



Mental Health Challenges of Youth of Assam with Special Reference to Post COVID Period: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

Mental health refers to the optimal state of dealing with different stressors that one can come across at any phase of life. With the hasty advancements in technology, the concept of mental health has become the prime concern at present. During the various stages of development, the individual has to cope with numerous challenges of life. The young age is the most influential period of life with major impacts on the future. The youth phase carries special implication for mental health, since in this phase most of the important transitions of human life take place. A number of mental disorders have their onset in the young age or adolescence. In view of the rising mental health concern of the youth population this study has attempted to describe the present mental health challenges of the youth in the context of Assam. Various risk and protective factors related to mental health is also discussed. Further the study has also highlighted the mental health status of the youths in Assam after the COVID emergency.

Keywords: Mental Health, Mental Health Challenges, Youth, Assam, COVID

1. Introduction

With the rapid globalization the concept of mental health is now becoming one of the most vital areas of concern in the developing countries like India. The first well defined concept of mental health was put forwarded by World Health Organization (WHO). Mental health is the state of mental well-being that facilitates people to deal with the stressful situations of life, recognize their capabilities, learn and work efficiently and thus contributing to the community. Mental health determines various abilities from making decisions to building new relationships and hence shaping the world. It is the most essential part of the health and well-being that plays vital role in the developmental process of humankind [1]. Among all developmental stages, the youth stage is considered to be the most prominent and vulnerable stage of life. In every country, the youth population is considered to be the key resource for the growth of that country. However, a considerable ambiguity can be seen in the definition of young people across the globe. The terms like 'young', 'adolescents', 'adults', 'young adults' are quite similar in meaning and hence often used one as the replacement of the other. As defined by (WHO) the 'adolescence' age group is from 10 to 19 years, the "youth" covers across 15-24 years age group [2, 3]. The National Youth Policy of India has defined the youth population covering the age range of 15-35 year [4]. As the formative years of life, the youth age carries so much significance in the developmental process of an individual. However, this period of life is full of mixed experiences. The youth is the most vulnerable yet most viable and productive period of human life. Various studies on youth mental health have reported a number of issues associated to the transitions of this phase. This study is an attempt to deep dive into the critical domain of mental health in the context of youths of Assam with special reference to the post COVID times.

2. Objectives

- To study the overall Mental Health challenges of youth of Assam.
- To develop an understanding of the Mental Health scenario of youths in India.
- To identify the Mental Health risk factors among the youths.
- To identify the Mental Health protective factors among the youths.
- To develop an understanding of scenario of youth Mental Health after COVID emergency in Assam.
- To learn about the initiatives undertaken by different organizations related to mental health during COVID emergency.

3. Method

The present study is a narrative review based study to explore and understand the mental health scenario of the youths of Assam with special reference to the post COVID period.

Inclusion:

- Only the reviews related to post COVID period conducted from 2020 to 2022 were included for this study.
- Only the Indian studies related to mental health with reference to post COVID period were included

Exclusion:

- The studies conducted in other foreign countries were not included.

4. Procedure

For the purpose of this study the literature of last two years were collected and reviewed using different data base like national and state level newspapers, Indian research journals, Online journals, websites etc. As the objective was to get an insight into post COVID period scenario of mental health challenges only the latest reviews were considered consisting of studies conducted during the year 2020-2022.

5. Discussion

5.1. Scenario of Youth Mental Health across Assam

The world is inhabited by approximately 1.8 billion young individuals of age in the range of 10-24 year which is one-fourth of the total world population. Out of them, nearly 90 percent live in the under developed countries. Country-wise, India has the highest number of this age group at present and it is estimated that the total youth population of India will exceed 347 million approx by 2036. Figure 1 shows the present and projected future percentages of youth and elderly population in India [6]. Assam, the 17th largest state, is one of the current well developing states of India. Like other regions of the country, the youth population of the state of Assam is also undergoing many mental health challenges of the present.

