

COPING STRATEGIES AS A CRITICAL CONCERN OF POST-COVID MENTAL HEALTH AMONG STUDENTS, PARENTS AND TEACHING/NON-TEACHING STAFF: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has produced unprecedented disruptions in educational systems being practised across the world. Beyond the immediate health crisis, the pandemic generated short-term and long-term psychological consequences among students, parents, teachers, and non-teaching staff. School closures, social isolation, economic uncertainty, online learning, increased care giving responsibilities, and occupational stress contributed significantly to mental health challenges. New and unfamiliar teaching learning methodologies added further to the burden. While the acute phase of the pandemic subsided in about two years, the post-COVID mental health concerns continue to persist. This exploratory study examines coping strategies adopted by educational stakeholders and evaluates their effectiveness in promoting resilience and psychological well-being. Drawing upon contemporary literature, the paper explores stress, anxiety, depression, burnout, and emotional exhaustion among students, parents, teaching staff, and administrative personnel. Findings indicate that adaptive coping mechanisms such as social support, mindfulness, physical activity, resilience training, counselling, and institutional support significantly enhance recovery and mental well-being. Conversely, maladaptive coping strategies including avoidance, excessive screen time, substance abuse, and social withdrawal exacerbate mental distress. The study highlights the necessity of comprehensive mental health frameworks within educational institutions and recommends multi-level interventions involving policymakers, educators, families, and healthcare professionals.

KEYWORDS: Post-COVID mental health, coping strategies, students, parents, teachers, non-teaching staff, resilience, educational institutions.

INTRODUCTION

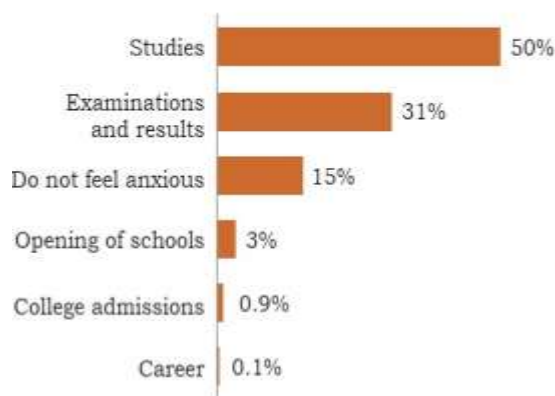
The COVID-19 pandemic represents one of the most disruptive global crises of the twenty-first century. Beginning in late 2019 and continuing through several waves, the pandemic transformed social, economic, educational, and psychological realities worldwide. Educational institutions were among the most affected sectors. Schools, colleges, and universities were compelled to shut down physical operations and rapidly transition to online learning platforms. The methodologies adopted then have left an indelible mark on the continuance of education in Indian and global educational institutions.

The consequences of the epidemic extended far beyond educational disruptions. Students experienced social isolation, academic uncertainty, and reduced peer interactions. Parents faced increased care giving burdens, financial insecurity, and concerns regarding children's educational progress. Teachers encountered technological challenges, increased workloads, and role conflicts, while non-teaching staff experienced employment insecurity and changing work conditions. There were widespread reports of elevated levels of anxiety, depression, stress, loneliness, and emotional exhaustion among educational stakeholders during and after the pandemic. Studies report significant associations between disrupted routines, social isolation, and deteriorating mental health among students. Furthermore, parental mental health has been shown to influence children's psychological well-being substantially. Educational professionals have similarly reported increased burnout and occupational stress during the transition to remote and hybrid educational models.

