Proceedings of the National Conference on Mental Wellbeing
Navigating Stress from Classroom to Workplace

10th December 2024, Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi

A National Conference on the Rights of Health and Mental Health, on the theme '**Mental Wellbeing: Navigating Stress from Classroom to Workplace' was** organized by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), India, at Vigyan Bhawan on 10th December 2024. The conference focused on three agendas, namely stress among children and adolescents; mental health challenges concerning youth in institutions of higher learning; and stress and burnout at workplaces. The Conference aimed to deepen the understanding of mental health issues by bringing together a diverse range of stakeholders, including policymakers, industry leaders, and experts, to build a comprehensive view of the situation, and to generate concrete, data-driven

recommendations that can be shared with relevant stakeholders, addressing both immediate concerns and long-term solutions. The list of participants is **annexed**.

The inaugural session began with welcome remarks by **Shri Devendra Kumar Nim**, Joint Secretary of the NHRC, who underscored the importance of mental well-being as an essential component of human rights. He emphasized the urgent need to address the growing societal concern over the impact of stress on mental health across various age groups. Shri Nim highlighted the significance of the conference, which aims to explore the mental health challenges faced by children and adolescents, the unique issues encountered by youth in higher learning institutions, and the pervasive stress and burnout experienced in workplaces.

Quoting His Holiness the Dalai Lama, he aptly remarked, "It is vital that when educating our children's brains, we do not neglect to educate their hearts." This powerful statement encapsulates the holistic approach required to nurture both mental and emotional well-being. He also drew everyone's attention to the human rights issues pertaining to doctors, which may be related to their poor living and working circumstances, physical and biological risks in the workplace, psycho-social pressures, etc. A lack of medical personnel in public health institutions is directly related to the heavy workload faced by

frontline doctors. Frontline doctors, especially junior doctors struggle with heavy workloads,

erratic work schedules, lone women doctor postings in distant buildings/ departments, unreliable pay schedules, lack of necessary facilities, like proper washrooms, especially women restrooms, and other professional stressors.

Shri Nim stressed that mental health is not merely an individual concern but a societal issue that demands collective action. He further noted that through various meetings, seminars, and conferences, the Commission is working toward comprehensively addressing mental health challenges. Mental well-being, he concluded, is in alignment with the Commission's broader mission of creating a society where no one is left behind.

Shri Bharat Lal, Secretary General of the National Human Rights Commission, commenced his address by highlighting the comprehensive initiative undertaken by the Commission last year, focusing on mental health institutions across the country. This included a National Conference and the release of the report on the *Status of Implementation of the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017*. Building on this effort, the Commission has shifted its attention to various sectors and the unique mental health challenges they face, as exemplified in the current conference, which focuses on the mental well-being of school children, adolescents, and the challenges faced by youth in professional institutions, coaching centres, and workplaces.

He added that the Commission has also recognized the mental health issues in workplaces, particularly in the private sector, gig economy, and the challenges faced by workers concerning their dignity and respect. Furthermore, significant attention has been given to the safety and security of women in workplaces and public spaces. The NHRC's advisory on mental health emphasizes the urgent need for the implementation of existing laws and policies, including the Mental Healthcare Act of 2017, as well as improvements in infrastructure, human resources, outreach and community services, rehabilitation of recovered patients, state-provided services, and mass awareness and sensitization. Corroborating these challenges with significant statistics, Shri Lal pointed out that approximately 1.7 lakh people die by suicide every year in India, with 41% of these individuals being under the age of 30. Among the age group of 15-24 years, suicide rates are particularly high. The data also reveals that women and the elderly are disproportionately affected by mental health issues, which has far-reaching implications for society.

He further mentioned that the Commission is committed to identifying the specific mental health challenges faced by various segments of society and developing targeted action plans in collaboration with key stakeholders, including State Human Rights Commissions, Special Rapporteurs, Special Monitors, academicians, mental health professionals, mental health institutions, NGOs, and human rights defenders. Shri Bharat Lal emphasized the critical importance of taking proactive measures to address these concerns and prevent the increasing rates of burnout and suicide among students and young people.

Dr. V. K. Paul, Member, NITI Aayog, in his address, emphasized that health is a fundamental human right, and by extension, mental health is also a human right. He commended the NHRC for its efforts over the past two years, noting that these initiatives have sparked important discussions

within the government, potentially leading to a new mental health paradigm and mission for the nation.

