

The 3 A's of Mental Health: A Holistic Approach to Support Young Female Students

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ABSTRACT

The World Health Organization (WHO) reports increasing rates of mental health conditions among the young population, which mostly go unseen and untreated. Although India is renowned for its academic excellence and rich cultural heritage, the nation's mental health issues are often unreported. The depression affects one in seven youth populations in India, and the symptoms are more than three times as common in girls as in boys. However, substantially less research has been done on the mental health of young Indian female students. This research study attempts to categorize the mental health conditions prevalent among young female college students in Southern Tamil Nadu, India. The categorization reveals the majority of students are only moderately mentally healthy, and a significant student population has poor mental health. This emphasizes proposing a proactive approach to promote positive mental health among students. The 3 A's approach to mental health—Assess, Access, and Adopt—offers a comprehensive framework for promoting healthy behaviours and improving mental health outcomes among students. Young students, by assessing their mental health conditions, accessing necessary services, and adopting evidence-based interventions, can create a supportive environment that can foster academic, social, and emotional well-being.

Keywords: *Mental health, Students, Female, Well-being, Approach, Assess, Access, Adopt*

In India, those between the ages of 15 and 29 make up the youth age group (National Youth Policy, 2014), accounting for about 27.2% of the country's total population. As a result, India now has the world's highest youth population. Youth citizens who are happy and healthy are better equipped to contribute to their communities even in the face of any challenges around them. The intrinsic and instrumental value that is essential to youths' happiness and well-being is their mental health. According to the World Health Organization, (WHO, 2022) mental health refers to “a state of well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, to realize their abilities, to learn well and work well, and to contribute to their communities”.

The scope and complexity of youth mental illness in India are still understudied. The system to support the mental health problems remains stagnant, exacerbating the disparity between providers and beneficiaries. Social and gender-specific factors determine the prevalence of

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mental disorders among females (Malhotra, S., & Shah, 2015). Psychiatric disorder and psychological distress are experienced differently by women than by men. It is evident that females commit suicide at a higher rate than males between the ages of 15 and 24 in India (Gupta, S., & Basera, D., 2023). This merits the significance of prioritizing the mental health of young women and exploring effective approaches to foster their mental well-being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to a study by Feng et al. (2025), university students' mental health and well-being are enhanced by greater psychological flexibility and mindfulness. When students at universities and colleges learn to be psychologically flexible and mindful, it can help them thrive in their academic and personal lives and also reduce the risk of mental health problems. Pachas et al. (2025) studied mental health conditions of adolescents with intersectional identities and revealed an increasing need for holistic, equitable, and inclusive mental health services due to high rates of depression, anxiety, and suicides among adolescents of different gender identities. Hui et al. (2025) studied mental health distress among the youth community and expressed that while youth undergo a 12-month specially designed Youth Mental Health (YMH) program, it can show a greater impact in reducing distress symptoms and functional impairment and preventing the emergence of probable mental disorders.

Marthoenis et al. (2024) explored that female health workers from different communities had a high degree of misconceptions and misinformation about mental illness. This misconception may result in erroneous assumptions about the mental health of those who are under stress, which can further stigmatize them. These results highlight the significance of focused mental health education initiatives to dispel myths. Zango-Martin (2022) revealed that a holistic therapeutic approach to occupational therapy improves the mental well-being of people at a larger level.

Raghavan et al. (2024) emphasized the urgent need for mental health education among students. According to their study, a 90-minute interactive Mental Health Literacy (MHL) session will facilitate achieving a sustained improvement in the mental health of young college students.

Robinson et al. (2024) investigated the sleep pattern and the quality of sleep among young Canadians on their mental health. Poor sleep quality can have severe consequences on mental health, including increased stress, anxiety, and depression.

Risser et al. (2020) evaluated the acceptability and feasibility of a PROACTIVE Family Navigator Program designed to support foster parents of children with mental health needs. The program aimed to provide foster parents with the necessary tools, resources, and guidance to effectively navigate the complex mental health system and ensure their children receive the care they need.