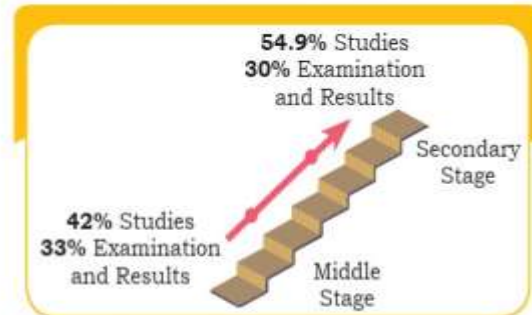
The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in late 2019 and persisted through multiple waves into 2023, profoundly disrupted global mental health, with the World Health Organization reporting a 25% increase in anxiety and depression worldwide during the crisis (WHO, 2022). Lockdowns, social isolation, economic uncertainty, and fear of infection added to the mounting psychological distress, and leading to long-term effects such as elevated rates of post-traumatic stress, burnout, and suicidal ideation even after restrictions lifted (Santabárbara et al., 2021). These impacts lingered into the post-COVID era, particularly in vulnerable populations where access to support remained uneven.

India's National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) surveyed over 379,000 students in 2022, revealing 80% anxiety tied to exams and results, compounded by limited emotional support outlets. Reports highlight student suicides exceeding 13,000 in 2021, parental stress from economic fallout, and teacher burnout,

with preschoolers in low-income families showing worsened emotional problems post-lockdown. Recent 2025 analyses note ongoing academic crises in government schools and high anxiety among healthcare-adjacent



As students move from middle to secondary stage, the most common anxiety causing factors were:



educators.

Anxieties related to Academics

Source: (NCERT, 2022)

As educational systems transition into the post-pandemic era, understanding effective coping strategies becomes essential. Coping strategies represent cognitive, emotional, and behavioral efforts employed to manage stress and adversity. Effective coping mechanisms tended to mitigate mental health problems, promote resilience, and facilitate adaptation to changing circumstances.

This exploratory study seeks to examine the role of coping strategies in addressing post-COVID mental health concerns among students, parents, teaching staff, and non-teaching staff.

2. Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

1. Examine post-COVID mental health concerns among educational stakeholders.
2. Analyse psychological impacts on students, parents, teachers, and non-teaching staff.
3. Identify coping strategies adopted during and after the pandemic.
4. Propose recommendations for strengthening mental health resilience in educational institutions.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an exploratory and descriptive research design based on secondary data. The sources of data are research papers in academic journals, Government reports, WHO and UNESCO publications, reports of mental health surveys, educational policy documents with special focus on post-COVID mental health studies.

The qualitative data collection and assessment approach was applied to better understand the deeper ramifications of the coping methods applied and proven useful during the pandemic by a varying sample population comprising students, teachers, parents and non-teaching staff. A thematic analysis approach was employed to identify recurring patterns related to mental health challenges and coping strategies. The data findings have been presented as case studies giving brief descriptions of the experiences of the sample population.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study is grounded in a few basic theories that form the background of the conceptual framework:

[i] Stress and Coping Theory

Developed by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman, this theory suggests that individuals evaluate stressful situations and employ coping mechanisms to manage demands.

[ii] Resilience Theory

Resilience refers to the capacity to recover from adversity and adapt positively despite significant challenges.

[iii] Ecological Systems Theory

Urie Bronfenbrenner emphasized the interaction between individuals and their environments, highlighting the importance of family, school, and community support.

A review of the available literature was conducted to understand the work of other scholars on the subject.

5. Review of scholarly work on the subject

The literature review conducted was under various themes that were concerned with many of the aspects of mental health and coping mechanisms to evaluate how different people reacted to and adapted to changed human circumstances.

[a] Mental Health among Students

A review of Asia-Pacific students found heightened levels of anxiety, depression, stress, and psychological distress during and after COVID-19. Effective coping strategies practised by a cross-section of the population included social support, healthy lifestyles, reduced screen time, and community engagement. A systematic review of school-age children revealed widespread disruptions in mental health, with increased stress and depressive symptoms among youth. Positive coping mechanisms and supportive care giving environments were found to mitigate negative outcomes.

Pandya and Lodha's review demonstrated that higher education students experienced loneliness, uncertainty, fear of academic loss, and diminished motivation. Institutions that provided tele-counselling and peer support programs reported better mental health outcomes.

[b] Mental Health among Parents

Parental stress increased substantially due to homeschooling responsibilities, financial instability, and health concerns. Studies found strong associations between parental anxiety and children's emotional difficulties.

Parents who maintained social support networks and family communication demonstrated greater resilience and psychological well-being.

