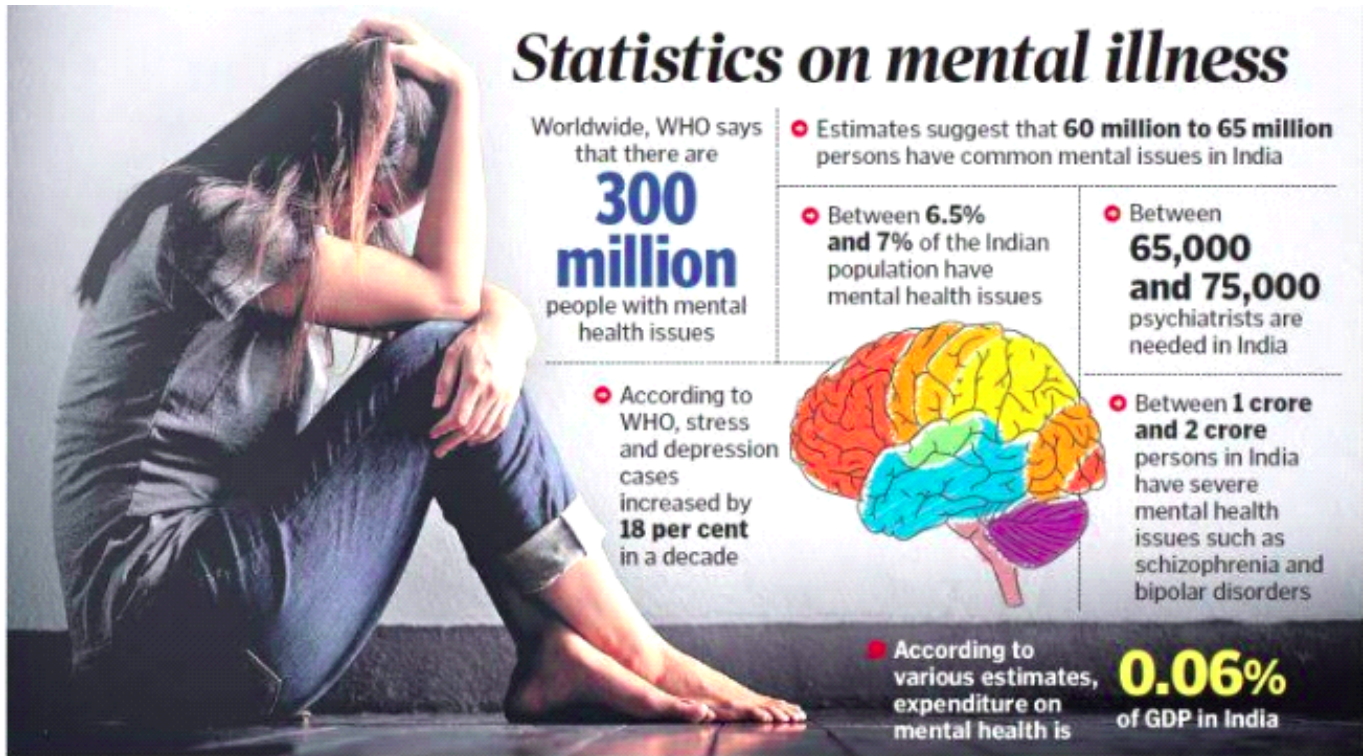# *Mental health of students*

30 August, 2024 | GS-I |

The mental health of students has become a major concern in India, with alarming rates of mental health issues and suicides, particularly among medical students. The National Task Force for Mental Health and Wellbeing of Medical Students recently submitted its report, highlighting the prevalence of depression and suicidal thoughts among students.

