

This May, for **Mental Health Awareness Month**, WOW! dives into the importance of mental well-being in formative years, the alarming current landscape, and ways to address it

BY IPSHITA RAMAN

REDISCOVER YOUR POWER



The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Delving deeper, it calls mental health a fundamental human right – a state of mental well-being that helps people cope with the stress of daily life, understand their potential, and contribute to the community they belong to.

THE FORMATIVE YEARS

"Mental health conditions, such as childhood epilepsy, developmental disabilities, depression, anxiety and behavioral disorders, are major causes of illness and disability among young people," according to WHO (who.int). Worldwide, eight percent of children and 15 percent of adolescents are said to experience a mental disorder, with a majority not seeking help or receiving care. Suicide is reportedly the third leading cause of death among individuals aged 15 to 29.

Childhood and adolescence lay the foundation for mental health. It is a period marked by rapid growth and development in the brain. Cognitive and socio-emotional skills acquired during these formative years help shape their future and become crucial in adulthood.

The quality of the environment in which one grows up also contributes to overall

well-being and development. The lack of a strong support system, and early negative experiences in schools, homes, and digital spaces increase the risk of mental illness.

A GLOBAL ISSUE

We are only a few months into 2026, and social media, and support systems in families and educational institutions, are already being called into question.

In a landmark social media addiction case, Meta and YouTube were recently found liable by a California jury for deliberately designing addictive platforms that harmed young users. Back home in Telangana, there has been an urgent call for mental health intervention, as young people are taking their own lives out of fear of their parents, exam results and educational institutions.

Presenting new data at the 77th Annual National Conference of the Indian Psychiatric Society (ANCIPS 2026), held recently in Delhi, experts revealed:

- Nearly 60 percent of mental disorders are diagnosed in individuals below the age of 35.
- Mental disorders frequently manifest early, often during adolescence or young adulthood, with the median onset age ranging between 19 and 20 years.
- An international study published in the journal *Molecular Psychiatry*, tracking over 7 lakh individuals, has shown that 34.6 percent of mental disorders begin before the age of 14 years, 48.4 percent before 18 years, and 62.5 percent by the age of 25 years.

"When 60 percent of mental disorders are affecting people below 35 years of age, it becomes clear that India's mental health crisis is unfolding far earlier than we once believed. These are the years when individuals are studying, building careers and contributing to society. Early identification, school and college-based mental health programs and de-stigmatization are no longer optional; they are essential if we want to protect the future of our nation," says Dr Deepak Raheja, Organizing Secretary, ANCIPS Delhi and Director, Hope Care India.

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THE POWER OF NOW

With mental health concerns on the rise, it's time we pause, check in with ourselves, and take charge of the choices we make every day. Dr Harish Tenneti, MDS, Maxillofacial Surgeon, Meditation Instructor, and Life Coach and Emotional Therapist, shares more insights on this. He says, "Maintaining sound mental health means having the cognitive capacity to not dwell excessively on your past or future while staying focused on what needs to be done in the present."

On the much-debated topic of living in the present, Dr Tenneti tells us that as important as it is to practice living in the now, trying to control that outcome can be damaging. "You cannot force your

mind to stay in the present," he says. "Instead, you should come to terms with your past and be ready to accept what comes your way in the future. Doing so will enable you to stay in the now."

Dr Tenneti encourages letting the mind drift in a natural back-and-forth without letting thoughts affect us negatively.

He further asks us to observe these thoughts and try to understand how many are actually our own and how many are borrowed from someone else's opinions. He believes these observations or visions are as close as we can get to something that is authentically ours.

CONFRONTING THE SHADOW

Coined by Swiss Psychiatrist and Psychotherapist, Carl Jung, the term **Shadow Work** refers to the exploration, acceptance, and integration of one's neglected or hidden aspects – often described as the shadow self or the dark side of the psyche.

It is safe to assume that most people have parts of themselves that they are proud of, and, conversely, others they would rather keep hidden. These hidden parts can manifest through emotional reactions, unresolved triggers, and self-sabotage. Shadow work helps bring to the surface these repressed feelings, thoughts, desires, and fears in order to heal from past traumas, embrace self-acceptance, and foster personal growth.