[c] Mental Health among Teachers

Teachers reported increased emotional exhaustion, anxiety, burnout, and technological stress. Remote instruction required rapid adaptation to digital platforms and new pedagogical approaches. Teachers involved in prolonged online teaching reported higher psychological distress.

Recent post-COVID studies from Indian universities indicate that coping styles significantly influence emotional health and successful reintegration into educational settings.

[d] Mental Health among Non-Teaching Staff

Non-teaching personnel experienced job insecurity, reduced social interaction, and concerns regarding workplace safety. Limited research exists, but available evidence suggests elevated stress and uncertainty.

[e] Coping Strategies

Research identifies several effective coping mechanisms like social support; mindfulness; physical exercise; Counselling services; peer mentoring; emotional regulation; positive reframing of attitudes and approaches as well as the adoption of spiritual practices. Educational institutions that implemented tele-counselling, peer mentoring, and online support groups reported improved mental health outcomes among students.

6. Post-COVID Mental Health Concerns

Students were greatly impacted upon by the changed circumstances and situations. The constant uncertainty took its toll on their daily routines and academic as well as career aspirations. At that point in time their entire future seemed to have come to a standstill and no plans could be made nor could any constructive preparations be done. Their entire lives hung in the balance. The recurrent problems faced by them were:

[i] Anxiety: Most of the students reported concerns regarding their academic performance, future employment, examination uncertainty and social reintegration.

[ii] Depression: The symptoms included a sense of foreboding and hopelessness, reduced motivation, emotional numbness as well as sleep disturbances.

[iii] Social Isolation: The prolonged isolation reduced peer interaction and emotional connectedness.

[iv] Digital Fatigue: Excessive online learning contributed to cognitive overload; physical discomfort including eye strain as well as reduced concentration.

The parents also experienced a different set of problems that pertained to financial stress, increased childcare burden, work-family conflict and the ever present fear of infection and the attendant multiple problems of future being in the doldrums as far as the family and the children as well as all aspects of life were concerned. Single parents and economically disadvantaged families faced greater psychological strain.

The Teaching Staff experienced several newer forms of mental strain that bordered on total burnout, role overload, technological challenges as well as emotional exhaustion. Many of the educators struggled to balance professional and personal responsibilities.

Then there were the many problems faced by the non-Teaching Staff. These challenges comprised employment uncertainty; reduced workplace interaction; financial insecurity and also the ever-present threat of health concerns surrounding the pandemic.

7. Coping Strategies Adopted

While coping with adversity is an individual concern that develops according to the person's own capacity to tolerate the circumstances being faced, the coping strategies adopted are often similar and belong to a particular category. The coping strategies adopted by the subject population during and after the pandemic belonged to a specific range that has been enumerated as follows:

[i] Problem-Focused Coping: Individuals addressed stressors directly through constructive time management; seeking diverse information; skill development and enhancement along with efficient resource utilization.

Best Utilization of Benefits Accrued: The peculiar situation of the pandemic created circumstances where the sparse resources were taken care of through increased control, reduced uncertainty and improved confidence.

[ii] Emotion-Focused Coping

Many of the coping strategies included emotional expression, meditation, relaxation exercises and acceptance. Best Utilization of Benefits Accrued: The benefits resulted in reduced anxiety and better emotional regulation.

[iii] Social Support: The social support of the family was considered very high on the coping mechanisms to overcome the confinement and isolation induced by the pandemic. Support from family, friends, colleagues, community organizations was found to be highly protective against psychological distress.

Importance of the social support during the pandemic: Social connectedness remains one of the strongest predictors of resilience.

[iv] Physical Activity: Due to the prolonged bouts of isolation there was a need to indulge in some forms of physical activity. The activities included walking, yoga, home workouts, indoor sports participation, dancing and even some forms of calisthenics.

Importance of physical activity: The benefits of physical activity were apparent in the acceptance of indoor activities among the population.

[v] Mindfulness and Meditation: Having some form of control over the mind and thought processes was a significant part of the pandemic era. Mindfulness practices helped individuals focus on the present constructively, reduce rumination and improve emotional regulation.

