

# Mental health: How can the youth help themselves?



India is home to more than 250 million young people in the age group of 15–24 years, or one-fifth of the global population of young people including ‘older adolescents’ aged 15–19 years and ‘young adults’ aged 19–24 years. Young people go through rapid transitions biologically, psychologically, as well as socially. With the onset of puberty and rapid brain development, young people navigate a huge transition from being a child to an adult with an independent identity and socioeconomic autonomy.

Young people face considerable stress in their daily lives. These stresses are related to academics - particularly pressure to perform well in exams and secure admission to professional courses; managing interpersonal relationships with parents, peers, as well as romantic/sexual relationships; peer pressure for but not limited to substance use; exposure to violence and conflicts including in families and neighborhood; poverty, and more. When these stresses are sustained and seem to overpower young people’s capacity to cope, it increases their vulnerability to mental health conditions. Young people while experiencing a range of distressing emotions often may not find it easy to reach out for help or find a trusted adult who can provide support. This vulnerability can even lead to devastating consequences, such as substance use and suicide.

According to National Mental Health Survey 2015-2016, 7.3 percent adolescents and 10.6 percent young adults in India suffer from mental health problems that need psychological support and treatment. Urban metros have a two-to-three-fold higher prevalence. Deaths by suicide and self-harm among young people has increased alarmingly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. A UNICEF report published in 2021 highlighted that with one in every seven young people in India feeling depressed or having little interest in doing things, the number of young people requiring support may be even higher. In addition to social stigma, low levels of awareness, poor living conditions, lack of support from family and peers impede timely and appropriate help-seeking in India.

With support from Fondation Botnar, PATH recently completed a multi-pronged landscape analysis titled Stakeholder-led Advancement of Mental Health of Young People (SAMYP), entailing an environmental scan of rapidly evolving multisectoral policies, programs, and services addressing the mental health needs of young Indians aged 15–24 years.



Primary focus on mental health of young people (15-24 years) living in low-income urban communities in India



Stakeholders, policies, public and private sector initiatives, and legislations review and analyses of enablers and challenges



Comprehensive needs assessment, identification of enablers and barriers for digital mental health interventions



Technical Advisory Group, Youth Advisory Groups including young people with lived experience of mental health problems



Employ human-centered design principles and stakeholder-led co-creation process for developing interventions



Three-fourth of all mental health conditions (disorders that affect mood, thinking, and behavior) manifesting throughout a lifetime begin by the mid-twenties. It is important to address youth mental health and well-being systematically so that individuals requiring support and care are identified early, appropriately, adequately, and efficiently.

This note focuses on and provides insight into the various ways in which young people can take care and manage their mental health in everyday lives.

### Talking about mental health

Young individuals are often unable to talk about their emotions and feelings openly, especially in a country such as India where the stigma around mental health is still very fierce. Lack of open and safe conversations can lead to bottled up feelings, eventually transcending into poor mental health or in some cases, serious mental health conditions.

Youth Advisors associated with PATH revealed that young people often felt that there was a lack of safe spaces to open-up and talk about their psychosocial and emotional concerns without the fear of being judged. This may also be related to not being able to find a trusted adult or having feelings vulnerability or shame and social stigma associated with mental health.

**“We don’t get a platform where we can share without feeling judged. Everyone is different and their needs for support are different. Families too, often do not understand us.” Youth Advisor, SAMYP**

### Way forward

One way to approach this challenge is to start a conversation about thoughts and feelings with a trusted adult such as a parent, teacher, or peer. It does not necessarily have to be a heavy conversation on personal problems to begin with, but could be about general emotions, state of mind, and ways of coping. Normalizing these conversations can generate awareness, create demand, and mobilize appropriate solutions.

Furthermore, young people need to become a catalyst of social change and be given access to platforms to share, discuss, and mobilize the solutions on their mental health needs with policymakers and program implementers. To advance their interests, young people can also participate in social entrepreneurship challenges and youth innovation hubs for co-creation, ideation, and innovative thinking, which will contribute to the development of interventions relevant for the youth.

