

Contemporary Mental Health Issues among Indian High School Students: Challenges and Protective Factors

¹N. Metilda, ²Dr. K. Vellaichamy

¹Research Scholar, Department of Education, Madurai Kamaraj University,
Madurai-625 021

²Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai-625 021.

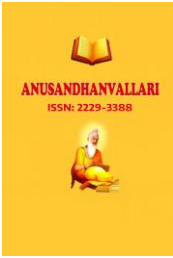
Abstract

Mental health has emerged as one of the most significant public health concerns affecting adolescents worldwide, particularly in low- and middle-income countries such as India. High school students experience a developmental period characterised by rapid biological, psychological, cognitive, emotional, and social changes that increase their susceptibility to mental health challenges. The increasing academic competition, examination pressure, parental expectations, peer influence, digital technology use, cyberbullying, social media exposure, body image dissatisfaction, substance use, sleep disturbances, and emotional instability collectively contribute to psychological distress among adolescents. This review paper critically examines the contemporary mental health landscape of high school students in India by synthesising empirical studies published between 2020 and 2026. It explores the prevalence, determinants, and consequences of common mental health problems, including stress, anxiety, depression, emotional disorders, behavioural problems, and suicidal ideation. The paper further discusses protective factors such as resilience, emotional intelligence, positive school climate, family support, life skills education, mindfulness, and school-based mental health interventions. Special emphasis is placed on preventive strategies aligned with the National Education Policy (2020), the National Mental Health Programme, and the World Health Organization's recommendations for promoting adolescent mental well-being. The review concludes by advocating a collaborative and holistic approach involving schools, parents, teachers, counsellors, healthcare professionals, and policymakers to establish mentally healthy educational environments that foster resilience, emotional competence, academic success, and overall well-being among Indian adolescents.

Keywords: Mental Health, High School Students, Adolescents, Academic Stress, Depression, Anxiety, Resilience, School Mental Health, Digital Well-being, India.

Introduction

Mental health is increasingly recognised as a fundamental component of overall health, educational success, and human development. The World Health Organization defines mental health as a state of well-being in which individuals realise their abilities, effectively cope with everyday stressors, work productively, and contribute meaningfully to society. During adolescence, mental health assumes even greater significance because this developmental period lays the psychological and social foundation for adulthood. Adolescence, generally encompassing the ages of 10 to 19 years, is characterised by remarkable physical growth, neurological development, emotional maturation, identity formation, and expanding social relationships. While these developmental transitions



provide opportunities for personal growth, they simultaneously expose adolescents to heightened psychological vulnerability.

High school students occupy a particularly critical stage within adolescence. They experience increasing academic responsibilities, career planning, competitive examinations, changing peer relationships, family expectations, and rapidly evolving digital environments. These multiple developmental demands frequently interact with biological and environmental factors, creating substantial emotional and psychological stress. Consequently, adolescence has become one of the most vulnerable periods for the onset of mental health disorders, many of which persist into adulthood if left unidentified and untreated.

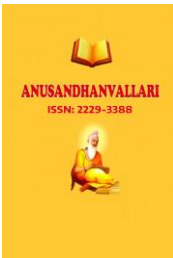
Globally, approximately one in seven adolescents experiences a diagnosable mental health disorder, accounting for a considerable proportion of the global burden of disease among young people. Depression, anxiety disorders, behavioural disorders, eating disorders, substance misuse, self-harm, and suicide represent the most common mental health concerns during adolescence. Alarming, suicide continues to remain one of the leading causes of death among adolescents worldwide, highlighting the urgent necessity for comprehensive preventive interventions and early mental health promotion.

The Indian context presents additional complexities. India possesses the world's largest adolescent population, with more than 250 million individuals belonging to this age group. Rapid urbanisation, technological advancement, changing family structures, intense academic competition, socioeconomic inequalities, and increasing digital engagement have transformed adolescents' educational and social experiences. While educational opportunities have expanded considerably, these changes have simultaneously intensified psychological pressures experienced by high school students.