Importance of inculcating mind over matter activities: The evidence suggests resilience-building interventions tended to enhance mental well-being and reduce future mental health risks.

[vi] Spiritual and Religious Coping: Many of the individuals relied on prayer, faith communities, religious practices, to find meaning and emotional comfort.

Importance of inculcating mind over matter activities: Many of the students and teachers were encouraged within the school curriculum to take up mind motivational and spiritual sessions as an effective coping mechanism.

[vii] Professional Mental Health Support: The health care services included comprised tele-counselling; online therapy; monitoring by school psychologists as well as elaborate employee assistance programs.

Importance of using Professional mental health support: These interventions were effective in reducing stress and depression.

8. Data collection, interpretation and discussion

Field Notes and Narratives: Case Studies and qualitative analysis

The random sampling method had the researcher approaching sundry respondents to attempt to understand and enumerate their experiences during the pandemic and the effective coping mechanisms they may have utilized to keep themselves mentally at ease. The case study form of reporting mechanisms for coping or their absence and non-functional aspects have been presented as short case studies.

Case-1: 46 years-old, female home-maker having two children. The four-member family was dependant on the salary of the husband:

“Space and resource constraints were often leading to persistent yet aimless and baseless arguments. It was one of the major ways of giving vent to our frustration. My man had never sat around doing nothing. During those days he had nothing to do and therefore he simply employed himself by ticking me off on the way I was cleaning the house or making food or even washing the utensils and the clothes. There was increased house work. It was very tiring to carry on day after day.

Even the news from all over the world was very depressing. I started getting palpitations whenever I heard someone in the neighbourhood had succumbed to the dreaded pandemic. It seemed like the end of the world had come.

I sought succour with God. I kept chanting ‘bhajans’ and ‘mantra’ which I had known since childhood. I found that this helped quieten my nerves. Then I started participating in online meditation and even motivated my children and husband to try it. They did for some time but were bored but I continued.

Gradually, I learnt not to panic and most of the time I started keeping my emotions within myself. Soon I realised that this was a good way for survival otherwise I would have lost my mind and my children would have suffered”.

Case-2: 39 years-old, female with two children (one of whom was an infant then). Husband in business. Had domestic help for 24 hrs.

“There were both negative and positive points of impact of the pandemic. In our household the main problem was financial. My husband is a businessman. Due to the indefinite lock-down there was no idea of income and sustenance. We were scared about how long we would have to stretch our limited resources. There was much tension in the household.

With every passing day the financial issue gained crisis situation as the income plunged further. This growing crisis was leading to extreme tension at home. Despite our best efforts to spare the children, they also became involved. We talked over the entire situation with them and by assuring them we also gained confidence. In this way we realised that as long as we are together we can face any situation. The togetherness of the family and total cooperation of the children reminded us of the stronger bonds of our family which could help us get over any problem. This led to facing the financial issue unitedly. Both my husband and I realised that our togetherness and our love for each other and our children was strong enough to tide us over the crises. We began to plan positively about coming through the situation together. I told my husband that ones the pandemic intensity subsides we can

plan on having work from home options for me where the children and the domestic help could also contribute. We gained strength from supporting each other. I realised that isolation was a big enemy of mental stability. If at that time my husband had been alienated and gone into depression, I do not think any of us would have survived. Our entire family could have been lost. It is the strength of one another that keeps us going in crisis. When someone is in distress and another person is there just to hold one's hand and talk sympathetically that things can improve and get better, the heart takes strength and one gets the courage to move on. This is the coping mechanism that helped us through the difficult times.

Case-3: 32 years-old, mother of an infant, entrepreneur, salaried husband, home-baker.

"I have had a thriving baking business that I run from home. It was rather unfortunate that everything happened together. The pandemic struck just when I had an infant baby at home and my baking business was at its height. I was in a terrible position because I could not give ample time to the baby or the business while there were many things that required my attention. My husband, who had a steady, salaried job was sitting at home. There were all signs of his going into depression and my going into anxiety attacks.