Dr. Paul referred to a recent survey conducted by NCERT, which involved over four lakh school students. The survey revealed concerning statistics: 81% of students experienced anxiety related to studies and examinations, 43% reported frequent mood swings, and many students expressed concerns about their attachment to mobile phones and social media. Additionally, the survey highlighted the issue of inadequate sleep, which has a profound impact on both physical and mental health. Further, a study conducted on students in higher learning institutions showed that 19% of them had contemplated suicide, 7% had attempted it, and 34% showed signs and symptoms of depression. In a report published in *India Today*, it was highlighted that 60% of professionals in the workforce experience mental health challenges, with the problem being even more pronounced among younger professionals, especially those aged 21 to 30 years.

The size of this issue is vast, and Dr. Paul stressed the urgent need for a societal response. He called it an emergency that affects every citizen of the country, urging all to collaborate in addressing this critical issue. He noted that addressing mental health is not just about immediate concerns but has long-term implications for India's journey toward 2047. To build a positive society, Dr. Paul emphasized the need to create robust mental health systems, environments, and ecosystems within all institutions. Developing strategies and implementing them to foster a culture of mental well-being is vital. However, he acknowledged that creating a comprehensive, holistic mental health paradigm is still a work in progress. There is also a pressing need to develop metrics to measure positivity and ensure that every individual has access to the healthcare necessary to tackle these challenges.

In her inaugural address, **Smt. Vijaya Bharati Sayani,** Hon'ble Acting Chairperson, NHRC emphasized the growing urgency of addressing mental health challenges, which are no longer silent concerns but require collective action and attention. She acknowledged the various pressures faced by individuals, particularly students and employees, due to the demands of education, career transitions, and professional environments. She highlighted that mental health issues affect everyone differently, but their pervasive nature binds society in the need for solutions and support.

Smt. Sayani also referenced India's rich historical context in recognizing the importance of mental health, citing ancient teachings from the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita, which emphasized mental discipline and self-awareness as key to achieving peace. She elaborated on the stresses faced by students in educational institutions, including academic pressures, social comparisons, and the challenges posed by technology. Additionally, she discussed the challenges young professionals face as they transition into the workforce, often encountering uncertainty, job pressures, and the complexities of balancing personal and

professional lives. In the workplace, she noted that while some progress has been made, organizations still struggle to create supportive environments for employee well-being. She concluded her speech by urging a multifaceted approach to addressing mental health, including the incorporation of mental health education in schools, a shift in workplace cultures, and greater investment in mental health infrastructure by governments. She stressed the importance of collective responsibility, encouraging individuals, families, and communities to prioritize mental health and create supportive environments for all.

Session – I: Stress among children and adolescents

The session was chaired by Dr. V. K. Paul, Member, NITI Aayog and co-chaired by Dr. Rajesh Sagar, Prof. of Psychiatry, AIIMS, New Delhi. The panelists included, Shri Rahul Singh, Chairman, CBSE;

Shri Subodh Kumar Singh, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Steel and former DG-National Testing Agency; Shri Anandrao Patil, Additional Secretary, PMPY & Digital Education; Dr. Geeta Malhotra, Country Director, READ India; Dr. Nand Kumar, Prof. of Psychiatry, AIIMS, New Delhi; Dr. Charu Sharma, Principal, Dr. Rajendra Prasad Kendriya Vidyalaya, Presidents State, New Delhi; and Ms. Vijayalakshmi Arora, Child Protection Specialist, UNICEF.

The session focused on the critical importance of addressing mental health issues among children and adolescents in India, particularly within the school environment. With a significant portion of the population enrolled in schools, this age group, especially between 11 and 13 years, is at a crucial stage of development, both physically and emotionally. It is also the period when many mental health disorders begin to manifest, making it essential to prioritize mental well-being during these formative years. The session emphasized that the stress faced by adolescents is not solely academic but is also deeply influenced by societal pressures, family dynamics, and peer relationships.

Key issues highlighted include the immense academic stress experienced by students, driven by high expectations from parents and educational institutions. This stress is compounded by societal

pressures, such as bullying, peer competition, and the negative effects of social media. Family expectations and conflicts, especially in urban settings, contribute significantly to the mental health challenges faced by adolescents. Additionally, concerns about student suicides, particularly in coaching-heavy cities like Kota, were raised, with factors such as fear of failure, excessive

parental pressure, and a lack of emotional support identified as contributing factors. The commercialization of coaching centers was also noted as a critical issue, leading to a stressful, competitive environment that often disregards students' emotional well-being.

