults and 15 teenagers- were tested using the Self Analysis Form (IPAT) developed by Kurg, Scheier and R.B. Cattell. The study found that adolescents have higher anxiety levels than adults because a big source of stress for teenagers comes from parental pressure.

Anxiety and depression often stem from bullying between peers or teenagers feeling insecure of their bodies. To study the prevalence and psychosocial outcomes of bullying among adolescents, Malhi, Bharti and Sidhu conducted a study in 2014. 209 students from grades 9 and 10 were asked to self-report on bullying involvement. Four categories were identified- bullies, victims, bully-victims and non-involved students. An Indianized version of the Piers Harris Children’s Self Concept Scale (CSCS) was used to measure their self-concept and the emotional and behavioural difficulties were assessed through the Youth Self Report measure. They found there was a 53% overall prevalence of bullying behaviour and 19.2% of the teenagers were victims. The higher the self-concept of the adolescent, the more likely he was to be a bully. The other root cause for mental illnesses is body insecurity. In 2017, Shefali Sharma conducted research to identify and analyse the issues that Indian adolescents face regarding body image. 115 Indian students (between ages 14-16) were asked questions in a self-reporting questionnaire. The study found that teenagers’ preoccupation with their body image is the cause for negative thoughts towards themselves and towards others. The study also suggested how schools can create a safer environment and promote body positivity amongst students.

Based on the review of literature above, one can see that Indian students are facing many challenges, including depression, anxiety, bullying, substance abuse and body insecurity. Despite this, not enough research on Indian teenagers exists. This study has been conducted in order to fill this gap and ensure that mental health is given importance and that students are brought up in a nurturing and happy environment. Mental health is often overlooked in society and in order to tackle that, this study aims to provide accurate and tangible evidence to raise awareness.

II. METHOD

Objectives

The aim of this study is to assess the nature of psychological issues faces by Indian adolescents through a self-reporting survey designed to find issues specific to the Indian demographic. The results of the survey will help determine what the root of the problems are so that the researchers can suggest interventions to improve happiness and well-being.

Participants

Surveys were conducted in several government and Aided Schools located in New Delhi. A sample of 672 middle school students (11-13) and 830 senior school students (14-17) were surveyed. The students were all from lower to middle socio-economic stratum.

Tools Used

A new and specific questionnaire was developed and used to survey the students. The questions were adapted from various existing psychological and mental health tests to suit the demographic. The questionnaire went through multiple stages of being vetted by leading child psychologists before it was finalized and used. A pilot study was also done with 25 known students from a high socio-economic stratum to gain feedback and better understanding about the same (these participants were not included in the study). Later, questions were

altered to create 2 distinct questionnaires for middle and senior school. The bilingual questionnaires can be viewed in the Appendix. The questionnaires highlighted issues on topics displayed in Table 1.

Table 1 Issues Addressed in the Questionnaire

MIDDLE SCHOOL	SENIOR SCHOOL
Cognitive and Biological Difficulties	Cognitive and Biological Difficulties
Mood Difficulties	Mood Difficulties
Anxiety	Anxiety
Self-Harm Thoughts	Self-Harm Thoughts
Substance Abuse	Substance Abuse
Dissatisfaction with Looks	Dissatisfaction with Looks
Stress over Weight	Stress over Weight
Victims of Bullying	Low Satisfaction with Life

Note: The only major difference is the question on Bullying versus Life Satisfaction

Procedure

To collect the data the researchers as a part of Happiness Project - A non-profit organization created entirely for this objective - went to schools to conduct the surveys. The school was notified and all students' informed consent was taken, before proceeding with the questionnaire. The students who took the survey were guided through questions whenever necessary, and the bilingual nature made all questions easy to understand and answer. Anonymity was also kept, in order to collect the most accurate and honest data.

