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MADAD: Mobilizing for Anxiety and Depression in Adolescents via Peer Support



Introduction: This qualitative research focuses on capturing explanatory models for mental health distress among school-going adolescents aged 15-18 years in Goa, India. With a population of approximately 1.6 million and about 225,000 adolescents, Goa experiences high urbanization rates, which contribute to increased mental health challenges. This study aims to explore adolescents' perceptions of mental health distress, their experiences of seeking help, and their views on peers as agents of psychosocial service delivery.

Methods: Utilizing story-based questions with visuals and cue cards, this research encouraged adolescents to share their distressing experiences. Data collection includes interviews with students aged 15-18, with an emphasis on understanding their coping mechanisms, experiences in opening up to others, and preferences for future mental health interventions. Eligibility criteria include adolescents currently enrolled in school, while exclusion criteria include severe mental health disorders or neurodevelopmental conditions that require immediate medical attention. The data is analyzed using rapid qualitative analysis, followed by thematic analysis, focusing on categories like experiences of distress, coping mechanisms, and expectations from peers and professionals.

Results: Preliminary findings reveal that adolescents in Goa face significant academic and economic pressure, often exacerbated by parental expectations. Gender and family income were noted as key demographic factors negatively impacting mental health. Adolescents expressed mixed experiences when sharing mental health concerns with formal sources (e.g., counselors) and informal ones (e.g., peers), with some reporting harmful advice from school counselors. Suicidal ideation and self-harm have also emerged as critical concerns, with 3 cases of suicide attempts and several instances of ideation and self-harm in the past six months. Preferences for interventions highlighted that individual sessions with older peers were strongly preferred, and adolescents valued discussing different types of problems with peers versus counselors.

Conclusions: This study underscores the lack of adequate support services on school campuses, with a particular gap in long-term professional mental health care as well as high cultural stigma in the LMIC countries. Adolescents express a strong preference for peer-led psychosocial interventions, especially from older peers, suggesting that age-relevant tailored peer-support programs may offer an effective solution. The research calls for immediate attention to adolescent mental health needs in Goa and further investigation into culturally and contextually relevant interventions.