

Preventive mental health care is critical

Student suicides have spiked. Policies must be geared to decrease stress

More than 400 students (under 18 years) committed suicide in Delhi between 2014 and 2018, a petition filed in the Supreme Court has revealed. A public interest litigation (PIL), filed by Gaurav Kumar Bansal, requested the SC to direct all Indian states to plan, design, formulate and implement health programmes to prevent and reduce suicides. For a long time, mental health challenges were considered a taboo subject in India. But, in the last few years, there has been, at least in urban India, growing public awareness around the issue. Parliament has also passed the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017, which ensures that every person shall have the right to access mental health care and treatment from mental health services, run or funded by the government.

Despite this, the situation in campuses is worrying. According to a 2017 study published in the *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 37.7%, 13.1%, and 2.4% of the students were suffering from moderate, severe, and extremely severe depression in universities. Experts say that college and university students are susceptible because this is a critical transitory period when they go from adolescence to adulthood. This is also the time when students are also trying to fit in new campuses, ensure good grades, and plan for the future. Unfortunately, only a few top universities help students negotiate these challenges.

Universities usually take the counselling approach to tackle mental health issues. But this is inadequate, since it tends to put the onus on students to tackle the problem. Instead the strategy should be to invest in a preventive system that decreases stress. Addressing the root cause is critical because India doesn't have adequate funds (only 0.06% of the health budget is devoted to mental health) and trained personnel to tackle the burgeoning number of mental health cases.