The session presented several initiatives to address these challenges. For example, the CBSE has introduced curriculum adjustments, such as offering subjects at two levels of difficulty, and mandated the presence of counselors in schools to support students' mental and emotional health. The '*Manodarpan*' initiative and the *National Education Policy (NEP)* were also highlighted as steps towards integrating mental health support within the educational system. However, the session pointed out a significant gap, as only a small percentage of schools have full-time wellness

teachers, limiting the effectiveness of mental health initiatives. The National Testing Agency (NTA) has also taken steps to alleviate stress by reducing the syllabus for competitive exams and making exams more accessible, including offering them in regional languages and providing free mock tests for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Other key suggestions included enhancing parental involvement in managing children's stress, promoting open communication between parents and children, and creating a supportive environment at home and in schools. The importance of teachers as emotional support figures was emphasized, with recommendations for better training to identify stress signs in students. Moreover, there was a strong call for the integration of mental health education within school curricula to equip students with the skills to manage stress, build resilience, and foster overall well-being.

Session - II: Mental Health Challenges Concerning Youth in Institutions of Higher Learning

The session was chaired by Smt. Preeti Sudan, Chairman, UPSC. The panelists included Dr. B.N. Gangadhar, Chairperson, National Medical Commission; Dr. M.C. Mishra, Emeritus Professor, Former Director, AIIMS; Dr. Randeep Guleria, Chairman, Internal Medicine, Medanta, Gurugram; and Dr. Meet Ghonia, National Secretary, Federation of Resident Doctors' Association.

The session highlighted the growing mental health challenges faced by students, particularly in higher educational institutions, and emphasized the importance of creating a supportive and healthy environment. Key issues discussed included the significant stress students face due to academic pressures, social isolation, substance abuse, and challenges such as adjusting to new living conditions in hostels. The session also touched upon the stigma surrounding mental health, which often prevents students from seeking help, as well as the alarming rise in student suicides and the inadequate mental health support systems in many institutions. The pressures faced by students in medical fields, including financial burdens, workload, and language barriers, were also highlighted as contributing factors to mental health struggles.

Several suggestions were proposed to address these issues. These included the implementation of mentorship and buddy programs, the placement of counselors in hostels, and the integration of mental health services such as the *TeleMANAS* platform to provide accessible support. The need for greater awareness and proactive mental health initiatives in educational institutions was stressed, along with the importance of addressing substance abuse among youth. The session also recommended the mainstreaming of emotional education within school curricula and the training of teachers to better identify and support students' mental health needs. Additionally, it was suggested that a more holistic approach to stress management, including incorporating practices from global education systems, could help improve student well-being.

Session – III: Stress and Burnout at Workplaces

The session was chaired by Shri Rajiv Kumar, Former Vice Chairman, NITI Aayog and co-chaired by Shri Deepak Bagla, Former CEO & MD, Invest India. The panelists included Shri Manoj Yadav, DG, Railway Protection Force and former DG, NHRC; Dr. R.K. Dhamija, Director, IHBAS, Delhi; Shri D. P. Nambiar, Vice President–HR, Tata Consultancy Services; Ms. Gopika Pant, Head, Indian Law Partners, New Delhi; and Shri Mukesh Butani, Founder &

Managing Partner, BMR Legal Advocates.

The session addressed the escalating issue of workplace stress, particularly its impact on employees' mental health and overall productivity. It highlighted the multifaceted nature of stress, identifying key stressors that include workplace pressures, personal issues, social isolation, and the challenges of relocating to urban areas. Participants noted that stress is not only prevalent in high-pressure industries but also affects professionals across sectors, particularly in environments like education, legal services, and startups. Issues such as burnout, workplace dynamics, and the societal pressures of adjusting to new environments were identified as significant contributors to stress.

To address these growing concerns, several suggestions were made to create a more supportive work environment. One major recommendation was for organizations to establish stronger support systems for their employees, such as mental health counselors, mentorship programs, and stress management workshops. Emphasis was placed on fostering a workplace culture that promotes open communication, mutual support, and respect for work-life balance, ensuring employees feel heard and supported in both personal and professional aspects of their lives. The importance of leadership in setting the tone for a balanced work culture was emphasized, with a call for leaders to actively integrate mental health support into daily operations. Companies were encouraged to move beyond merely drafting stress management policies to actively enforcing and implementing these measures.