Once the survey was conducted the data collected was analysed. The questions were grouped according to what mental health problem they highlight, after which frequency count methods were used to find the percentage of students facing that issue at different intensity levels. The survey primarily adopted a 3-point scale, with 3 suggesting high requirement of intervention and 2 suggesting an adequate problem that has affected students' lives. The percentages provide information on how many students are facing the issue. The yes and no questions were also converted into percentages and presented. All other type of questions had the same procedure, and were presented as graphs.

Secondly, a scoring method was used to find an average score out of 3 or 2 on mental health issues. At the end all issues were given an equal denominator and compared to see which ones were the most concerning and affected the most students in the school.

III. RESULTS

Using frequency count methods, the percentage of students facing the different mental issues were found in Table 2

Table 2 Results from the questionnaire

PROBLEM	MIDDLE SCHOOL		SENIOR SCHOOL	
	MODERATE	HIGH	MODERATE	HIGH
Cognitive and Biological Difficulties	42.8%	4.3%	51%	8.17%
Mood Difficulties	39.61%	13.78%	51.41%	13.02%
Anxiety	39.3%	12.62%	44.91%	15.01%
Self-Harm	39.94%	8.17%	32.38%	4.47%
Substance Abuse	6.95%	3.57%	6.1%	1.54%
Concerned over Weight	23.52%	8.65%	27.3%	7.26%
Satisfied with Life	N/A	N/A	43.01%	30.94%
	YES	NO	YES	NO
Dissatisfaction with looks	87.14%	12.86%	84.89%	15.11%
Know how to manage stress	67.28%	32.72%	64.73%	35.14%

Note: The results from the questionnaire excluding more subjective questions in the questionnaire. Neither does it rank them in importance.

The average answer of each scalar quantity (Never, Sometimes, Almost All the time) was found by giving them a corresponding score (1, 2, 3) the average score was then found by frequency counting, giving a value between 1 to 3 for each issue. The couple exceptions with only two options were given similar value between 1 to 2 which was then converted to 1 to 3 to make the comparison fair. The results of the same, ranking the issues importance in the schools are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3 Results from the questionnaire

IMPORTANCE	MIDDLE SCHOOL		SENIOR SCHOOL	
1.	Mood Difficulties	1.67	Low Satisfaction with life	2.17
2.	Anxiety	1.65	Mood Difficulties	1.68*
3.	Commit acts of Self Harm	1.56	Anxiety	1.68*
4.	Cognitive Difficulties	1.51	Cognitive Difficulties	1.66
5.	Concerned about Weight	1.41	Commit acts of Self Harm	1.54
6.	Cannot deal with Stress	1.33	Concerned about Weight	1.42
7.	Use Substances	1.14	Cannot deal with Stress	1.32
8.	Troubled by Looks	1.13	Troubled by Looks	1.14
9.	N/A	N/A	Use Substances	1.08

Note: In middle school no particular issue comes out as the gravest danger, but Mood Difficulties and Anxiety do seem to have a higher impact on students. In general, it can also be seen that most problems have become more prominent going into senior school. Low satisfaction with life was a significant problem as it causes lack of motivation and concentration in students, deteriorating their chances for a better future in a cyclic manner. The middle school questionnaire had a lot higher importance on bullying and how it takes place. These questions had unique answer choices, and hence their results are displayed in various graphs. (Figure 1-4)