Due to the lock-down there was a highly increased demand for baking products in the nearby houses. To take care of the increased demand was very difficult for me because no outside help was available. I was experiencing increased stress levels due to managing home, infant and business altogether. I found that it was taking a tremendous toll on my health. The impact on my husband's mental health was also becoming apparent. He was becoming quieter and quieter. I became alarmed at the fact that he had stopped eating and even his sleep time had decreased significantly. I began looking for some coping mechanism that would provide help to both of us. I decided to follow two paths. One was physical exercise and physical activity and the other was to ensure some or the other mental involvement all through the day. The objective was to become so tired that one could sleep through the night comfortably.

This was when we started regular exercising at home. I involved my husband and even got him to supervise the involvement of the children. I set boundaries with my spouse to ensure that he helped with the housework and the business. He took orders and looked after the children when I baked. He began liking the involvement and once he saw the money being earned by the baking assignments. He also took pleasure in helping me out. I realised that he wanted to be useful and with my encouragement he was quite happy to share the load. He wanted me to teach him how to bake also. I think we managed to check the deterioration of our mental stability with this greater involvement in the available work. The solution was physical activity which led to mental involvement and the feeling of belonging and being alive".

Case-4: 22 years-old, undergraduate male in final year of B Tech.

"We went through a traumatic time. There was total uncertainty about the 10th boards. All my friends and their parents and even our teachers were constantly worrying about what would happen to our batch as we would lose precious time. All of us had been preparing rigorously all through the year and now when the finals were near at hand, we had no idea what will happen. There was total confusion all around. Some people said that both the years would be combined, some said internal assessment would be done, each of us students, was worried about what would be the outcome for us. How would we be able to pursue our desired careers if our fundamental year could not be completed successfully? What would be our status for gaining admission and how to go forward? Would there be any government intervention to help us? This constant bombardment of questions from our friends, peers, parents and even teachers was maddening.

Then there were the constant technical challenges for participating in the online classes. There was the problem of connectivity, availability of appropriate hardware and software for conducting the online classes. When there were 1-2 children in the house and classes were going on simultaneously it was not possible for everyone to be busy on the phone because many of the functions of communication had been focused on the cell phone for all of us. I attended my classes on the phone, my younger sister attended her classes on the phone and then my father worked from home on his phone and laptop. My mother also was on the phone to ask about the status of the disease among our many relatives.

There were several lessons for each of us during that troubled time. Excessive exposure to online content increased the fatigue. At a time when there was no social/peer interaction, it was a major problem. Almost everyone was suffering from the fear of the COVID-19 virus infection and almost equal was the fear of the future perils. The total uncertainty was making it difficult to even breathe properly.

At that time the very thing that I feared to use provided me with the answers. For me the mobile phone became the saviour. I learnt about how to use internet to the best of my ability. Once I had mastered its use, video and Zoom calls became the new playground. There was a wide variety of online games that took the place of physical games. Then there were a number of courses on the internet that I began to take to further my interest and academics. That is how I suddenly turned around from a position of vulnerability to a position of command. I was in a much happier place because I began relying on the versatile use of the mobile. It became my escape route. I could even help my sister with her class projects. The solution was in my problem itself. The best coping mechanism was to get immersed in the vast knowledge on offer in the mobile and thrive on everything the internet had to offer".

Case-5: 13 years-old, male student of 8th Std

“My mother could not understand anything. Papa was busy with his own office work and I was unable to get help from any of my friends. The teachers were too busy and harassed to give the required time to any of us for problem solving. Online classes were being conducted but we were not able to get our doubts cleared satisfactorily and none of the available tutorials were helping us in getting the doubts solved. Technical challenges were many and the solutions on offer were very few. On the one hand there was unlimited mental fatigue and on the other there was the laziness perpetuated by the absence of physical activity. No sports activity was possible because of the social distancing being practiced. The long hours were very tiring.

Gradually, I learnt how to make use of YouTube videos and online resources. I still use them when a topic is unclear. This gave me new lease on life. I could clear my doubts and also learn many new things. The best was my getting introduced to sports yoga. I became an enthusiastic participant and now I excel as international yoga player.

