

Adolescent Mental Health Issues - An Iceberg

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WHO defines adolescent as those people between the age of 10-19 years. Globally, approximately 1 in 7 (14.3%) of the adolescents suffer from mental health issues, yet they constitute the submerged portion of an iceberg with many undiagnosed and untreated [1]. India constitutes the largest adolescent population i.e. 20% of the world's 1.2 billion adolescents.

The Global burden of disease (2021) estimated that 14% of adolescents in India experienced a mental disorder; 13.4% of them being boys and 13.9% girls [2].

Adolescence is a vulnerable period when there is transition from childhood to adulthood. This is the age of experimentation when physical, emotional, behavioural and social changes occur including exposure to many hardships of life including poverty, abuse, or violence, that make adolescents vulnerable to mental health issues. Anxiety and depression are very common issues among adolescents which further lead to their poor physical and social health. This becomes a vicious cycle and causes life long disadvantage to the individual, community as well the nation as adolescents are going to be the part of our economically productive age group [3].

Determining factors for mental health issues among adolescents are academics, peer pressure, family pressure, some childhood trauma, increase use of social media leading to behaviour addictions and sometimes cyberbullying. Loss of joint family patterns have made them 'alone'; in many cases where both the parents are working and adolescents in their tender age usually spend most of their time on internet surfing which exposes them both to the so called 'good' and 'bad' stuff. There is no one in the family to answer their questions, so they seek the help of their peers who are also of the same age group. Moreover, some adolescents who are well behaved, sincere and good in academics also get lost in this competitive world where they have a fear of not achieving their goals or not meeting the expectations of their parents. They cannot handle the stress of failure which makes them vulnerable to mental health issues. Easy access to illicit drug has also contributed to mental health issues in adolescence. Even after realisation most of them are reluctant to talk and seek help due to social stigma attached with the drug abuse, which can further lead to many emotional and behavioural issues.

Although there is a limited data on the treatment gap in adolescents, the overall treatment gap for mental disorders in India is around 90% [4]. The question arises how to identify and overcome the barriers of treatment seeking in adolescents. Foremost cause is lack of awareness and strong stigma

surrounding mental health prevent them from seeking treatment. It is said that only one-third of the families (37.5%) of adolescents perceive that their children had any mental health issue [5]. Their erratic behaviour is many times ignored and considered as a part of their growing up issues by the family, thus delaying support and treatment seeking. Due to lack of sharing and fear, problems remain unidentified and untreated and progress to a level when it is difficult to handle.

Last but not the least, there is lack of mental health infrastructure for adolescents. Though Government has started many measures like Mental Health and Normalcy Augmentation System (MANAS) app in 2021 to integrate wellness efforts and provide counselling services, use of telemedicine and video consultations for psychiatric services and Adolescent Friendly Health Clinics (AFHCs) under National health Mission and UNICEF to offer medical advice and counselling services to adolescents; still, we are lagging behind and submerged portion of iceberg is increasing day by day.

More efforts are needed to reach upto the grass root level to identify the problem and stringent IEC activities and behaviour change communication for the adolescents as well as their families. More life skills to be added in the school curriculum so that healthy habits can be inculcated at the earliest in the children for making them healthy and responsible adolescents and then adults.

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