Furthermore, the session proposed broader systemic changes to alleviate workplace stress, including creating more employment opportunities in tier-2 cities. This would help reduce the pressure on young professionals to relocate to large urban centers, which often leads to increased stress due to social isolation and the challenges of adapting to new environments. In addition, participants suggested that corporate social responsibility funds could be directed toward establishing a 'National Mental Wellbeing Corpus,' which would aim to make mental health resources more widely accessible. These suggestions reflect a holistic approach to addressing workplace stress, recognizing that mental well-being should be a priority for organizations, and that addressing it proactively can lead to healthier, more productive work environments.

Outcomes of the Conference

The following actionable points and recommendations emanated from the discussions and presentations of Agenda – I.

i.) **Early mental health intervention:** Prioritize the mental health of adolescents, as this stage is crucial for development and the emergence of mental health concerns.

ii.) **Reduce academic pressure and curriculum load:** Adjust curriculum and introduce subjects at multiple levels of difficulty to reduce academic stress. Reduce syllabus content and explore alternatives like offering exams in regional languages.

iii.) **Introduce and expand mental health support services in schools**: Ensure all schools have counselors for both career guidance and psychosocial support. Implement tele-counseling services and train teachers to identify and support students with mental health concerns.

iv.) **Regulate coaching centers**: Regulate coaching centers to prevent commercialization and reduce undue academic pressures on students. Establish better support systems for students in coaching hubs like Kota, Delhi.

v.) **Promote holistic education in rural areas**: Expand libraries and resource centers in rural areas to provide free access to educational resources. Empower women and create support systems to address mental health needs in rural communities.

vi.) **Promote mental health education in schools**: Incorporate mental health education into school curricula and foster a school environment that emphasizes mental well-being. Train teachers to act as emotional support figures and encourage open communication between parents, teachers, and students.

vii.) **Increase community-level engagement for mental health:** Engage communities at the grassroots level to promote awareness and early intervention for mental health issues. Train frontline workers, teachers, and parents to identify and address mental health concerns early.

viii.) **Support for parents**: Educate parents on balancing academic pressures with emotional well-being. Provide resources and workshops for parents to manage their children's mental health and academic stress.

ix.) **Develop and integrate technology for mental health**: Use technology for early detection of mental health issues, including online counseling platforms and educational content that helps students manage stress.

x.) **Holistic approach to school health**: Create a framework for school health that integrates curriculum, physical wellness, counseling support, regular health check-ups, and acute care. Ensure that mental health is part of broader health initiatives in schools.

The following actionable points and recommendations emanated from the discussions and presentations of Agenda – II.

i.) **Provide accessible counseling services in hostels**: Appoint counselors within hostels to make mental health support services more accessible to students, especially in isolated environments.

ii.) **Implement mentorship and buddy programs**: Set up mentorship and buddy systems to provide guidance, emotional support, and peer connection for students.

iii.) **Utilize technology for mental health support**: Leverage platforms like *TeleMANAS* to enhance accessibility to mental health support for students and reduce stigma associated with seeking help.

iv.) **Integrate mental health awareness into education**: Incorporate mental health education and awareness programs, including anti-ragging initiatives, mentorship systems, and support measures for students, especially those facing financial pressures.

v.) **Introduce stress management and support programs**: Implement counseling services, stress management workshops, awareness campaigns, and teacher training programs to help students and resident doctors manage mental health challenges.

vi.) **Mainstream emotional education in schools and colleges**: Incorporate emotional education into the curricula to promote overall well-being and support students' mental health development.

vii.) **Promote open conversations about mental health**: Foster open conversations about mental health between students, parents, and teachers to reduce stigma and provide the necessary emotional support.

viii.) There should be adequate rest time, leaves, weekly offs, maternity and paternity leaves, childcare leaves, and proper restrooms, separate for women doctors.

ix.) The working hours of doctors must be kept within the NMC guidelines.

x.) It should be ensured that Anti ragging committee is established in all institutes and is working proactively.