What Students are Teased On

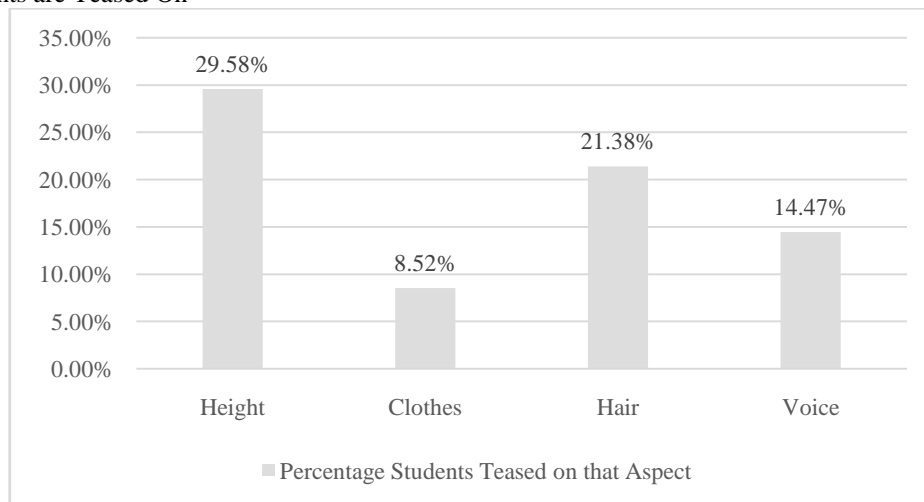


Figure 1. It is clear that approximately 75% students are teased on aspects related to their body image. Their physique and height being the major factor.

Where does Bullying Happen the Most

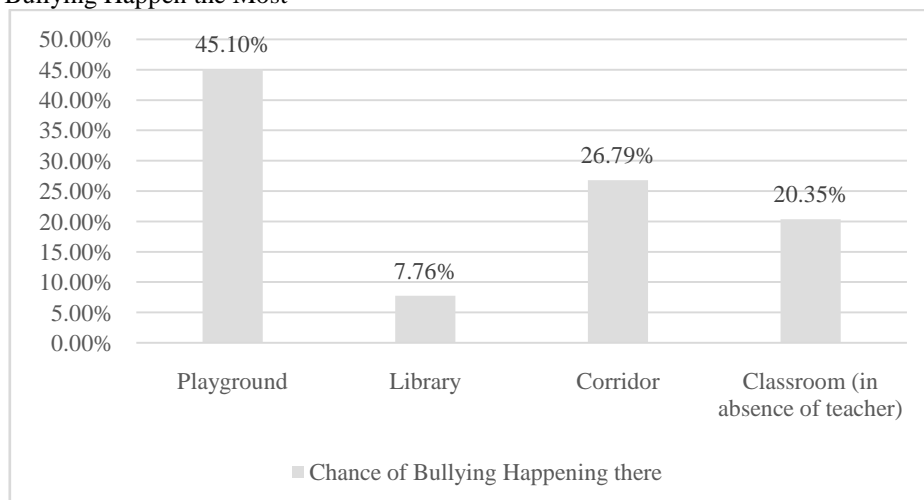


Figure 2. Unmonitored areas such as the playground and corridors have a high chance of bullying happening. This suggests that Bullying is a relief method for Bullies away from teachers and academic classes.

What Time is Bullying most Prevalent

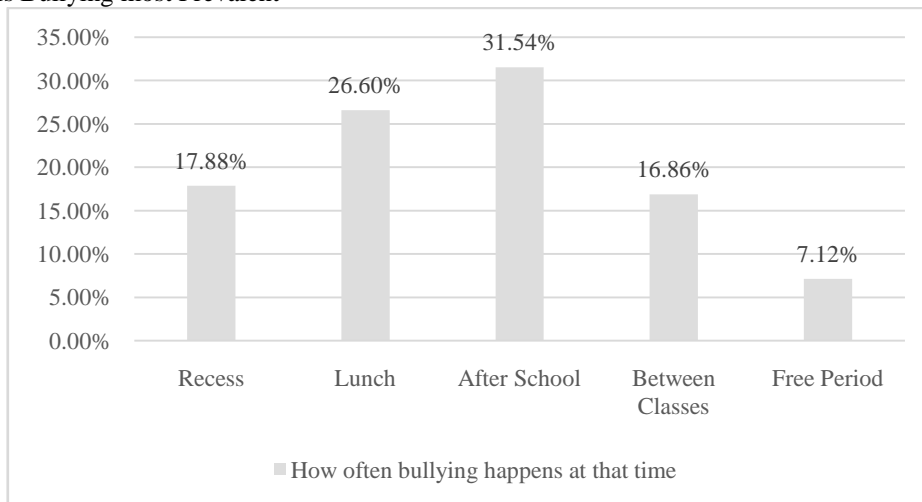


Figure 3. Trying to find the safest environment or location in the school, this question suggests that Classes are the safest environment, and the best reason being because of the number of people present

