

Review Article

Prevalence and Determinants of Mental Health Disorders Among Indian Adolescents

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A B S T R A C T

Mental health disorders among adolescents constitute a significant and growing public health concern in India. Adolescence, a critical developmental period marked by rapid biological, psychological, and social changes, is often the stage at which many mental health disorders first emerge. This review article examines the prevalence and key determinants of mental health disorders among Indian adolescents, drawing on findings from community-based, school-based, and clinical studies. Available evidence indicates that approximately 10–20% of Indian adolescents experience one or more mental health problems, with anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, behavioral issues, and stress-related conditions being the most commonly reported. The review highlights multiple determinants influencing adolescent mental health, including academic pressure, family environment, socioeconomic status, peer relationships, gender-related factors, exposure to digital media, and sociocultural beliefs surrounding mental illness. Limited access to mental health services, lack of awareness, and persistent stigma further exacerbate the burden of untreated mental health conditions. Protective factors such as supportive family relationships, positive peer support, resilience, and school-based interventions are also discussed. The article emphasizes the need for early identification, integrated mental health services, educational reforms, and community-based awareness programs to address the mental health needs of adolescents in India. Strengthening preventive and promotive mental health strategies is essential for ensuring healthy development and long-term well-being in this vulnerable population.

Keywords: Adolescent Mental Health; Prevalence; Mental Health Disorders; Determinants; Anxiety And Depression; Behavioral Disorders; Academic Stress; Socioeconomic Factors; India

Introduction

Mental health disorders among adolescents represent a growing public health challenge worldwide, and India is no exception. Adolescence, defined by the World Health Organization as the age range of 10 to 19 years, is a critical developmental period marked by rapid biological, psychological, and social transitions. During this phase, individuals develop emotional regulation, social identity, coping skills, and cognitive capacities that shape lifelong mental health trajectories. In India, adolescents constitute nearly one-fifth of the total population, making their mental well-being a matter of national significance.

Despite this, mental health among Indian adolescents has historically received limited attention, overshadowed by concerns related to physical health, education, and economic development. This review article examines the prevalence of mental health disorders among Indian adolescents and explores the key determinants influencing their psychological well-being, including individual, familial, social, cultural, and systemic factors.¹

Conceptual Understanding of Adolescent Mental Health

Mental health is a state of well-being in which individuals realize their abilities, cope with normal stresses of life, work productively, and contribute to their communities. During adolescence, mental health is influenced by ongoing neurodevelopmental changes, hormonal fluctuations, and increasing exposure to environmental stressors. Mental health disorders during this stage often manifest as emotional, behavioral, or cognitive disturbances that interfere with daily functioning.

Common disorders include anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, behavioral disorders, and stress-related conditions. Importantly, many adult mental health disorders have their onset during adolescence, highlighting the importance of early identification and intervention.

Epidemiology and Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders Among Indian Adolescents

Epidemiological studies conducted across India indicate that a significant proportion of adolescents experience mental health problems. Community-based and school-based surveys suggest that the prevalence of mental health disorders among Indian adolescents ranges from 10% to 20%, with variations based on region, methodology, and diagnostic criteria.

Urban studies often report higher prevalence rates compared to rural areas, although underreporting in rural regions may contribute to this discrepancy. Anxiety disorders and depressive symptoms are among the most commonly reported conditions, followed by conduct-related

and adjustment problems. These findings underscore the substantial burden of mental health disorders within this age group.²

Anxiety Disorders Among Adolescents

Anxiety disorders are among the most prevalent mental health conditions affecting Indian adolescents. These disorders are characterized by excessive fear, worry, and apprehension that interfere with academic performance, social interactions, and daily activities. Common forms include generalized anxiety, social anxiety, and examination-related anxiety. Academic pressure, fear of failure, and performance expectations play a significant role in the development of anxiety symptoms. Adolescents may experience restlessness, difficulty concentrating, irritability, and somatic complaints such as headaches or stomach discomfort. Persistent anxiety can impair emotional regulation and increase vulnerability to other mental health problems.³

Depressive Disorders and Emotional Distress

Depression among Indian adolescents is a major concern, with studies indicating rising levels of depressive symptoms in recent years. Depressive disorders are characterized by persistent sadness, loss of interest, low energy, negative self-perception, and difficulties in concentration. In adolescents, depression may also present as irritability, academic decline, and social withdrawal. Academic stress, interpersonal conflicts, family discord, and feelings of inadequacy are common contributing factors. When left unaddressed, depression can significantly impair psychosocial development and quality of life.

Behavioral and Conduct Disorders

Behavioral and conduct disorders constitute another important category of adolescent mental health problems. These disorders involve persistent patterns of disruptive, aggressive, or defiant behavior that violate social norms and rules. In the Indian context, conduct-related issues may manifest as truancy, aggression, substance experimentation, or defiance toward authority figures. Such behaviors are often influenced by family environment, peer relationships, and exposure to adverse experiences. Early behavioral problems, if not addressed, may increase the risk of academic failure and social maladjustment.⁴

Stress-Related and Adjustment Disorders

Stress-related and adjustment disorders are common among Indian adolescents, particularly in response to academic demands, family transitions, or social changes. These conditions arise when individuals experience difficulty coping with identifiable stressors, resulting in emotional distress and functional impairment. Adolescents facing transitions such as changing schools, examination pressure,

or family conflicts may exhibit symptoms including anxiety, sadness, irritability, and behavioral changes. While often transient, prolonged stress exposure can lead to more severe mental health conditions.

