

## Mental Health and Well-Being in Kashmir: Breaking Silence Bridging Stigma and Support for a Better Future

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### ABSTRACT

Well-being encompasses physical, emotional, mental, and social health, with mental health playing a crucial role in shaping thoughts, emotions and behaviors. Globally, one in eight individuals experiences mental health disorders, with depression and anxiety being prevalent concerns. In India, nearly 15% of the population faces psychological distress. The situation is even more concerning in Kashmir, where decades of socio-political instability, conflict, and trauma have contributed to alarmingly high rates of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Studies indicate that nearly half of Kashmir's adult population suffers from mental health issues. Despite the severity of the crisis, stigma remains a major barrier to seeking professional help. Cultural misconceptions, fear of social judgment, and the stigma associated with psychiatric treatment further discourage individuals, particularly women, from accessing necessary care. This article highlights the urgent need to break the stigma surrounding mental health in Kashmir through awareness, early intervention, and systemic changes in mental health discourse. Addressing mental health with the same urgency as physical health can help prevent generational trauma and create a more supportive society.

**Keywords:** *Mental health, well-being, depression, anxiety, PTSD, stigma, Kashmir, India, psychological distress, early intervention, social support, generational trauma*

Well-being is the cornerstone of a fulfilling life, encompassing physical, emotional, and mental dimensions. Well-being is not just the absence of disease or illness. It's a complex combination of a person's physical, mental, emotional, and social health factors. Wellbeing is strongly linked to happiness and life satisfaction. In short, wellbeing could be described as how you feel about yourself and your life. (Ogden, 2012). Well being encompasses physical, emotional, and social dimensions. Among these Mental well-being plays a particularly vital role in shaping our emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. It influences how we handle stress, make decisions, and interact with others. The World Health Organization (WHO) conceptualizes mental health as a "state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" (World Health Organization, 2022)

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### ***Mental Health: A Growing Global Issue***

- According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 1 in 8 people globally live with a mental health disorder, equating to around 970 million individuals in 2019 (WHO, 2021).
- An estimated 3.8% of the population experience depression, including 5% of adults (4% among men and 6% among women), and 5.7% of adults older than 60 years.
- Approximately 280 million people in the world have depression (WHO, 2023).
- More than 720 000 people die due to suicide every year.
- Suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15–29-year-olds (WHO, 2024).

### ***Mental Health in India***

- In India, mental health is a growing concern. The National Mental Health Survey of India 2015–16 revealed that nearly 15% of Indian adults (those above 18 years) require active interventions for one or more mental health issues. (National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences [NIMHANS], 2016).
- As per the reports in 2017, one in seven Indians suffer from some mental disorder—roughly equating to 197.3 million people. (India State-Level Disease Burden Initiative Mental Disorders Collaborators, 2020).
- The Mental State of India 2024 report suggests that the mental well-being in the country is lower in 2023 than it was in 2020 and that mental health was worsening especially for the youths between the ages of 18-24.

### ***Mental Health in Kashmir***

- A study by Housen, Lenglet, & Ariti, 2017 found that 45% of Kashmir's adult population (1.8 million) suffered from some form of mental distress. There is a high prevalence of depression (41%), anxiety (26%), post-traumatic stress disorder (19%), and 47% had experienced some sort of trauma.
- In Kashmir, even adolescents are increasingly grappling with mental health challenges, often exacerbated by socio-political instability and other regional stressors. These behavioral and emotional problems (BEPs) have become a significant concern, particularly among adolescents with identified risk factors.
- A study found that 47% of adolescents in Kashmir were affected by mental health issues, with 45% facing peer-related problems, 39% showing signs of hyperactivity, 34% exhibiting conduct issues, and 9% experiencing emotional difficulties. These issues were observed across various factors, including socioeconomic status, age, adolescent type, and education (Dar & Lakshmana, 2024).
- A study by the Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, Kashmir (IMHANS-K), GMC Srinagar, revealed a 7-10% prevalence of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) among children in Kashmir.
- The percentage of school-going children with mental disorders in Kashmir is significantly higher compared to other states in India, as highlighted in the study by Paul and Khan (2019).