Type of Behaviour seen during Bullying

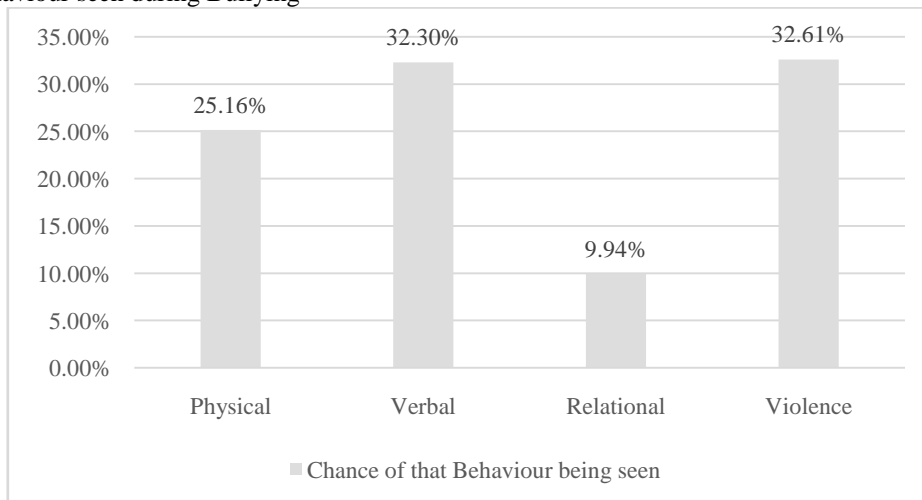


Figure 4. Relational suggested going towards family matters during bullying, and violence suggested the threat of lethal items. It is clear that Verbal Abuse and Violence were the key ways in which bullies bullied victims.

Figure 5 and 6 identify who students seek help from if they do at all.

Who Middle School Students Seek Help From

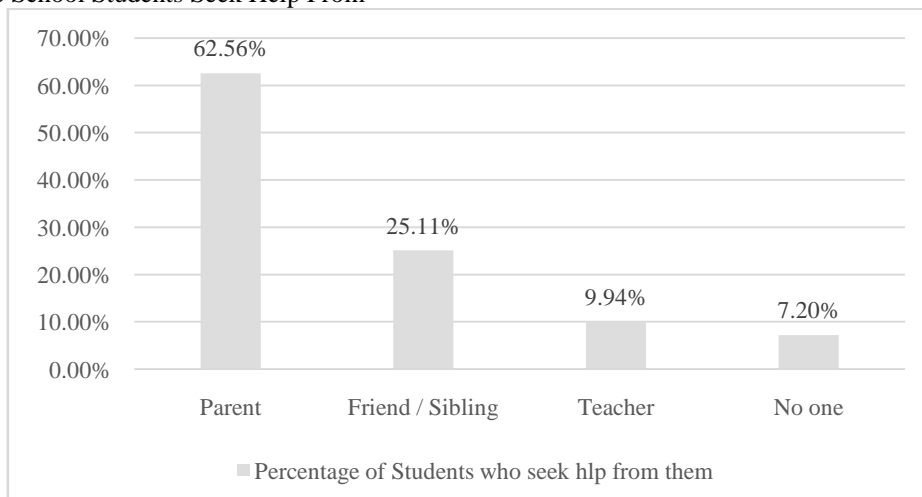


Figure 5. While it is good that most students do seek help from their parents or peers, the problem here is that teachers, who are the ones who groom these students the most, are not asked often. The 8% students who do not seek help should also be less even though it is good.