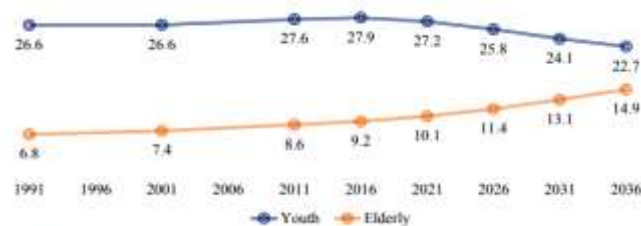


Figure 1: Percent Share of Youth & Elderly Population

5.1.1. Mental health challenges of youth of Assam

Several factors contribute to the mental health issues of youth in India, including social and economic factors, lack of access to mental health services, and cultural stigma. In Assam, the situation is aggravated by several factors such as the ongoing insurgency and terrorism, which have led to a sense of insecurity among the youth. Moreover, there is a lack of awareness about mental health issues and their treatment in Assam. Many people still consider mental illness as a taboo and avoid seeking professional help. The lack of trained mental health professionals and inadequate mental health infrastructure in the state also pose a significant challenge [2]. According to a study conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), around 7.5% of India's population suffers from mental health issues, and the prevalence of mental illness is higher in urban areas compared to rural areas. In Assam, the number of people suffering from mental health issues is estimated to be around 1.5 million [1]. In the National Mental Health Survey (NMHS), where 90% of the respondent population was of 18-29 years old, some interesting facts about the Assamese youth population were revealed. In the report, the morbidity related to mental health of the Assamese youth is reported as 5.85% [15]. The currently prevalent mental health issues reported by NMHS report are substance abuse (27.35%), mood disorders (2.97%), schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders (1.5% and 0.5%), stress related disorders (0.79%) [15]. Among them, substance abuse disorder is the most predominant issue which require a lot of attention in the present scenario of Assam. In addition to these problems, the incidence of suicide has also increased among the Assamese population in the near past.

5.1.2. Substance Abuse

Just like the big picture of substance abuse in India, Assam is also fighting with numerous issues related to the same. A study conducted to delineate the abuse of substances in the urban slums of Jorhat district of Assam has reported that tobacco was the most abused substance among 10-24 years old. Males of 22-24 years are the most vulnerable group found to get involved in the substance abuse behaviour than females. Most of the youths are introduced to any kind of psychoactive substance during 17-24 years of age [16].

5.1.3. Suicide

The National Crime Record Bureau 2014 has reported that Assam recorded a suicide rate of 11.1 per 1,00,000 population, which is an alarmingly high number and also higher than the national average of 10.6 [17]. However, post COVID the suicide rate is increased upto 36.9 % and the recorded number of cases were 3262 [18]. NMHS data has also found a higher risk, i.e. 1.12% for suicide in the age range of 18-29 years [15]. A study was conducted by Nath et al. on Psychological autopsies of suicidal hanging cases at Jorhat district of Assam. This study was based on suicide victims (n=42) using hanging method coming for medico legal autopsy in the mortuary of Forensic Department, Jorhat Medical College and Hospital, which were from the age group of 15 to 80 years including both the sexes. The study reported various psychosocial factors like substance abuse, stressful life events and mental illness to be associated with suicide. [19]

5.1.4. Others

Some other mental health issues related to cyber bullying and game addiction are also increasing among the young adults of the state. A recent large-scale survey conducted by UNICEF and National Service Scheme (NSS) has reported the an estimated 95 % of the youth in Assam suffered mental health related conditions due to cyber bullying and corporal punishment [5].

5.1.5. Treatment and Therapeutic Initiatives

As per the treatment and therapeutic practices are concerned it was reported that the superstitions are still very high among the Assamese population about the person with mental health disorder. In the present scenario also, the desirable source of treatment is mainly the local quacks, faith healers and astrologers. According to NMHS report, use of belittling terms and discrimination were also prevailing in the expression of stigma. Even the media and other public discussions were also reflected various stigmas [15]. However, to deal with such adverse conditions the state authorities have implemented different action plans like opening district mental health programs, making budgetary provisions for mental health promotion and conducting sessions to generate awareness and side by side fighting prevailing stigmas related to mental health.

5.2. Scenario of the youth mental health across India

Majority of the population of India belongs to the youth age group that has major responsibility towards the development of the nation. In a rapidly advancing country like India, the mental health of youth carries special significance as it is a very influential stage of life which leads to the development of future human resource [7]. This section introduces some of the notable factors affecting the mental health conditions of the youth in this country.

5.2.1. Modernization of the nation

In the last decades, some revolutionary changes had been taken place in the world which has led to a tremendous change in the quality of life of world population. The transportation is now become very easy with new and faster modes of transport and it has enabled the migration across countries in a pinch of time. Moreover, the new innovations in information technology (IT) have enabled the youths to live their lives in a virtual world. This has brought many challenges related to the mental health of the youths. The increased use of gadgets has been associated with various ill effects such as low social interaction, minimum physical activities and a more sedentary lifestyle [7, 8]. With the changes in lifestyle, the global burden of mental disorders is also getting alarmingly high. The most recent National Mental Health Survey of India has estimated the contemporary prevalence of mental disorders in the youth is about 7.39 per cent (excluding tobacco use disorder) and lifetime prevalence is about 9.54 per cent [7, 9]. A cross sectional study conducted in 2022 has reported the prevalence of internet addiction as 78.7% (N=480) [8].