Objectives of the Study

- To categorize the mental health conditions of young female students.
- To propose a proactive approach to promote positive mental health among students.

METHODOLOGY

Sample and procedure

This study used qualitative methods, and the survey was carried out among the female students at colleges targeting both undergraduates and postgraduates in southern Tamil Nadu,

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India. The students completed 253 survey questionnaires, and the anonymity of responses was ensured. This study used a convenience sampling method to collect the data.

The sample consisted of 253 student respondents with the age group ranging from 17-20 years, constituting 142 respondents (56%); ranging from 21-25 years, constituting 108 respondents (43%); and ranging from 26-28 years, constituting 3 respondents (1%). The mean age of the students was 20.1 years. In terms of educational level, the sample comprised postgraduate students of 125 respondents (49%) and undergraduate students of 128 respondents (51%).

Measures

This study used the validated scale of the Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF) to measure the mental health of the students. Students were asked to rate how often they had such feelings in the past month on a 5-point Likert scale, with 5 being the highest and 1 being the lowest, ranging from every day, almost every day, about 2 or 3 times a week, about once a week, and never. This scale has 14 items constituting three dimensions, such as emotional well-being having 3 items, social well-being having 5 items, and psychological well-being having 6 items, while social and psychological well-being are combined to refer to positive functioning.

The three categories employed in this study to classify the students' mental health conditions were flourishing, moderately mentally healthy, and languishing. Students who respond "every day" or "almost every day" to one of the three emotional well-being items and at least six of the 11 positive functioning items during the previous month are classified as having flourishing mental health.

The diagnosis of languishing is made when a student rates as "never" for one of the three emotional well-being items and six of the 11 positive functioning items during the previous month. Students who did not meet the criteria for either languishing or flourishing were then classified as moderately mentally healthy.

RESULTS

The reliability of a scale refers to the internal consistency, and the instrument is considered to have good internal consistency when it exceeds Cronbach's alpha of 0.7. The scale reliability in this study is high, as it has a Cronbach's value of 0.94. This study's mental health measure was validated using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using SPSS software. The model fits the data well: $\chi^2(253) = 2.43$, $p < 0.01$, $\chi^2/df = 1.93$. The fit indices are presented in Table 1.

			RMSEA 90% CI	
CFI	TLI	RMSEA	Lower	Upper
0.937	0.923	0.0751	0.0612	0.0891

Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker– Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)

The factor loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR) values are presented in Table 2 where all the values are within the cut-off limits (Hair et al. 2013).

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Table 2 - Factor loadings, Average Variance Extracted and Construct Reliabilities

Factors	Items	Loadings	AVE	CR
Factor 1	EW1	0.750**	0.52	0.94
	EW2	0.805**		
	EW3	0.850**		
Factor 2	SW1	0.601**		
	SW2	0.591**		
	SW3	0.774**		
	SW4	0.764**		
	SW5	0.809**		
Factor 3	PW1	0.721**		
	PW2	0.741**		
	PW3	0.642**		
	PW4	0.576**		
	PW5	0.682**		
	PW6	0.744**		

N= 253, **p < 0.001, EW – Emotional Well-being, SW – Social Well-being, PW – Psychological Well-being, AVE – Average Variance Extracted and CR – Construct Reliability

The mental health conditions of students are classified into three categories, namely, flourishing, moderately mentally healthy and languishing of their mental health conditions. The mental health categorization of students is shown in the Table 3 below.