Yoga helped me take charge of my life. I learnt to become more focused and concentrated on my goals. I could control my mind from wavering here and there. Instead, I cultivated a confident, adventurous mind which was open to innovative ideas. This discovery and training helped me greatly in coping with the earlier hopelessness of my situation. I was able to help several of my friends and even till today my teachers give my example to others and asked me to help other students as well. Today I am in a very happy place and can work on any aspect of my academics with a renewed energy and positivity. The earlier stress, anxiety and feeling of helplessness are all gone”.

Case-6: 16 years-old female, student of 11th Std

“The online system of learning and teaching was very confusing at first. Both students and teachers were trying to understand how best to utilize the medium and obtain the best results. The classroom teaching we were used to was very different. It was directly interactive. We could ask questions and interact with our classmates also. Here we were isolated into separate boxes it seems. We could not get any clarity on the fundamentals being taught during the online classes. There could be no peer interactions or teacher consultations. I was under much stress because nothing seemed to make sense. There were constant arguments with parents because of studies and screen time. Nobody could understand my misery, anger and helplessness.

Then one of my teachers realised that I was on the verge of a breakdown if I was not helped. She reached out to me. Her handholding proved to be my lifeline literally. She re-visited all the subjects I was struggling with. Those areas that I was under confident in were tackled one by one and I regained my confidence gradually. It was under her guidance and with the renewed confidence that I had that I managed to strengthen the fundamentals of all the subjects that I was earlier screaming at.

I am still facing difficulties as scars of that time. I hesitate while having to go into a position where I am interacting with lot of people. Since I lived in a shell for a long time, I find myself very slow in opening up to anybody of any age group. In fact, I have developed a habit of retreating into my corner and avoiding contact until somebody makes the effort.

Though not doing very well in studies, I have developed a deep love for music. I took part in some online courses to learn. Music has become a passion for me now. It has become a route for removing all negativity and anger from within me in a creative manner. I can channelize all my creativity through music – it is my escape route. All the problems of the world fade away the moment I am in my world of music. It has helped me regain my life. I can think, plan and even take steps for my future which had earlier seemed dark and scary. Music has provided me with the necessary coping strengths to overcome all the problems that I was facing with my school work, changed teaching and learning methodologies and also the constant pressure of proving myself. Now I am calm and at peace with myself and with my surroundings. My parents are also happy with this new me”.

Case-7: 45 years-old male IT Professional with spouse also an IT Professional.

“The ‘work-from-home’ was the worst thing that could have happened to women employees. Already we were always being ticked off about not spending enough time for the family and the home when we were going out for work but now, we were expected to be available to our work limitlessly. The expectation of the employers was that I am available 24/7 for finding data, preparing reports and even making presentations. They did not realise that there was a pandemic going on that had the world in its grip. As it is, the reality was that every household was battling its own war against the pandemic. The constraints of social isolation, being confined within the home for long periods of time with no idea of how long the situation would carry on. Having four people constantly within the house was a major challenge in itself because each had demands of food, work, personal hygiene and space. There were many conflict situations created every day. Whether it was with spouse who was also tied down with work from his office, or the children who had to cope with their own stress levels induced by changed school schedules and teaching methods as also the uncertainty of their future academics. Added to this was my own hypertension which rose due to increased work pressure and handling household chores as there was no house help available. I was at the end of my tolerance because doing all the house work, cooking, cleaning and washing was something I had outsourced to my maids but they were unable to come and I had to do all this with reluctant help from my children. Everybody was busy. Then one day I broke down. I cried out for help and my family rallied around me. They understood that they were off loading much of their stress on me instead of helping me out with the household chores.

