



RISING NUMBER AND SEVERITY OF MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: *Policy Analysis*

Abstract

Mental well-being of students is more significant than their grades, and just as substantial as their physical well-being. Childhood and adolescence (age 14 to 25) are critical stages of life for well-being and mental health. The development of core emotional and cognitive skills, including self-control, learning and social interaction, can be destroyed by negative experiences. Recently, it was found that three college students, living in different areas of Chitral, committed suicide on the same day over their intermediate (Higher Secondary School) examination results 2018. Although the reason for their suicide was allegedly over poor examination result, this alarming trend of mental health status of youth made it crucial to analyze the issue in detail. In this context, a survey was conducted in this study to analyze the significance of the mental health for policy actors with the help of pictures while the people of focus group were given no prior information about the topic of the research. Furthermore, a set of effective policy alternatives, using the Policy Delphi rankings based on certain assessment criteria such as effectiveness, cost, time, acceptability, desirability and implementation, were proposed for the mental wellbeing of students within the context of Pakistan.

Key findings

The analysis of the pictures illustrated the importance of urgency to cater to the increasing mental health problems in students and its harsh implications. Furthermore, the disturbance or destruction in mental capital or mental well-being in childhood and adolescence were found to have happened due to certain key factors including insecure home life, unsupportive parenting, bullying at school and negative learning environment in universities. In addition to that, culturally constructed myth of supernatural causes, public stigma attached to mental health care, unavailability of child mental health professionals, mass media using hyperbolic and cynical language, invisibility of the mental health symptoms due to the lack of awareness, and substance abuse as one of the co-occurring disorders of mental health issues, were further found to be deterring the care and treatment of psychiatric patients. Besides this, the findings identified certain policy actors that could influence the policy process including government bureaucrats, parents of both healthy and mentally ill children, educational institutes, both effected and effecting students, NGOs, international Institutes, mental health professionals, and child psychologists. Although around twenty million children in Pakistan are suffering from mental health and need to be treated properly, the government was found to be ignoring the rising need for mental health policy and the implementation of the currently available ordinance. In addition to that, the education system promoting unhealthy completion among students, pressure on students from society and parents for grades, disapproval on the existence of common mental health disorders, lack of mental health indicators, absence of clinical skills and knowledge to identify and record mental illness and low utilization of mental health care facilities by students, have further worsened the situation. Therefore, the study proposed significant policy alternatives to deal with the mental health problems of university going students which include making it obligatory for universities to have a panel of psychologists, awareness through media campaigns and seminars, change in education system, increasing the number of psychologists, and no action policy. However, analyzing the Delphi responses, it was evident that the desirability of goal objective of the policy should be prevention as well as treatment. Therefore, the short-term outcome of the alternatives would be to make psychologists available for students on campus and to increase the awareness among policy actors to reduce the number and severity of the mental health issues among students and for the treatment of all the effected ones. Whereas the long-term impact would be making education institutes better for the mental wellbeing of the students.

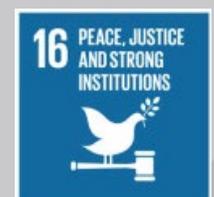
Implications

The study suggests that all Higher Education Commission (HEC) registered universities, both public and private, should have a Psychology Care Center on campus with full-time qualified psychologists for each batch in order to focus the preventive resources on high-risk students without breaching their confidentiality. Disciplinary committees should be held in case of any bullying and/or harassment cases. Similarly, the universities should have at least four psychologists in the counselling department, along with career and job counsellors. On a Government and Federal level, there can be a separate budget for mental health. The government should provide scholarships to people pursuing adolescent psychology and research. The government should also open separate psychology universities in major cities of Pakistan and the students who graduate from there could get jobs created by the state, private institutions and non-profit organizations. Furthermore, National Community Awareness Programs should be held at universities by the Ministry of Health and NGOs to transmit mental health information and to increase the interchange of experience and knowledge on mental health among parents, teachers and students. Similarly, awareness media campaigns in the form of advertisements starring the heroes and ideals of society should be aired on television and online social media forums in order to recognize the importance of mental health and potential risk factors for students and to reduce stigmas. Moreover, there is a need to encourage universities to develop curriculum focused on mental health and courses that could promote mental wellness and teach students about self-management. Universities should help students develop the ability and skills to make more informed and wiser choices about their careers and the use of social media. They should train students to be resilient and prepare them to handle exam pressure. Assessment criteria should also include other factors like academic background, work ethic, and capacity and capability without being partial. Similarly, they should train teachers to support students and regulate the behavior of teachers with the help of evaluation surveys anonymously filled by students in detail every month. Furthermore, vocational trainings and extracurricular activities should be encouraged in universities, whereas, rote learning and cramming should be discouraged. In addition to that, promotion of socio-emotional learning and life-skills training in universities, early diagnose and treatment of mental health or behavioral problems, and prevention of suicide and self-harm will contribute to the universal prevention of mental health issues. However, in Pakistan, it is necessary to have a system to gather or manage data related to mental health of students that could further help policy makers in the development and implementation of effective policies in this respect.

Citation

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SDGs



Keywords

Mental Health
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Education System
Stress
Mental Health Problems
Adolescence
Self-Management
Bullying

Harassment
Mental Health Care
Mental Health Professionals
Awareness
Educational Institutes
NGOs, Psychologists
Mental Health Disorders
Prevention
Treatment
Behavioral Problems



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