5.2.2. Substance abuse

A major concern in today's India involves growth in the numbers of substance use disorders. A national survey conducted between the years 2017 to 2019 has found that an alarmingly high number of Indian youths are suffering from different psychoactive substance addictions. The report also revealed that out of four drug addicted individuals, three doesn't receive any kind of treatment. The other important findings of the survey include: over 30 million people use cannabis and among them 2.5 million suffer from cannabis dependence. Whereas 22.6 million people are using opioids and about 7.7 million individuals has dependency on opioids [10, 14]. A study conducted on Indian youth has identified 40% higher risk of substance abuse below 18 years of age. Other significant findings of the study include 70% of adult smoking behaviour has the onset before 18 years [11, 14].

5.2.3. Other mental health conditions

However, other mental health conditions like stress, anxiety and depression has also been increased among the youth from last few years. The survey conducted by Rakuten Insight in India in May 2022 has reported that 50 percent of respondents in the age range 24-34 were feeling extra stressed or anxious during one year. In the same survey 28 percent of respondents belonging to the 16 -24 age group reported their stress and anxiety level as same to that of 24-34 age group [12]. While facing so much of mental health disorder burden, the youths of India have to face some other issues like prevailing stigma, lack of awareness towards mental illness and lack of mental health care providers [13]. Although India has come a very long way from fighting with blind superstitions like witch hunting to the establishment of community mental health clinic, yet a far better tomorrow is waiting for the finest development towards the attainment of positive mental health for Indian youths.

5.3. Mental health risk and protective factors

Across the lifespan the existence of different combinations of protective and risk factors play a role in maintaining the mental health [4]. Figure 2 represents the Mental Health Risk and Protective factors of a youth [5].

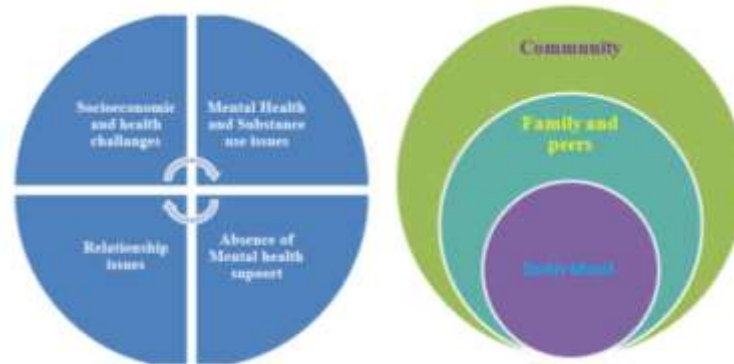


Figure 2 (a) Mental Health Risk Factors

(b) Protective factors

Mental health is often determined by various environmental and social conditions and the presence of risk factors associated with it. Mental health risk factors of youths can be comprised of different environment or social or relationship or rendered service related issues. Table 1 mentions some mental health risk factors of young age in brief.

Table 1. Mental Health Risk Factors

Risk factors			
Socio economic and health challenges	Mental health and substance use issues	Relationship issues	Absence of mental health support
Unemployment, No investment opportunities Energy poverty	Depression, anxiety and stress Substance abuse and addiction, COVID 19	Family dynamics Social pressure and judgement	Low mental health literacy Limited access to knowledge Few mental health practitioners

With the risk factors, every individual is also blessed with some protective factors which safeguards the mental health and ensures smooth functioning. Protective factors are the attributes which are present at different levels of the societal strata and helps to moderate the risk of mental health imbalance and promote the wellbeing of the youth. These factors act as a buffer for any potential risk to the healthy development of an individual. Table 2 mentions some protective factors in brief.

Table 2: Mental Health Protective Factors

PROTECTIVE FACTORS		
Individual	Family and peers	Community
Stress management	Relationships with peers and reduced feelings of isolation	Community norms of shared responsibility
Access to concrete support	Positive relationships within the extended family	Implementation of evidence-based practices
Hopefulness	Ability to communicate emotions effectively	Access to basic needs and specialized services
Problem-solving skills	Engagement in social institutions	
Resilience		

5.4. Scenario of youth mental health after COVID emergency in Assam

Assessment surveys have been conducted by Population foundation of India to understand the level of knowledge and attitude of young people regarding COVID 19 and the impact of this disease on their lives and mental health.