### ***Stigmatization and Barriers to Mental Health Support:***

Despite the growing prevalence of mental health issues in Kashmir, stigma remains a significant barrier to seeking help. Due to stigma, many individuals delay seeking help, leading to a deterioration of their mental health. In Kashmir, mental health issues are often seen through the image of a "moult", a term used to describe a "mad man." People associate

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mental health problems with extreme cases, where someone appears completely disconnected from reality, wandering the streets etc. This view focuses only on the most severe and visible signs of mental illness like psychosis and ignore other common but less obvious conditions such as depression, anxiety, OCD, PTSD etc. Because of this, many people hesitate to seek help, fearing they might be labeled as "mad" or face social rejection.

In Kashmir, mental health issues like depression are not always recognized for what they are. For example, when someone talks about depression, the common response might be "*Cxe chukh khaewaan chaewaan, cxe kemuk depression chu?*" which translates to, "*You are eating well and physically fine, so what depression do you have and why?*" This reflects the widespread belief that if a person is physically healthy, their mental health struggles must be imaginary or unimportant. However, mental health is just as important as physical health, and this misperception creates a dangerous cycle of silence and shame.

In Kashmir, there is still a lot of stigma around mental health, especially when it comes to parent's attitudes about seeking help for their children. When a child talks to their parents about mental health problems, many parents do not believe them or dismiss their concerns. Some parents also think that taking their child to psychiatrist or psychologist is something to be ashamed of. A big part of this is the fear of the pagalkhane (mental hospital) IMHANS-KASHMIR. Parents often think that if they take their child to a place like IMHANS, society will label them as "pagal" (mad); (moult) and that label will stay with them forever. This fear of being judged by others is so strong that many parents choose to ignore their child's problems, thinking it's better to let them suffer than face the judgment of others. The situation becomes even more challenging when the child is a girl. Many parents fear that seeking psychiatric help for their daughter could harm her future, particularly her chances of marriage. They worry that if people find out she received mental health treatment, in-laws might label her as "pagal" (mad) and say things like, "Emis chu pagal khanuk ilaaj chalaan; bei cha pagal dawa khewan" (She has been treated at the mental hospital and she is taking medication). This phrase reflects deep stigma, treating psychiatric care and medication as shameful rather than steps toward recovery. Such attitudes discourage seeking help, forcing individuals to suffer in silence and reinforcing misconceptions about mental health. This deep-seated fear of social judgment and discrimination leads parents to suppress their daughter's struggles rather than seek the help she needs. They are often more concerned about societal perceptions than their child's well-being, adding to the burden she already carries.

It is crucial that we should create a space where mental health is treated with the same care and attention as physical health. It is important to educate people that mental health is not a sign of weakness or shame, but an essential aspect of overall well-being that requires support, understanding, and professional care. The key is understanding that mental health conditions are invisible but very real, and they need the same level of care and treatment as any physical illness. Encouraging a shift in how we talk about and understand mental health—comparable to how we treat physical health problems like headaches or back pain—is essential in breaking the stigma and promoting better mental well-being in Kashmir.

### ***Call to Action: Breaking the Stigma and Promoting Early Intervention***

Mental health issues in Kashmir are pervasive, but they remain largely unaddressed due to stigma and a lack of support systems. It's time to break the silence and acknowledge that mental well-being is as important as physical health. Early intervention is key in addressing

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mental health challenges. We must create a future where mental health is openly discussed, understood, and treated with care. It is crucial to foster an environment where individuals are encouraged to seek help without the fear of judgment or social rejection. This shift can help reduce generational trauma, offering children a chance to grow in a supportive environment, free from the emotional scars of untreated mental health issues.

Let's unite in breaking the stigma, ensuring access to mental health resources, and empowering individuals to prioritize their well-being. Together, we can build a future where mental health is treated with the respect and urgency it deserves, leading to a stronger, healthier society for generations to come.

### CONCLUSION

The mental health crisis in Kashmir requires urgent attention. Stigma, lack of awareness, and cultural misconceptions hinder individuals from seeking help. Early intervention, education, and stronger support systems are essential in breaking the silence surrounding mental health. By fostering a supportive environment and treating mental health with the same importance as physical health, we can prevent generational trauma and create a healthier future for Kashmir's youth. Together, we can build a culture of understanding and support that prioritizes mental well-being for all.

As Carl Jung said, "*We pay attention to the diseases of the body, but we neglect the far more dangerous diseases of the mind.*"

This serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of prioritizing mental health. Just as we care for physical ailments, addressing mental well-being is essential for a holistic wellbeing.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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