This was literally the 'Silver lining in the cloud' because finally my husband and children were with me. They realised that I was burning the candle literally at both ends. My husband reported that his mornings were free and he connected with his overseas company at night. Therefore, after some sleep he could put in two to three hours doing some of the preparations for the meals and even do the washing and putting out of the clothes. My children, both, said they will take on the dishwashing and the sweeping and mopping of the house and even help in the preparation and laying out of the meals. When they realised that so much work went into doing these household tasks they all decided to cut down on much of the labour. Soon our home was working like clockwork. All of us worked hard, shared all the chores and even had enough time to eat together, and spend some leisure time together. It was just as if someone had waved a magic wand. From a group of grouchy complaining people we became a family that was well bonded and focused on relishing every moment together. Togetherness and a supportive atmosphere proved to be a strong coping mechanism that helped us tide over the crises and even face the future with strength and confidence. We learnt to be vocal about setting boundaries between professional and personal life. There has been harmony and well-coordinated action all around our home. This was the best way to cope with the pandemic induced stress and we successfully survived the worst situations. That learning is helping us even today”.

Case-8: 29 years-old female, Mathematics Teacher in School.

“Though I managed to overcome the technical challenges easily but explaining concepts to 40 students online was very difficult while maintaining active interaction with them. I had to work overtime to be able to understand the new methods and then help my students get a grip on these technical formats. It was not easy as all students do not have the same learning capacity. Each of them works at a different pace. I learnt newer methods of teaching interactively and tried my best to try breaking concepts in a way that students can understand.

The feeling of constant pressure was back breaking because the workload had increased manifold. Much more time was being taken to prepare lessons and deliver them. I was always worried about meeting the expectations of the students, their parents and also the school authorities. Many a times I had to counsel one of the students who was almost at breaking point as I could observed that they were unable to cope up with the pace of the new methods or were having a tough time in adapting to the newer teaching environment. Online teaching was not in any way similar to the classroom teaching we used to have. The students could directly interact with the teacher whenever they wanted and could seek help but once the online formats were followed the proximity of the teacher-student equation was under threat.

On the personal front managing the household along with attending to the demands of my job became tough. I was constrained to seek help from my family in attending to the household work so that I could spend the required time to prepare my lessons and take my classes. Over and above, I needed extra time to be able to help some of my weaker or slower students.

Gradually, I persevered as the students began rewarding me by applying themselves diligently to the school work. This sense of relief and gratefulness to the cooperation of my family was what made it possible for all of us to get over the pandemic. Working together and the sense of helping others was what boosted my morale enough to forget about the pandemic and concentrate on the future of my students. The sense of responsibility kept me going. This proved to be a wonderful coping mechanism”.

Case-9: 54 years-old female English Teacher associated with university.

“There were a lot of technical challenges which were very difficult to cope with. The constant pressure of completing the syllabus, ensuring that the students were participating to a satisfactory level and making sure that the assignments were completed. Attention span of the students was short and this made it more difficult to successfully complete the curriculum in time. I was very stressed and for the first time I began feeling that there was no satisfaction in teaching anymore. The combined anxiety of the school work and the inability to cope up with the changed methodologies had far reaching adverse impact on my psyche, my ability to function normally and also my physical strength. I had no idea that I was fast falling victim to depression and anxiety.

The pressure to cope up with technical challenges was overbearing. I finally quit my job. It took me a long time to understand that the problems I had been facing had been more due to the many changes that had been occurring in my life rather than my own inability to deal with the circumstances. I had fallen into depression thinking that I was incapable of handling my duties.

Even at home I was finding it difficult to do my everyday tasks. My husband tried his best to help me involve myself in other activities like reading and watching TV but even the alarming coverage in the everyday news discouraged me and I sunk deeper into depression.

I finally quit my job and sat at home. Gradually, the pressure eased off but my self-esteem had taken a beating and it took me a long time to try and get it back. I am still recovering and have been put on anti-depressants which I am taking regularly. The pandemic has ruined me but my family has not given up on me. They are constantly trying to lift my spirits and involve me in their activities. I know I cannot return to that point again where I had full control of myself”.

Case-10: 28 years-old male Sports Teacher. Squash Teacher associated with school and also used to take coaching classes

"I was aware that all the students were facing tremendous technical challenges. Due to the extreme isolation situation I was very desperate to reach them somehow. How to teach a sport that is supposed to be played on courts? I tried getting them to take physical exercises and limbering up exercises online. There was break down of all services. I tried to think up newer and newer ways of helping my students. Many of them were starting to develop potential for State-level tournaments.