BENEFITS OF SHADOW WORK:

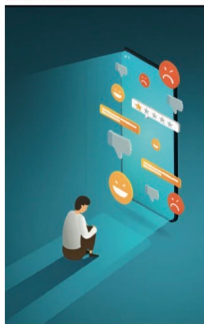
- Builds confidence
- Offers clarity
- Nurtures self-respect
- Helps rediscover yourself
- Improves overall wellness

THE ART OF LETTING GO

Acceptance, forgiveness, gratitude, and respect (for oneself and others) are a few key qualities often associated with fostering a healthy and peaceful mind. With practice, they help maintain composure in moments of distress, face challenges head-on, and develop trust in our abilities. These qualities also help people connect with those who are better aligned with them, and let go of the illusion of control and what no longer serves them.

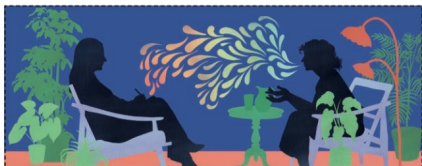
Letting go of the need to control either people or situations far outside ourselves can be the wisest choice we make to improve our mental well-being. Ruminating over past situations or potential future ones that cannot be dealt with in the present, fostering intense feelings without offering them an outlet, or holding on to grudges against others are sure to contribute to and exacerbate the deterioration of mental health.

"Peace requires us to surrender our illusions of control" – Jack Kornfield, American psychologist and writer



"The most intense conflicts, if overcome, leave behind a sense of security and calm that is not easily disturbed. It is just these intense conflicts and their conflagration which are needed to produce valuable and lasting results"

– Carl Jung, Swiss Psychiatrist and Psychotherapist



Q&A:

Dr Harish Tenneti about the stigma that still surrounds mental health, its common myths, and more

YOUR THOUGHTS ON THE STIGMA THAT STILL SURROUNDS MENTAL HEALTH TODAY?

There's been some progress, but the stigma persists. There are people who still think mental health is a very dangerous thing. People need to understand that one good idea or suggestion from a therapist can change their entire perspective. So, they should always feel free to reach out.

WHY DO YOU THINK MANY PEOPLE STRUGGLE TO RECOGNIZE THAT THEY NEED HELP?

Mental blocks and conditioning – ego, false self-image, and illogical “isms” – blind them to their need for help. Seeking support feels like weakness and harmful patterns get normalized.

YOUR ADVICE TO THOSE WHO FIND IT FINANCIALLY CHALLENGING TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP?

They can explore free mindfulness programs and doctor-led webinars. What matters most is the intention to seek help.

WHEN SEEKING HELP, SHOULD ONE FIRST CONSULT A PSYCHIATRIST OR A THERAPIST? HOW DOES THE PROCESS TYPICALLY UNFOLD?

The first visit would be to a psychiatrist. If they rule out psychological issues and chemical imbalances, they may then refer the individual to a therapist for talk therapy and for a change in perspective.



YOUR ADVICE TO OLDER INDIVIDUALS WHO MAY BE SET IN THEIR WAYS AND HESITANT TO SEEK SUPPORT?

A good therapist can help relieve years of trauma and ease the weight one has been carrying. If you are experiencing constant stress and worry, mental agony or depression, consult a psychiatrist or a therapist.

ARE THERE ANY COMMON MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS YOU WOULD LIKE TO DEBUNK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH?

There is a lot of misinformation about mental health, and with everything now being commercialized, it's important not to self-diagnose through the internet or social media. Instead, consult a professional and seek a proper diagnosis before jumping to conclusions.

WHAT DO YOU WISH MORE PEOPLE UNDERSTOOD ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS LIKE YOURSELF?

That we are not gods. Mental health professionals can only offer guidance; ultimately, overcoming a problem depends on the individual's determination and dedication. Change has to come from within.

ONE MESSAGE YOU HOPE STAYS WITH READERS?

Do not fall prey to your mind; be the boss of it.



PRACTICES TO IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH:

- **Mind and Relaxation**
Meditation (15 to 20 minutes a day)
Creativity (engage in art, writing, music, or any expressive activity)
- **Physical Health**
Exercise (30 to 50 minutes a day)
Eat healthy, balanced meals
Get good sleep (six to eight hours of deep rest)
Get some sunlight (15 to 45 minutes)
- **Digital Well-being**
Keep phones away for at least six to eight hours a day
- **Social Well-being**
Have at least one trusted person you can talk to

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT AND SUICIDE PREVENTION HELPLINES:

- **One Life:** 78930 78930 (24x7)
- **Tele MANAS:** 1800 891 4416 (Mon to Sat, 11 am to 9 pm)
- **Roshini Trust:** 81420 20033, 040-66202000 (Mon to Sat, 11 am to 9 pm)