

# THE HINDU EDITORIAL

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### **Getting mental health into the curriculum**

Close to 15 million individuals are battling some form of mental health related illness or other in India

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When one hears the word 'curriculum' in the context of mental health, it might seem bewildering. What could the contents be and how would this be imparted to school students? First, why is it important?

Data show the growing prevalence of mental illnesses, especially among children and adolescents. Close to 15 million individuals are battling some form of mental health related illness or other in India; 10% of all children suffer from some form of mental health issue and more than 50% of these go untreated. Many more are undetected.

Depression is now the single largest illness in the world; suicide is the second leading cause of death among adolescents and young adults; and almost half of all mental illnesses begin by the age of 14. At the same time, the psychosocial stressors experienced by children cannot be ignored either. These include the growing pressure of academics and competitive entrance examinations, and even exposure to media, which seems to invade almost every aspect of our lives. Children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable given the impact on their self-esteem, and a positive body image contributing to overall psychological well-being.

#### **Life-skills training**

Therefore, including such a mental health curriculum ought not to be viewed as increasing the academic burden of subjects being taught. Instead, its aim should be to highlight the need for incorporating life-skills training as an integral aspect of schooling. Some of these life skills could include encouraging them to acquire skills related to gender sensitivity, dealing with bullying and managing aggression, improving emotional intelligence while imbibing skills for emotional regulation, building empathy, training them to be assertive and, making them media literate.

Being mindful of such a curricular inclusion does not necessarily entail an additional number of academic classes or teaching hours. Instead it could involve more experiential and fun-learning techniques which are enjoyable for both teachers as well as students. This serves the dual purpose of equipping young minds with the necessary skills to improve their overall quality of life in the future, as well as building their resilience to deal with the world and its challenges in the years ahead. These practical experiences and learning are what help develop their personality. Therefore, such experiential learning cannot be restricted to textbooks.

Ideally, a mental health curriculum needs to be running in parallel with the existing educational paradigm within schools. Mental health often tends to get neglected when compared to the significance typically attached to general-health awareness (hygiene and sanitation, nutrition and balanced diets, education about infectious and communicable diseases). A point to be reiterated is that similar to physical ailments, mental illness is also rooted in a biological basis, as opposed to mythological beliefs which attribute mental illnesses to the presence of evil spirits, or the like.

## Overcoming stigmatisation

Given the extent of stigmatisation of mental illnesses, a catalyst for change would need to begin at the roots. This is by sensitising the young minds of children as well as adolescents. By incorporating mental health as an integral part of our health curriculum, such a pedagogy, which sensitises young minds about mental health and shapes their attitudes and beliefs, would help seize the future of mental health in the country.

Last, but not the least, the objective of introducing a mental health curriculum is to encourage help-seeking behaviour, especially in connection with mental health. It is through the training of young children and adolescents during their prime years that we can improve their own psychological well-being. The long-term implications of incorporating such a curriculum within schools will contribute to a society which is educated, informed and sensitised towards mental health.

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### THE HINDU VOCABULARY

- Bewildering(adj.)- confusing
- E.g. There is a bewildering variety of software available.
- Imbibe(v.) sth- to absorb sth, especially information
- E.g. He was imbibing skills for emotional regulation.
- Bully(v.)- to frighten or hurt a weaker person सताना, डराना-धमकाना
- E.g. My son is being bullied at school.
- Empathy(n.)- the ability to understand another person's feelings, experience etc.
- E.g. The writer has very imaginative empathy with his subject.
- Entail (v.) sth- involve sth that cannot be avoided
- E.g. The job entails a lot of hard work.
- Paradigm(n.)- a typical example or pattern of sth
- E.g. The war was a paradigm of the destructive side of human nature.
- Hygiene(n.) – स्वच्छता, साफ-सफाई
- E.g. In the interests of hygiene, please wash your hands.

### DOER CLASSES

- In the interest(s) of sth – in order to help or achieve sth
- Stigmatisation(n.)- treatment of sb that makes them feel that they are very bad or unimportant दोषारोपण
- E.g. There is a need to combat the stigmatisation of people with mental disorders.
- Incorporate sth- to include sth so that it forms a part of sth
- E.g. Many of your suggestions have been incorporated in the plan.
- Pedagogy- the study of teaching methods शिक्षाशास्त्र, अध्यापन विज्ञान
- Well-being(n.)- general health & happiness.
- E.g. We try to ensure the well-being of our employees.