At the home front due to truncated salaries there were many financial issues because of closure of coaching classes. My family was suffering on all fronts because not only there was no job and extra work to be done, there was no source of income and money was required every day for day-to-day expenses. On the one hand I found my family struggling under extreme financial pressure and on the other there was the extended time of senseless boredom due to the prolonged inactivity. Finally, it was decided that we all go back to our hometown to sustain ourselves during this tough period.

I passed through a phase of life when I was faced with two impossible pathways to follow. On the one hand there was too much of responsibility- both personally and professionally and on the other was mere survival. There were two positive aspects, however, the first one was that because of the constant ongoing judgment by all, I managed to develop an assertive personality; I could make decisions on my own. I was not being led by anybody else but myself. The second aspect was that due to the time spent together with my spouse during the initial days made us understand the thoughts and feelings of each other. This made us feel stronger and we could face the challenging times with renewed strength and confidence".

Resultant highlights of thematic analysis

The findings and discussion of the results show that the post-COVID mental health challenges were widespread. Even half a decade after the highest impact of the pandemic the scars of the isolation, social distancing and the health issues that were rampant then continue to have strong influence on the lives of people even today. Many of the students continue to experience anxiety regarding academics and careers as they had to adapt to teaching learning strategies that were totally new and have been evolving rapidly. The students' anxiety and stress were in turn transmitted to their parents who along with dealing with the complexities of the situation in terms of their own home and work exigencies shared the concerns for their children's future.

The parents on their own also had to face ongoing financial and care giving stress because they had never been forced to live in such circumstances. The Teachers exhibited common signs of stress when they were faced with elevated burnout and emotional fatigue. The Non-teaching staff remained vulnerable due to the rampant employment uncertainty. No doubt the social support featured among the most consistently effective coping resource. Mindfulness, physical activity, and counselling significantly improved the over-all resilience. The institutions providing structured mental health support report better outcomes. There were certain maladaptive coping mechanisms which tended to worsen psychological distress. It was observed that resilience-based interventions are essential for long-term recovery.

These findings have significant implications for educational institutions. The main highlights of the findings brought forth the suggestions that educational institutions should develop mental health policies which would be comprehensive and could integrate prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation. There was felt the need for expanding counselling services which ensured that easily accessible psychological support should be available for all stakeholders. There was a need to promote mental health literacy through the spread of awareness programs for reducing stigma and to encourage help-seeking behavior.

Peer mentoring enhances belongingness and emotional support. It would also foster inclusive environments where the supportive institutional cultures improve resilience.

There are distinctive suggestions recommended for all three stakeholders. Students are advised to participate in counselling programs; maintain healthy routines; limit excessive screen time; engage in some form of physical activity and build peer support networks.

The parents should diligently practice family communication; seek community support while constantly monitoring the children's emotional well-being. They are advised to utilize stress-management techniques.

The Teachers need to participate actively in resilience training, develop digital competencies, access professional counselling avenues and maintain work-life balance evenly.

The Non-Teaching staff would do well to participate in wellness programs through institutional support and gradually learn to develop stress-management skills.

The key points of action for the policymakers were that there should be an increase in the funding for mental health services besides conducting efforts to integrate mental health into educational policy. They could also establish crisis preparedness frameworks.

CONCLUSION

The post-COVID era presents significant mental health challenges for students, parents, teachers, and non-teaching staff. The pandemic's psychological effects continue to influence educational environments long after the immediate health emergency has subsided. Evidence indicates that coping strategies play a crucial role in determining mental health outcomes.

Adaptive coping mechanisms such as social support, mindfulness, physical activity, counselling, resilience training, and positive emotional regulation promote recovery and well-being. Conversely, maladaptive coping strategies increase vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and burnout.

Educational institutions must adopt holistic mental health frameworks that prioritize prevention, support, and resilience building. Sustainable investment in mental health services and coping-skills education is essential to ensure the long-term well-being of educational communities.

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