Table 3 – Categorization of Students’ mental health

Mental Health categories	No. of Students	Percentage
Flourishing	89	35%
Moderately Mentally Healthy	151	60%
Languishing	13	5%
Total	253	100%

DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to categorize the mental health conditions of youth female students in the southern part of India. The categorization showed a majority of 60% of young students fall into the category of moderate mental health conditions. This alarming trend needs attention and commitment in resolving the mental health challenges (Sutton, H. 2023). Notably, the data reveals that 5% of students have poor mental health, which calls for quick action to help these students get over their mental health issues. On a more positive note, the study also reports that 35% of students exhibit good mental health conditions. However, there is still room for improvement, and it is crucial to build upon this momentum by implementing various approaches and strategies derived from this study to further enhance the mental health and well-being of students in the future.

The five ministries of the Government of India, namely, Health and Family Welfare, Education, Women and Child Development, Youth Affairs and Sports, and Social Justice and Empowerment, acknowledge mental health as a priority for holistic youth development and well-being. They believe that the youth encounter challenges such as a lack of awareness regarding their mental health conditions, a reluctance to seek assistance, and the societal stigma attached to mental illness. The ministries recognize the need to improve access to

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information, resources, and services pertaining to the mental health of the youth population. They also acknowledge that the approaches taken by various sectors to handle mental health concerns are still fragmented and insufficient.

The 3 A's approach to mental health—Assess, Access, and Adopt—is the crucial component of a comprehensive mental health strategy. The assessment, accessibility, and adoptability can work together to identify needs, provide accessible services, and adopt necessary interventions to promote healthy behaviors, ultimately contributing to improved mental health outcomes and overall well-being of young female students.

The 3 A's – Assess

The assessing mental health is concerned about evaluating the mental health needs of individuals and communities. The assessment can facilitate early detection of mental health issues, enabling timely interventions and reducing the risk of more severe problems. While understanding the specific needs, targeted interventions can be developed to address the mental issues at regular intervals.

- Assessing mental health is as important as assessing the students' academic performance. Similar to conducting course evaluations to assess academic progress, regular surveys and gathering feedback from students can help evaluate their mental health and well-being.
- The standardized tools, such as a validated questionnaire, may be used to assess the mental health symptoms, such as anxiety, depression, or stress, of the students.
- Peers should be taught to be vigilant about a friend's behavior or well-being and to notify any changes to a trusted adult, such as a teacher or counselor at colleges.
- In order to spot possible mental health issues, teachers should contribute by observing student behavior and their interactions in class. Mentoring sessions are a good way for teachers to learn more about their mentees.
- Teachers should become "Health and Wellness Ambassadors," developing skills to deal with red flags students face and any psychological and behavioral problems that survivor of sexual abuse may experience (Girase et al. 2022).
- Any changes in their child's behavior or mood at home, such as increased irritability, anxiety, or any withdrawal symptoms, should also be closely monitored by their parents.

This collaborative effort from the management of the institutions, teachers, parents, and peers to assess the mental health status can ensure that students receive the timely help and resources they need to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

The 3 A's – Access

Accessibility ensures that mental health resources and services are available and accessible to those who need them, regardless of their background or circumstances, reducing barriers such as cost, location, or stigma. Breaking the stigma surrounding mental health is a crucial step that must be taken before accessing mental health support. This requires a comprehensive approach that involves education, awareness, support, and advocacy. Students should be empowered to access mental health support at a time and in a manner that is most convenient for them.

- Organizing medical camps that prioritize both physical and mental well-being can help promote a holistic approach to healthcare, reducing the stigma associated with mental health issues and encouraging individuals to seek help without hesitation.

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National Health Policy (NEP) 2020 recommends well-trained social workers and counsellors to be provided in the educational ecosystem.