Who Senior School Students Seek Help From

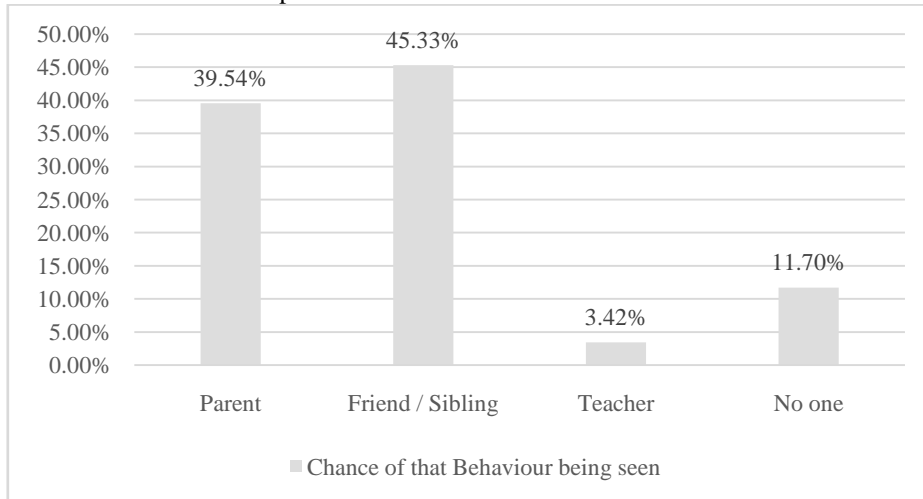


Figure 6. As the students grow old the situation worsens, as more students isolate themselves and their thoughts, parents are no longer the first choice, and teachers' roles have also reduced.

This was all done to find suitable suggestions and courses of action for the students to improve their mental health. Finally, to get a different perspective on which issues affect the students the most they themselves were asked what problems they want the school to talk about.

What Problems do Middle School Students want addressed

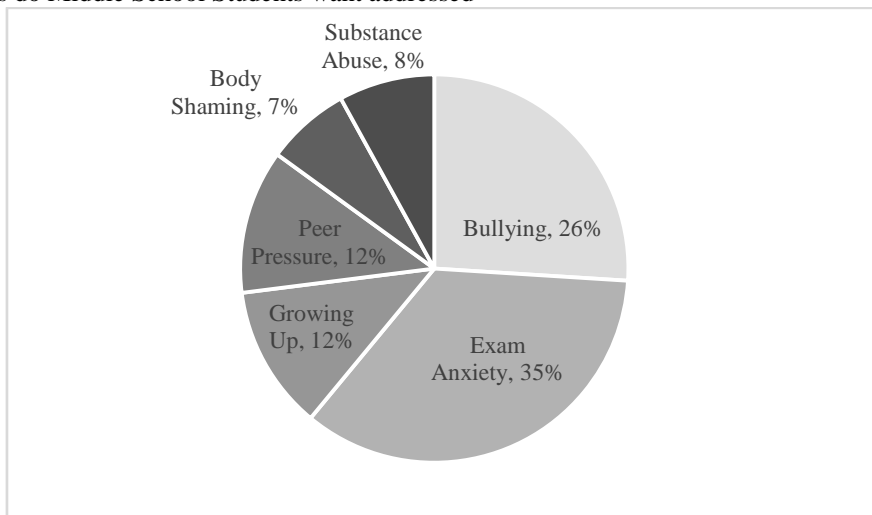


Figure 7. Bullying seems to be a big problem with new Exam Stress causing high Anxiety