The following actionable points and recommendations emanated from the discussions and presentations of Agenda – III.

i.) **Transform workplace norms to address stress**: Establish a "safety net" for employees. Employers should create systems that offer employees access to mental health resources and support, ensuring that those facing burnout have a clear path to recovery and assistance.

ii.) **Create employment opportunities in Tier-2 cities**: Shift focus towards creating more job opportunities in tier-2 cities to allow people to remain closer to their families and reduce stress related to relocation. By providing employment opportunities in smaller cities, workers can avoid the pressures of relocation, reducing stress and helping them maintain a better work-life balance by staying close to family.

iii.) **Foster strong communication channels**: Promote open communication within teams and provide mental health counseling for employees to support their well-being, especially in high-pressure environments like startups.

iv.) **Prioritize work-life balance:** Create a workplace culture that respects work-life balance. Create a supportive workplace culture focused on mutual help and openness. Establishing clear boundaries between work and personal life, along with fostering a culture of mutual support, ensures that employees can recharge and maintain their well-being without feeling overburdened.

v.) **Accountability from employers in stress mitigation:** Employers should be more accountable in addressing and mitigating workplace stress through proactive interventions and supportive practices.

vi.) **Utilize CSR funds:** Use part of corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds to establish a 'National Mental Wellbeing Corpus' to make mental health resources more accessible. Redirecting a portion of CSR funds towards mental health initiatives ensures broader access to resources and services.

vii.) **Practical approach to burnout and stress management**: Organizations should not only draft stress management policies but also actively monitor their implementation, ensuring that the policies have a real impact on reducing burnout and improving employee well-being.

viii.) **Equip leaders to foster supportive work cultures**: Train leaders to not only focus on tasks but also to create a balanced and supportive work environment that promotes mental well-being and reduces stress.

ix.) **Engage employees through activities**: Implement engagement activities that help employees feel relaxed, rejuvenated, and connected within the workplace, improving overall mental health. Organizing activities such as wellness programs, team-building

exercises, or mindfulness sessions can help employees de-stress and feel more engaged, leading to better mental health and a positive work environment.

x.) **Address mental health as a non-taboo subject**: Foster an environment where mental health is openly discussed, reducing stigma and promoting well-being as part of the company culture. Cultivating a workplace culture that encourages open conversations about mental health helps reduce the stigma surrounding it, making employees feel more comfortable seeking support when needed.

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List of Speakers/ Resource Persons in the National Conference on Mental Wellbeing: Navigating Stress from Classroom to Workplace held on 10th December 2024 at Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi

I. National Human Rights Commission

1. Smt. Vijaya Bharathi Sayani, Hon'ble Acting Chairperson, NHRC
2. Shri Bharat Lal, Secretary General, NHRC
3. Shri Devendra Kumar Nim, Joint Secretary, NHRC
4. Dr. Rajul Raikwar, Consultant (Research), NHRC
5. Ms. Aakanksha Sharma, Junior Research Consultant, NHRC

II. Session Chairs & Co-Chairs

1. Dr. Vinod K Paul, Member, NITI Aayog
2. Smt. Preeti Sudan, Chairman, Union Public Service Commission
3. Shri Rajiv Kumar, Former Vice Chairman, NITI Aayog
4. Dr. Rajesh Sagar, Prof. of Psychiatry, AIIMS, New Delhi
5. Shri Deepak Bagla, Former CEO & MD, Invest India

III. Panellists

1. Shri Rahul Singh, Chairman, CBSE
2. Dr. B.N. Gangadhar, Chairperson, National Medical Commission
3. Shri Manoj Yadav, DG, Railway Protection Force and former DG, NHRC
4. Shri Subodh Kumar Singh, Addl. Secretary, Ministry of Steel & former DG–National Testing Agency
5. Shri Anandrao Patil, Additional Secretary, PMPY & Digital Education
6. Dr. M.C. Mishra, Emeritus Professor, Former Director, AIIMS
7. Shri D. P. Nambiar, Vice President - HR, Tata Consultancy Services
8. Dr. Randeep Guleria, Chairman, Internal Medicine, Medanta, Gurugram
9. Dr. R.K. Dhamija, Director, IHBAS, Delhi
10. Dr. Geeta Malhotra, Country Director, READ India
11. Dr. Nand Kumar, Prof. of Psychiatry, AIIMS, New Delhi
12. Dr. Charu Sharma, Principal, Dr Rajendra Prasad Kendriya Vidyalaya, Presidents State, New Delhi
13. Ms. Vijayalakshmi Arora, Child Protection Specialist, UNICEF
14. Ms. Gopika Pant, Head, Indian Law Partners, New Delhi
15. Shri Mukesh Butani, Founder & Managing Partner, BMR Legal Advocates
16. Dr. Meet Ghonia, National Secretary, Federation of Resident Doctors' Association

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