### Self-care as an attitude and way of life

Often, self-care is understood as pampering oneself and doing pleasurable activities like listening to music, dancing, and eating good food. While these activities which give pleasure are certainly helpful, self-care pertains to many other behaviors that are also related to taking care of one’s mind and body and improving one’s capacities to deal with stressors effectively. It also involves understanding of one’s feelings, thoughts, and behaviors through self-reflection, creating boundaries, taking rest, and more. Self-care as a concept needs to be inculcated as a part of daily living and thinking.



## Way forward

Young individuals can start reflecting on their daily lives and identifying easily doable and sustainable ways to include self-care for mental health, such as:

Programs that are based on psychology principles such as cognitive behavior therapy and positive psychology can also be developed to enhance reflections on the working of thoughts – feelings and behaviors in simple terms.

**“Some of the basic psychotherapy concepts can be simplified and taught to develop a more aware understanding of one’s thoughts, feelings, and actions.” Psychiatrist and Technical Advisor, SAMYP**

Self-care also involves looking for information and developing skills to manage difficult feelings related to stress, anxiety, low mood; identifying and responding to specific trigger points; preventing substance use and addiction; reducing distraction; increasing concentration and focus on immediate tasks; dealing with loneliness; and improving one’s overall quality of life.

## Seeking help

Peers and families are major sources of support for emotional problems and daily life stresses. As a person navigates through daily life challenges, the requirement of support varies largely from person to person but also for the same person from time to time. A significant proportion of young people will need professional help such as psychologists and psychiatrists. Help-seeking from professionals often begins with visiting family physicians or doctors among known friends and relatives. But talking to peers and families regarding one’s mental health condition and finding a right professional to support may not be very simple.

**“I felt so helpless when my feelings and mental health problems were invalidated by treating physicians, citing that they are not the problems of young age.” Youth Advisor, SAMYP**

## Key imperatives from SAMYP SPOTLIGHT report

- There exists a high treatment gap and limited data on treatment coverage among adolescents and young adults specifically, posing a huge challenge for India.
- There is a need to reimagine the scope of current mental healthcare programs and provide a spotlight on mental well-being in addition to mental disorders or illnesses.
- Parents, teachers, healthcare workers, and policies need to be supported to enable creation of safe spaces to promote safe and frank discussions on mental health with young people in their care.
- There are systemic barriers such as poor implementation of policies and acts, less publicization of mental health unlike other competent health programs, and minimal and un-sustained efforts to address the dearth of skilled workforce and sustained funding.
- Stakeholder actions are fragmented with lack of national- and state-level platforms to convene dialogue between key stakeholders, including youth engagement. A collective push leveraging innovative solutions is warranted to foster these learnings into tangible actions.

The Spotlight report can be accessed at this link: <https://www.path.org/resources/spotlight-youth-mental-health-in-india/>



Click on image to read more

## Way forward

A big reason for not seeking help for mental health conditions is stigma, which can be experienced or perceived, and is often linked to prejudices held by society regarding mental health conditions and people living with such conditions. These prejudices may also be internalized by young people.

**“The first thing we should think about is that the feeling we are having about ourselves needs acceptance, we need to recognize what exactly we are feeling and then decide from whom to seek help.”**

## Youth Advisor, SAMYP

Young people need to become more informed and aware of mental health conditions commonly impacting young people, their treatability and the options available for treatment like medication and therapy which can be accessed online as well – such as helplines, face-to-face virtual therapy, chat, or email-based therapy. Depending on their comfort level and willingness to stay anonymous, young people can choose whichever option is suitable for them. While psychotherapy can be costly, many therapists now have a sliding scale for payment, which can be helpful for those who find it difficult to afford therapy.

Another important point to be kept in mind is understanding the qualifications and experience of a mental health professional. With a plethora of information on the internet, and almost everyone on social media claiming to be a therapist, it is crucial that the youth is guided with the correct information.

## Priorities

- Young individuals should start inculcating mental health in their everyday conversations. More conversations can lead to lower stigmatization.
- There is a need to understand the concept of self-care deeply and start seeing it as a lifestyle change or practice, that needs to be carried out regularly.
- Becoming aware of the different types of professional help options available is crucial.