What Problems do Senior School Students want addressed

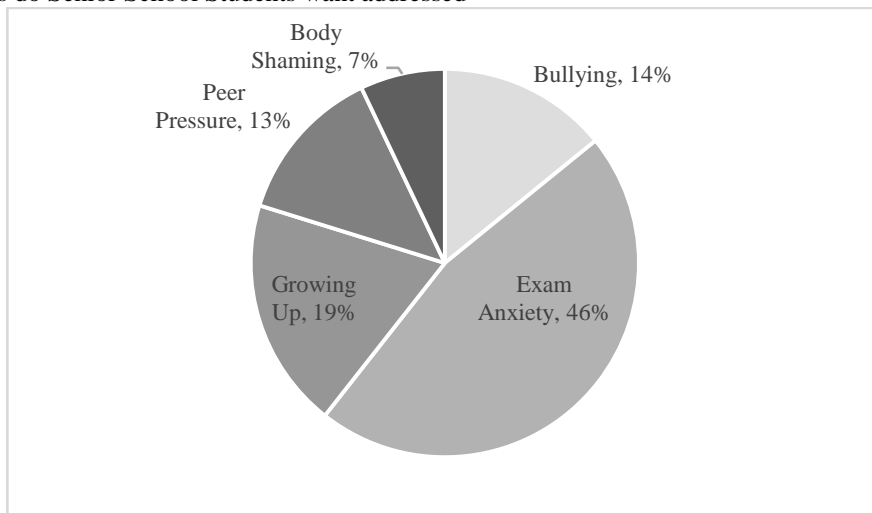


Figure 8. As the students grow, bullying subdues but exam anxiety stays all other issues stay at a same level

IV. DISCUSSION

Aim and Objective

The aim of this study was to assess the psychological issues Indian adolescents are facing using a unique self-reporting tool. Using data collected, researchers will suggest interventions to improve happiness and well-being in teenagers. 672 middle school students and 830 senior school students of Government and Aided Schools were surveyed using a new and specific questionnaire that was designed to suit the demographic. Results showed that mental illnesses were clearly prevalent amongst the adolescents. Over 50% of the teenagers, both in middle and senior school, were facing mood difficulties, anxiety and dissatisfaction with looks.

Analysis

Middle School. Table 2 consists of the data found through the survey. It shows the percentage of teenagers suffering from mild or severe illnesses based on the themes the researchers were determining. The data suggested that mood difficulties were the most prevalent and impacted 53.39% (39.61 mild and 13.78 severe). This large number is most likely due to fights with parents, beatings at home and academic struggles as suggested by the study by Bansal, Goyal and Srivastava. Anxiety was also found to be very common (39.3 mild and 12.62 high). Due to academic pressure, growing-up challenges, parental pressure and inability to cope with change. These results coincide with those of Preeti, Singh and Kumar which supports the fact that anxiety is a big psychological issue amongst teenagers and needs to be addressed. Researchers also found that 12.86% of the middle schoolers surveyed were unhappy with the way they look. This could be related to weight, skin colour, body type or the way others react to an individual's looks. Shefali Sharma's study on body-image in Indian adolescents support these results and also find that if body insecurity is not addressed, it can lead to negative thoughts and stress. Body insecurity mostly occurs due to social media and peer-to-peer bullying as both give students an idea of what an ideal body should look like and put immense pressure on them to try and attain that image.

Another extremely concerning thing to note is that levels of self-harm (39.94% mild and 8.17% high) and substance abuse are very high, in fact, they are higher in middle school students than in senior school students. This may be because middle school students are more immature and because of this, they cannot cope with the constant change which leads to negative thinking and self-harm. They also have access to social media in which people display the best aspects of their lives. This could lead to insecurity as teenagers may start to wish their lives were like that. Moreover, because they are the younger group, they are more prone to peer pressure and addiction, which explains the high levels of substance abuse. The studies did, however, show that middle school students were more equipped to deal with stress (67.28%) than senior students which suggests that they are less likely to suffer from anxiety and other related issues. Despite this, the fact that middle school students harm themselves more and abuse substances, leads researchers to believe that the training given to the students was not adequate and that they have not been given enough support.

Schools and parents can take several steps in order to prevent psychological issues occurring and helping those that already exist. Anxiety levels can often be reduced through something as simple as meditation as that helps centre the adolescent and stops them from over thinking and panicking. To reduce bullying, schools can come up with stricter consequences for bullies and place more teachers in the corridors (as that is where bullying most often takes place) as these will scare bullies into stopping. If parents are more particular about