- Similar to emphasizing sex education at schools and colleges, promoting psychosocial education is important. It aims to empower individuals with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to manage their mental health, build strong relationships, and navigate challenging social situations.
- Psychological First Aid (PFA) is an evidence-based approach to providing emotional support and care to individuals who have experienced a traumatic event or are in crisis. Such first aid should be administered by trained mental health professionals, emergency medical technicians, or other healthcare workers. Every institution should provide psychological first aid equally to general first aid.
- Encouraging students to download MANAS (Mental Health and Normalcy Augmentation System) application to their mobile phones in order to build an online community where they can learn about resources, information, and wellness initiatives implemented by different government ministries to enhance the standard and accessibility of mental health care.
- Students should be educated about India's first national 24-hour mental health helpline, KIRAN (1800-599-0019), established by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. It provides early screening, psychological support, psychological crisis management, and helps with referrals to mental health specialists.
- The National Digital Health Mission 2020 (NDHM), Telepsychiatry Guidelines, 2020, and eSanjeevani, the National Telemedicine Service of India provide specific guidelines pertaining to legality, the mental health consultation process, prescription guidelines, and documentation of telepsychiatric consultations. These services facilitate the utilization of digital interventions for mental health concerns, enabling access to expert psychiatric consultations for female students who face stigma around personal psychological therapy.
- The National Commission for Women (NCW) created a digital complaint registration system providing a help line number (7827-170-170) to support women who have been impacted by any abuse impairing their emotional well-being.

Changing students' attitudes towards help-seeking, reducing the social stigma associated with mental health problems, and allowing them to access timely mental health interventions can have a profound impact on their overall well-being.

The 3 A's – Adopt

Students adopting mental health interventions can have a significant impact on their mental well-being and academic success.

- Mental health therapies, such as counselling, psychotherapy, or medication, can be incredibly effective in managing mental health conditions. Students can learn coping mechanisms, develop resilience, and improve their well-being by consistently taking their prescribed therapies.
- Students can practice self-compassion by treating themselves with kindness, understanding, and patience. Students engaging in activities that nourish their mind, body, and soul, such as exercise, meditation, and spending time in nature, can make them uphold positive mental health.
- Social network interventions (SNI) leverage social networks among students where they can share their experiences, feelings, and concerns with each other. Such interventions provide students with a sense of belonging and social support, which

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lowers stress, anxiety, and depression among students. School connectedness and strong peer support are found to be associated with student well-being (Birrell et al. 2025).

- Mindfulness is a cognitive skill that involves heightened awareness and is essential for improving students' well-being (Feng et al. 2024). Mindfulness therapy is a clinical intervention that needs to be provided for students to foster positive mental health among students. A recent meta-analysis conducted by Zuo et al. (2023) suggest that mindfulness therapy may benefit college students with clinical symptoms by reducing levels of stress, anxiety, depression and improving sleep quality.
- Resiliency refers to the capacity to cope and manage mental health challenges, such as anxiety, depression, or trauma, and to emerge stronger and more capable of dealing with future challenges (Wu et al. 2020). Students developing strategies to build resiliency can promote their overall well-being and reduce their risk of mental health

Therefore, adopting positive mental health behaviors and practices is crucial for students to achieve long-term improvements in their overall well-being. Effective mental health therapies, medication, practicing self-compassion, engaging in activities that nourish the mind, body, and soul, and leveraging social network interventions, developing resiliency strategies, and being mindful can provide students with a sense of belonging and social support, reducing stress, anxiety, and depression.

The categorization of mental health conditions among young female college students in Southern Tamil Nadu reveals a disturbing trend, with the majority of students exhibiting only moderate mental health and a significant population struggling with poor mental health. This emphasizes the need for a multi-faceted approach to support the mental health and well-being of young female students.

The 3 A's approach—assess, access, and adopt—has the potential to transform the way the mental health condition is addressed, leading to long-term improvements in overall well-being and enabling students to reach their full potential. This approach involves not only the students themselves but also educators, policymakers, and community leaders, enabling them to prioritize mental health and well-being to create a brighter future for generations to come.

CONCLUSION

The categorization of mental health conditions among young female college students in Southern Tamil Nadu reveals a disturbing trend, with the majority of students exhibiting only moderate mental health and a significant population struggling with poor mental health. This emphasizes the need for a multi-faceted approach to support the mental health and well-being of young female students.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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