Key Findings:

- *High prevalence of mental health issues:*
- *27.8% of undergraduate medical students reported mental health problems.*
- *31.3% of postgraduate students reported suicidal thoughts.*
- *General student population:*
- *A study by NIMHANS found that 23% of school children in India suffer from mental health problems.*
- *The National Mental Health Survey (2015-2016) reported a 7% prevalence of psychiatric disorders among 13-17-year-olds.*
- *A study by SCARF in Chennai found over 30% of students suffer from anxiety and depression.*

Factors Contributing to Mental Health Problems Among Students:

- *Immediate Triggers:*
- *Academic pressure, failing exams, financial loss, or public humiliation often lead to mental health crises.*
- *Social media can disrupt sleep, contribute to depression, and lower academic performance.*
- *Social isolation:*
- *Students may feel socially isolated due to family dynamics, gender identity issues, or academic pressures.*
- *High expectations from parents, especially in competitive environments like Kota (known for coaching centers), can exacerbate mental health problems.*
- *Biological Factors:*
- *Genetic predispositions or family history of mental illness can increase risk.*
- *Personality traits like impulsivity and major physical illnesses also elevate the risk of mental health problems.*
- *Stigmatization:*
- *Stigma around mental health prevents early intervention, leading to worsening of conditions over time.*

Statistics on mental illness

Worldwide, WHO says that there are **300 million** people with mental health issues

Estimates suggest that **60 million to 65 million** persons have common mental issues in India

Between **6.5% and 7%** of the Indian population have mental health issues

Between **65,000 and 75,000** psychiatrists are needed in India

According to WHO, stress and depression cases increased by **18 per cent** in a decade

Between **1 crore and 2 crore** persons in India have severe mental health issues such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorders

According to various estimates, expenditure on mental health is **0.06%** of GDP in India

Issues in Handling Mental Health in India:

- *Fragmented mental healthcare due to poor integration with primary healthcare services.*
- *Geographical disparities, particularly in rural areas, where mental health services are lacking.*
- *Shortage of mental health professionals: India has only 0.75 psychiatrists per lakh population (Economic Survey 2023-24).*
- *Lack of awareness and stigma result in social isolation and reluctance to seek help.*

Steps Taken by the Government to Address Mental Health Issues:

- *Constitutional Provision:*
- *The Supreme Court of India has interpreted healthcare as a fundamental right under Article 21 of the Constitution, which includes the right to mental health. This establishes a legal foundation for mental health services.*
- *National Mental Health Program (NMHP):*
- *Launched in 1982 to tackle the burden of mental disorders and address the shortage of mental health professionals, the NMHP has been a key initiative.*
- *In 2003, the program was re-strategized to modernize State Mental Hospitals and upgrade the Psychiatric Wings of Medical Colleges and General Hospitals.*
- *Mental Healthcare Act, 2017:*
- *This act ensures access to mental healthcare services provided or funded by the government for every affected person.*

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- *It also reduces the scope for criminalizing suicide attempts under Section 309 of the IPC and treats such cases with a focus on mental health treatment rather than punishment.*
- *Kiran Helpline:*
- *Launched by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment in 2020, the Kiran Helpline (a 24/7 toll-free number) provides support for individuals facing anxiety, stress, depression, suicidal thoughts, and other mental health issues. It is aimed at providing immediate psychological assistance.*

Way Forward:

- *Regular Training Programs:*
- *Train school and college faculty to recognize mental health issues and support at-risk students.*
- *Counseling Services:*
- *Implement a 24/7 support system in educational institutions, leveraging the TeleMANAS initiative (toll-free number 14416).*
- *Early Detection and Treatment:*
- *Sensitize teachers and front-line health workers to identify early signs of mental health issues in students.*
- *Policy Reforms:*
- *Allocate resources and integrate mental health care into primary healthcare systems, addressing its biological, psychological, and social determinants.*
- *Digital Detox Programs:*
- *Encourage a balance between digital use and physical exercise, hobbies, and social interactions to reduce the negative impact of excessive screen time.*
- *Promoting Self-Awareness:*
- *Students should practice mindfulness, maintain healthy sleep patterns, engage in regular exercise, and prioritize mental well-being.*

Conclusion:

Addressing the mental health crisis among students requires a multifaceted approach involving regular mental health support, reducing stigma, promoting early detection, and reforming policies. By prioritizing student mental health, we can mitigate issues like depression, anxiety, and suicide, helping students lead healthier and more productive lives.