social media, body insecurity is likely to come down as the teenagers will no longer be forced to embrace an ideal body-type. The most important course of action, however, is adequate training of both adults and adolescents. If the teenagers are taught how to cope with changes, then the chances of them facing psychological difficulties reduces significantly. Training of teachers, which is provided free of cost through The Happiness Project, is imperative as it sensitizes them and makes them more prepared to help their students through any issues they face. If effective, this training can help with almost any psychological issue, including depression and substance abuse. For example, 7.2% students are isolating themselves and their problems. This is not a good figure and the only way to improve it is to make someone accessible and open to them. Happiness Project could train the teachers on how to act like a mentor and be supportive to the children. Courses of Action can also be suggested, like a 10-minute morning slot every day for a 1 on 1 chat with students personally. This idea has been implemented in one of the schools where research was conducted, and it has been extremely successful as all students now get a time to vent their concerns as the teachers help them in improving it.

Senior School. Similar to middle school, senior students suffered greatly from mood difficulties. 64.3% (51.41% mild and 13.02% high), which is a very high number. This is worrying because the study conducted by Jaycox et al found that depressive symptoms have negative long-term implications that could have serious consequences if not addressed. Cognitive and biological difficulties, such as sleep deprivation and trouble concentrating, also have high rates of occurrence (59.7%). This could be due to other psychological issues including anxiety and depression. Anxiety was prevalent in in 59.92% of the students (44.91% mild and 15.01% high). In senior students, pressure increases as they are expected to do better in academics as it matters more for them and their families also have higher expectations from them to support the family. 36.85% of the students reported that they self-harm in some way, from which 4.47% reported severe levels. Self-harm could be for a variety of reasons that all stem from negative thinking that leads to self-hate. Another issue that concerned researchers was 15.11% were dissatisfied with their looks. This is supported by the research by Shefali Sharma, which found that many teenagers suffer from body insecurities. Again, a range of issues could have led to this like social media and bullying. The study by Malhi, Bharti and Sidhu support this as it found that bullying has several psychosocial impacts that could include every psychological issue this research focuses on.

The suggestions to improve psychological issues for senior students are more or less the same as that for middle school students, however, results suggest that more focus needs to be given to anxiety related remedies. These could include meditation and lessening the workload. The results from the survey also showed that 35.14% students did not receive any training in stress management. If thorough, effective training is conducted, then anxiety levels can definitely be reduced. Additionally, therapy and support groups can be recommended to students suffering from more severe problems. Furthermore, since the most important problem according to the students is 'Exam Anxiety' (Figure 8: 46% students), transforming teachers into mentors, as earlier suggested may be even more effective as they know the best way to cope with such stress, and can adapt their own teaching methods to for their betterment. Other than these, the same suggestions that are being given to middle school students can be used for senior students.

V. LIMITATIONS

The tool adopted and the procedure used had their limitations. Firstly, the questionnaire may have received biased results from students for the following reasons:

- Peer pressure – Other students looking into what they are writing, may influence them to answer dishonestly.
- Taken lightly – Since the entire research was not academically connected or a standardised test many students may have taken it lightly.
- Questions answered without understanding – Many students were reluctant to seek help on what questions mean due to reasons that could again relate to image in front of their peers, this could have resulted in anomaly answers in some questions.
- Teachers remain in class. They walk around looking at students' answers, which could make them put answers that suggest there is no problem due to their presence

Secondly, random sampling was done as the entire school could not be surveyed, and quota sampling would be difficult except the difference of grade. This could have resulted in skewed data, as the sample may not be a valid representation of the entire school.

For future research, it is essential that a fifteen-minute mentoring session is conducted with the students to make them understand the importance of what they are doing. If the stigma behind mental health is attempted to be removed there and then, students may be more supportive, the survey won't be taken lightly, and students won't be afraid to clarify any doubts they may have. Teachers will then also understand and in their absence students can answer more freely.

In the future the likelihood of digitalization should also be looked into as it will help in increasing the scale of the research, however before so, students need to be familiar with technology and schools should have necessary facilities, both which are absent at the moment

VI. CONCLUSION

This helps in concluding that psychological issues are prevalent in teenagers and are impacting every aspect of their lives. It also finds that these issues need to be addressed urgently so that teenagers can lead happy and fulfilling lives and has also provided suggestions that help address them

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