Gender Differences in Mental Health Prevalence

Gender differences in adolescent mental health are well-documented in Indian studies. Female adolescents generally report higher levels of internalizing disorders such as anxiety and depression, whereas male adolescents are more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors such as aggression and conduct problems. These differences are influenced by biological factors, socialization patterns, and gender-specific expectations. Cultural norms related to gender roles, restrictions on autonomy, and societal pressures may contribute to increased emotional distress among adolescent girls.⁵

Socioeconomic Determinants of Adolescent Mental Health

Socioeconomic status is a significant determinant of mental health among Indian adolescents. Adolescents from economically disadvantaged backgrounds often face multiple stressors, including financial insecurity, limited educational resources, overcrowded living conditions, and reduced access to healthcare. These stressors can increase vulnerability to mental health disorders. Conversely, adolescents from higher socioeconomic backgrounds may experience stress related to academic competition and high parental expectations. Thus, socioeconomic factors influence mental health through both material deprivation and psychosocial pressures.

Family Environment and Parenting Practices

The family environment plays a central role in shaping adolescent mental health. Parenting styles, family cohesion, communication patterns, and emotional support significantly influence psychological outcomes. Authoritarian or highly controlling parenting styles, excessive expectations, and lack of emotional warmth are associated with increased risk of anxiety and depression. Conversely, supportive parenting characterized by open communication, encouragement, and autonomy fosters resilience and emotional well-being. Family conflict, parental mental illness, and domestic stress further increase adolescents' vulnerability to mental health disorders.⁶

Academic Pressure and School-Related Factors

Academic stress is a major determinant of adolescent mental health in India. High academic expectations, examination-oriented evaluation systems, and intense competition contribute to psychological distress. Adolescents often

face pressure to excel academically to secure future opportunities, leading to chronic stress and fear of failure. School environments that emphasize grades over learning, lack supportive teacher-student relationships, and provide limited counseling services exacerbate mental health challenges. Academic stress frequently coexists with anxiety, depression, and reduced self-esteem.

Peer Relationships and Social Influences

Peer relationships significantly influence adolescent mental health, serving as both protective and risk factors. Positive peer interactions provide emotional support, companionship, and validation, promoting psychological well-being. However, negative peer experiences such as bullying, exclusion, and unhealthy competition can contribute to emotional distress. Social comparison, particularly in academic and social domains, may undermine self-esteem and increase anxiety. The quality of peer relationships is therefore a critical determinant of mental health during adolescence.⁷

Impact of Digital Media and Technology

The increasing use of digital media and technology has introduced new determinants of adolescent mental health in India. While technology provides opportunities for learning and social connection, excessive screen time and social media use have been associated with sleep disturbances, reduced physical activity, and emotional distress. Online social comparison, cyberbullying, and exposure to unrealistic standards may negatively affect self-esteem and mental health. Balanced and mindful use of technology is essential to minimize adverse psychological effects.⁸

Cultural Beliefs and Mental Health Stigma

Cultural beliefs and stigma surrounding mental health significantly influence help-seeking behavior among Indian adolescents. Mental health problems are often misunderstood or minimized, leading to delayed identification and intervention. Adolescents may fear social judgment or parental disapproval if they express emotional distress. Stigma also affects access to care, as families may prioritize academic or physical concerns over psychological well-being. Addressing stigma through awareness and education is essential for improving mental health outcomes.⁹

Access to Mental Health Services

Limited access to mental health services is a major challenge in addressing adolescent mental health in India. Shortage of trained mental health professionals, uneven distribution of services, and lack of school-based counseling contribute to unmet needs. Rural and underserved areas face particular challenges due to infrastructural constraints. Integrating mental health services into primary healthcare and

educational settings can improve accessibility and early intervention.

Protective Factors and Resilience

Despite numerous risk factors, many Indian adolescents demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity. Protective factors include supportive family relationships, positive peer networks, adaptive coping skills, and engagement in extracurricular activities. Emotional intelligence, problem-solving skills, and a sense of purpose further enhance resilience. Strengthening these protective factors through school and community programs can mitigate the impact of stressors on mental health.¹⁰

Policy Initiatives and National Programs

India has initiated several policy measures aimed at improving adolescent mental health, including school health programs and national mental health initiatives. These programs emphasize early identification, awareness, and integration of mental health into existing health and education systems. While these initiatives represent important steps forward, effective implementation, monitoring, and resource allocation remain critical challenges.¹¹

Future Directions and Research Gaps

Despite growing awareness, significant gaps remain in understanding adolescent mental health in India. More longitudinal studies are needed to track mental health trajectories over time and identify causal pathways. Research focusing on culturally sensitive interventions, rural populations, and marginalized groups is particularly important. Strengthening data collection and evaluation can inform evidence-based policies and practices.¹²

Conclusion

Mental health disorders among Indian adolescents are prevalent and influenced by a complex interplay of biological, psychological, social, and cultural determinants. Anxiety, depression, behavioral problems, and stress-related conditions significantly affect adolescents' academic performance, social relationships, and overall quality of life. Factors such as academic pressure, family environment, socioeconomic status, peer relationships, and stigma play critical roles in shaping mental health outcomes.

Addressing adolescent mental health requires a comprehensive, multisectoral approach involving families, schools, healthcare systems, and policymakers. Promoting awareness, reducing stigma, enhancing access to services, and fostering supportive environments are essential for ensuring the psychological well-being and healthy development of India's adolescents.

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