Academic stress remains one of the most consistently reported mental health challenges among Indian adolescents. Pressure to obtain high examination scores, secure admission into prestigious higher educational institutions, and fulfil parental aspirations frequently contributes to chronic stress, emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. The competitive educational environment often leaves limited opportunities for recreation, creative expression, and emotional development, thereby affecting students' psychological well-being.

Beyond academic demands, contemporary adolescents increasingly confront challenges arising from digital technologies. Social media platforms have transformed communication, learning, and identity formation while simultaneously introducing risks such as cyberbullying, excessive screen time, problematic smartphone use, online harassment, fear of missing out (FOMO), sleep disturbances, and reduced face-to-face social interaction. These digital influences significantly affect adolescents' emotional health and self-esteem, particularly among students who lack adequate digital literacy and emotional regulation skills.

Family remains another influential determinant of adolescent mental health. Although supportive parenting promotes resilience and emotional security, unrealistic parental expectations, ineffective communication, family conflicts, economic hardships, and limited emotional support often increase adolescents' psychological distress. Similarly, peer relationships exert profound influence during high school years. Positive friendships foster belongingness and emotional support, whereas peer rejection, bullying, social comparison, and discrimination may contribute to loneliness, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem.



The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these concerns by disrupting schooling, reducing opportunities for peer interaction, increasing dependence on digital devices, and exposing students to prolonged uncertainty and social isolation. Although schools have largely resumed normal functioning, post-pandemic psychological effects—including learning anxiety, emotional instability, behavioural changes, and reduced social connectedness—continue to influence adolescent mental health. These developments have reinforced the importance of integrating mental health promotion into mainstream educational practices.

Recent policy initiatives, including the **National Education Policy (2020)**, emphasise holistic education, socio-emotional learning, life skills development, inclusive education, and student well-being. Likewise, national programmes addressing school health and adolescent development recognise that educational achievement cannot be separated from psychological health. International organisations similarly advocate comprehensive school mental health programmes involving teachers, school counsellors, parents, healthcare professionals, and community stakeholders.

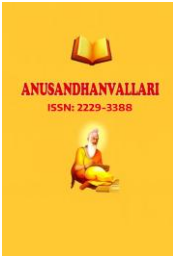
Protective psychological characteristics such as resilience, emotional intelligence, optimism, self-efficacy, social competence, mindfulness, and effective coping strategies have emerged as important buffers against mental health difficulties. Schools that promote supportive learning environments, positive teacher-student relationships, mental health literacy, peer support programmes, and accessible counselling services demonstrate greater success in fostering psychological well-being and preventing emotional disorders among adolescents.

Against this background, the present review critically examines the contemporary mental health landscape among high school students in India by synthesising recent empirical evidence published between 2020 and 2026. The review analyses the prevalence and determinants of major mental health concerns, explores emerging psychosocial and technological risk factors, evaluates protective factors associated with resilience and positive youth development, and discusses evidence-based preventive strategies for promoting adolescent mental well-being. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for educators, researchers, psychologists, school administrators, policymakers, and public health professionals working towards creating mentally healthy educational environments that enable Indian adolescents to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Prevalence and Emerging Mental Health Issues among High School Students in India (2020–2026)

Mental health disorders among adolescents have emerged as one of the foremost public health concerns worldwide, with adolescence representing a critical developmental period during which nearly half of all lifetime mental disorders begin. High school students experience rapid biological maturation, cognitive development, emotional changes, and evolving social relationships that collectively influence their psychological well-being. During this transitional stage, adolescents become increasingly vulnerable to emotional and behavioural problems owing to academic demands, family expectations, peer relationships, technological influences, and socioeconomic challenges. According to recent evidence, depression, anxiety, stress-related disorders, behavioural problems, self-harm, and suicidal ideation constitute the most common mental health concerns among school-going adolescents, necessitating comprehensive preventive and promotive interventions.

