

# Give them a voice

A holistic and coordinated approach is required to de-stigmatise mental health issues in educational institutions



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**I**magine corridors packed with students, each carrying their unique concerns and worries about life. We have always focused on academics, but now we need to start conversations to break down the stigma around mental health. Here's how this can be done.

**Normalise discussions:** Sometimes, students don't know how to talk about issues that bother them. This can be changed by building a safe and supportive space and normalising conversations about mental health. Include mental health into everyday discussions so that it is not taboo. When we talk openly about feelings, troubles, and coping techniques, the stigma fades and students get the courage to open up.

**Integration into curriculum:** An early prevention strategy is to include common mental health disorders, coping strategies, and resources in the curriculum. This gives students the knowledge required to manage their mental health.

**Mental health first aid training:** Teachers are front liners in recognising and helping students with mental health problems. Provide teachers and staff with training to recognise signs and symptoms; use appropriate tools and strategies to intervene successfully; and engage students in thoughtful and supportive discussions. Early treatment is important for healthy development, and this training is crucial.

**Access to counsellors and professionals:** A critical step is providing access to trained support through counsellors and mental health professionals, who should offer one-on-one consultations, counselling, and therapy interventions to meet individual needs and build resilience.

**Peer support:** Peer advocacy is an opportunity to connect and develop a feeling of being understood. The peer support group can be trained to normalise mental health challenges, challenge and reduce stigmas and myths, and lessen the feeling of "otherness" surrounding mental health disorders.

**Impact of social media:** In this digital era, so-

cial media has a huge role in mental health. Students need to be aware of negative aspects such as comparison traps, cyberbullying and information overload among others. Those taught to use social media in a healthy way are better prepared to navigate the Internet safely.

**Adult support:** Parents and guardians also need to be made aware of mental health issues through workshops, resource materials and open communication lines. This ensures a combined support system.

**Public awareness:** Basic information on mental health must be disseminated to the larger community to diminish stigma and discrimination, increase help-seeking behaviour, and enhance understanding and empathy.

In conclusion, we need a holistic and coordinated approach to de-stigmatise mental health issues and create a climate where students feel comfortable, supported and empowered to seek help.

Investing in their mental health is investing in their future and ensuring they have the tools and resources to thrive.