5.4.1 Mental health of Youth post- COVID emergency

Another important concern for the youth of Assam is the increasing mental health issues in the post COVID era. According to a survey conducted by the NIMHANS, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the mental health of people in the Northeast region, including Assam. Abrupt changes in the situations during the COVID emergency have induced numerous mental health issues in different population. The ongoing insurgency and terrorism in Assam, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, have led to increased levels of stress and anxiety among the people in the state.

Data on mental health in Assam post the COVID-19 pandemic is limited, but there are reports that suggest a significant impact on the mental health of people in the state. Here are some statistics and reports related to mental health in Assam post the COVID-19 pandemic:

- A survey conducted after the lockdown period has reported a sudden toll in the rates of suicide (35% increased risk) among the Assamese youths.
- Different organizations working in the state at ground level have reported growth in the level of distress, anxiety and depression. [13].
- The Assam State Mental Health Authority (ASMHA) has reported an increase in the number of people seeking mental health services during the pandemic.
- The ASMHA has also launched several programs to increase mental health awareness and provide accessible mental health services to those in need.

A cross sectional study was conducted by Gogoi and Sarmah among the residents of Assam during COVID lockdown period where most of the participants were adult older than 19 years. Depression Anxiety and Stress scale (DASS) was used for the assessment of mental health status. The study found that majority of the participants falling in the category of mild depression was from the age group 19 to 25 years. Out of the various important factors, one factor like occupation was found to be significantly associated with higher DASS-21 depression subscale score with significantly higher frequency of both students and unemployed individuals [20].

Another survey conducted by Assam Police on COVID 19 helpline callers in association with the Department of Psychiatry, Gauhati Medical College Hospital (GMCH), found that among the individuals who called 46 % was suffering from anxiety, 14% from depressive symptoms, and 8.3 percent from depression [21].

5.4.2. Government and Non-Government Initiatives

These reports highlight the need for increased investment in mental health services in Assam post the COVID-19 pandemic. It is crucial to prioritize mental health care and provide accessible mental health services to those in needs especially in regions like Assam that are already grappling with multiple challenges [18].The state government authority had initiated tele-mental health programs like MONON ASSAM CARES, during the COVID19 emergency to tone down the ill effects of lockdown on the mental health of the state population as well as to provide immediate attention to any mental health emergency. Previously, six phone lines had been providedby the Police in April 2020 as a helpline initiative. [22]. In the first six months, 43,700 COVID-19 infected people were contacted and provided psychological first aid, which is a mixture of active listening, problem-solving, meditation and relaxation techniques [22]. The families who lost their family members were given grief counselling by the volunteers andwhen severe problems have been arisen, those cases are referred to hospitals. [22].

6. Limitation

- It is only a theoretical paper based on review of literature
- In this study no psychological assessment tools have been used.
- The study throws light on the mental health challenges of youth only.

7. Suggestion

- An empirical study can be conducted by using various psychological assessment tools.
- Similar study can be conducted considering the mental health challenges of other age group.

8. Conclusion

Mental health is considered as one of the important determinants of a person's overall health. It refers to a state of wellbeing to deal with various situations and to learn and work adequately. This study mainly focuses on overall mental health challenges of youth in context of Assam. There are various factors contributing to mental health issues of youth like social and economic factors, cultural stigma, inadequate mental health services, terrorism, insecurity, unemployment, inadequate knowledge about mental health issues etc. Higher rate of substance abuse and suicidality has been found associated with youth of Assam. Not only in Assam, all over India there are high number of Indian youth found to be suffered from different types of psychoactive substance addictions, stress, anxiety and depression. During the period of COVID, the suicide rate was increased. The COVID 19 had major impact on mental health of people's including youth all over India. This pandemic was especially challenging for people who had been diagnosed with this disease and had to deal with social isolation, disruption of education, financial difficulties and fear and anxiety related to this disease. In Assam, youth has been found to suffer from increased level of stress, anxiety, depression and other psychological issues in the post COVID period. In this era of rapid development, the youth population is facing a lot of challenges related to mental health. Although there are number of attempts are made to mitigate such problems, yet Assam as a state has to go a very long way for successful attainment of optimal mental health of all youth.

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