India is home to one of the world's largest adolescent populations, making adolescent mental health a national priority. Over the past few years, increasing awareness, improved screening, and growing research have revealed



that psychological distress among high school students is considerably higher than previously recognised. Contemporary evidence indicates that multiple psychosocial, educational, technological, and environmental factors interact to influence adolescent mental health. Academic competition, examination-related anxiety, social comparison through digital media, cyberbullying, problematic smartphone use, family conflicts, inadequate sleep, unhealthy lifestyles, and limited access to psychological support have collectively intensified emotional difficulties among adolescents. Despite these growing concerns, stigma, poor mental health literacy, and limited youth-friendly mental health services continue to prevent many students from seeking professional help. A recent systematic review identified stigma, inadequate awareness, and restricted access to adolescent-friendly services as major barriers to mental health care among Indian adolescents.

Academic Stress

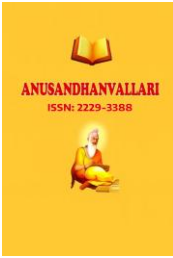
Academic stress continues to be the most consistently reported psychological challenge among Indian high school students. The highly competitive educational system, frequent examinations, extensive homework, coaching culture, parental aspirations, and pressure to secure admission into prestigious higher educational institutions contribute substantially to students' emotional burden. Recent investigations indicate that excessive academic expectations are strongly associated with anxiety, depressive symptoms, burnout, sleep disturbances, and reduced psychological well-being. Students preparing for board examinations and competitive entrance tests often report persistent emotional exhaustion and fear of failure. Emerging international evidence also demonstrates that examination-related stress during adolescence predicts depression and self-harm in later years, emphasising the importance of reducing excessive academic pressure through supportive school environments.

Anxiety and Depression

Anxiety and depression remain the most prevalent internalising disorders among Indian adolescents. Recent systematic reviews indicate that depressive symptoms among school-going adolescents have increased steadily over the past decade, with considerable regional variation across India. Depression adversely affects concentration, motivation, academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and overall quality of life. Similarly, anxiety disorders manifest through excessive worry, fear of examinations, social withdrawal, panic symptoms, and reduced self-confidence. Female students frequently report comparatively higher levels of anxiety and depression owing to gender-specific social pressures, body image concerns, and cultural expectations. Early identification and timely psychological intervention remain essential because untreated anxiety and depression frequently persist into adulthood and increase the risk of self-harm and suicide.

Digital Technology, Social Media, and Cyberbullying

The rapid expansion of digital technology has fundamentally transformed adolescents' educational and social experiences. Smartphones, social networking platforms, online gaming, and digital communication provide numerous educational opportunities while simultaneously exposing students to several psychological risks. Excessive screen time has been associated with sleep disturbances, poor emotional regulation, reduced physical activity, social isolation, and heightened symptoms of anxiety and depression. Cyberbullying has emerged as one of the most serious digital threats affecting adolescent mental health. Victims frequently experience fear, humiliation, loneliness, low self-esteem, depression, and suicidal ideation. Continuous social comparison on digital platforms



also contributes to dissatisfaction with personal appearance, fear of missing out (FOMO), and diminished psychological well-being. Consequently, digital literacy education, responsible technology use, and cyber safety programmes have become indispensable components of school mental health initiatives.

Parental Expectations and Family Environment

Family remains the primary social institution influencing adolescents' emotional development. Supportive parenting characterised by warmth, open communication, and emotional encouragement promotes resilience and psychological well-being. Conversely, unrealistic parental expectations, authoritarian parenting styles, family conflicts, financial stress, and limited emotional support significantly increase adolescents' vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and academic stress. Contemporary evidence suggests that parental involvement positively influences adolescents' mental health only when accompanied by emotional understanding rather than excessive performance pressure. Creating healthy family communication and encouraging realistic educational expectations are therefore essential preventive strategies.

Peer Relationships and School Climate

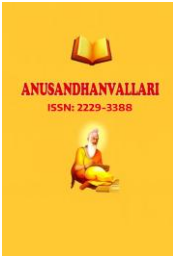
Peer acceptance represents an important developmental need during adolescence. Positive friendships foster emotional security, belongingness, social competence, and resilience. However, peer rejection, bullying, discrimination, social exclusion, and unhealthy academic competition contribute substantially to emotional distress. Similarly, school climate plays an important role in shaping students' psychological well-being. Schools characterised by supportive teacher-student relationships, inclusive classroom environments, counselling services, and positive behavioural practices demonstrate lower prevalence of emotional and behavioural problems. Conversely, unsafe school environments increase psychological distress and reduce academic engagement. Recent school mental health reviews consistently recommend strengthening school-based psychological interventions to improve emotional well-being among adolescents.

Body Image and Self-Esteem

Body image concerns have become increasingly common among Indian adolescents owing to social media exposure, unrealistic beauty standards, and peer comparison. Adolescents dissatisfied with their physical appearance frequently experience low self-esteem, anxiety, depressive symptoms, eating disturbances, and social withdrawal. Female students generally report greater body dissatisfaction than males; however, increasing concerns regarding muscularity and appearance are also being observed among boys. School-based health education, media literacy, and positive body image programmes are increasingly recognised as effective approaches for preventing body dissatisfaction and promoting psychological well-being.

Substance Use and Risk Behaviours

Substance use during adolescence remains an emerging public health challenge in India. Tobacco, alcohol, vaping products, and other psychoactive substances are frequently initiated during secondary school years owing to curiosity, peer influence, academic stress, and inadequate parental supervision. Recent evidence indicates that



approximately one-fifth of Indian adolescents are at moderate to high risk for alcohol or tobacco use, with marked regional differences. Substance use not only impairs physical health but also increases the likelihood of depression, anxiety, behavioural disorders, poor academic achievement, and school dropout. School-based awareness programmes, parental monitoring, life skills education, and counselling services therefore remain essential components of adolescent mental health promotion.

Sleep Disturbances and Lifestyle Factors

Healthy sleep is fundamental to adolescent cognitive functioning and emotional regulation. However, increasing academic workload, prolonged screen exposure, social media use, and irregular daily routines have significantly reduced sleep duration among high school students. Sleep deprivation has been associated with poor concentration, emotional instability, anxiety, depressive symptoms, reduced academic performance, and behavioural difficulties. Physical inactivity and unhealthy dietary practices further compound these psychological challenges. Consequently, promoting healthy lifestyle behaviours, regular physical exercise, adequate sleep, and balanced nutrition has become an integral aspect of school mental health promotion.

Suicide Risk and Help-Seeking Behaviour

Suicide continues to represent one of the most serious consequences of untreated adolescent mental health disorders. Depression, anxiety, academic failure, family conflict, bullying, substance use, and social isolation collectively increase suicidal ideation among adolescents. Despite growing awareness, many Indian students remain reluctant to seek professional psychological support because of stigma, fear of discrimination, lack of mental health literacy, and inadequate availability of adolescent-friendly mental health services. Recent systematic reviews consistently identify stigma and poor accessibility as major barriers preventing timely intervention. Strengthening school counselling services, promoting mental health awareness, reducing stigma, and improving accessibility to psychological care are therefore essential priorities for safeguarding adolescent well-being.

Summary

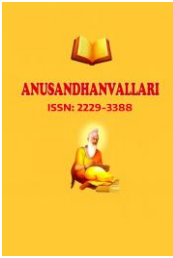
The contemporary evidence clearly demonstrates that mental health among Indian high school students is influenced by a complex interaction of academic, psychological, familial, social, technological, and environmental factors. Academic stress, anxiety, depression, cyberbullying, social media use, parental expectations, body image concerns, substance use, inadequate sleep, and poor help-seeking behaviour collectively contribute to the increasing burden of adolescent mental health problems. At the same time, supportive family environments, positive school climate, resilience, mental health literacy, accessible counselling services, and evidence-based school interventions have emerged as important protective factors. These findings reinforce the need for comprehensive, multidisciplinary, and school-centred approaches to promote adolescent mental well-being and prevent long-term psychological difficulties.

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