STUDENTS HEALTH AND WELL-BEING (SHAW) PROJECT, PAKISTAN

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BACKGROUND

The majority of undergraduate students in low-middle-income countries are between the ages of 19 and 24 when mental illness is most likely to appear for the first time. Students also face more stress, financial issues, increased autonomy, social pressures, and frequent use of technology and social media, all of which may impair self-esteem and feelings of belonging Caitlin Monaghan, 2020.[1] Because of the detrimental impacts of COVID-19 on mental health, issues with young students' mental health and well-being have become worse all around the globe in the last two years. Because mental health is necessary for academic performance, effective job outcomes, and the development of personal relationships, this is a major problem for global public health. Sixty-four percent of Pakistan's youngsters are under the age of 30. Over 90 million Pakistanis, mostly young people, suffer from physical and mental illnesses. Unfortunately, LMICs such as Pakistan under-invest in mental health. As a consequence, the nation's children are struggling with a range of mental issues that risk their physical health, leading to increased drug use and suicide mortality.[2]

PROJECT PRISM BY SHAW PAKISTAN

SHAW- Pakistan was founded in 2020 by Dr. Sahar Rameez and her team, led by Meritorious Prof. Dr. Iqbal Afridi, to increase cooperation and reduce negative health consequences. In July 2022, SHAW Pakistan started its first initiative, Project PRISM, which focuses on creating Mental Health Promotion at universities and colleges to meet the needs of adolescents aged 18 to 25. The PRISM project will run for five years, from 2022 to 2026, and will collaborate with health organizations, national NGOs, educational institutions (colleges and universities), and youth-serving organizations. Currently, the initiative is self-funded, but it will seek national and international grants, money, and sponsors to maximize its impact and sustainability. In the next years, the SHAW-organization will concentrate not just on young mental health, but also on non-communicable illnesses.

Among the areas of attention for creative techniques are:

•   Creating an efficient digital health platform that links educational institutions, professors, families, and healthcare providers.

•   Assisting educational institutions in implementing health prevention methods, policies, and initiatives.

•   Providing universities with the knowledge and tools they need to emphasize the importance of early diagnosis and treatment of mental and physical health disorders.

Suggested implementation framework and strategy for improving mental health in Pakistani youth

There is presently no national strategy or guiding framework to guide activities associated with post-secondary, even though several initiatives and instruments have been established by international organizations over the last few years to address post-secondary mental health in Pakistan. To have a long-term impact on young people's mental health, we recommend implementing a customised mental health framework for Pakistani institutions.

THE FRAMEWORK

Project PRISM was inspired by several mental health frameworks introduced in many nations, including the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. These frameworks of consideration involve developing campus communities that encourage mental well-being and learning, and it contains four essential principles:

1.   It is comprehensive, viewing the entire campus as the domain to be addressed and as responsible for enhancing and maintaining the mental health of community members; extends the focus beyond the individual and strategies, such as treatment, skill building, and awareness, to the entire campus, including its environment, organizational structure, policies, and practices.
2.   Creates environmental conditions for the flourishing of all students that are based on social equity and sustainability values; supports integrated development and capacity building; provides targeted programs for students who would benefit from assistance; and provides specialized services for students experiencing mental health issues.
3.   Is student-directed, founded on the ideals of informed choice and the inclusion of students' voices in strategy creation and decision-making, particularly among students who have lived experiences with mental health challenges.
4.   Involves all stakeholders in a collaborative, shared responsibility for generating campus environmental circumstances that enhance student learning and mental wellness.

An example of this paradigm is the Systemic Approach to Campus Mental Health established by the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS) in partnership with the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA).[3]

Framework for Post-Secondary Student Mental Health
(Adapted from CACUSS & CMHA, 2013)
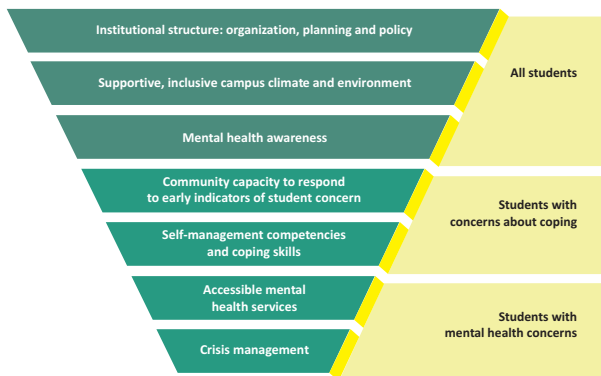
PROJECT PRISM INITIATIVES

- Offers professional development in classroom management by providing a PRISM training program to faculty members. The training will provide basics of excellent health behaviors in the classroom and link students to relevant assistance.
- SHAW- PRISM will aid student-led groups at the school. These groups will provide a secure space for students to mingle, support one another, and connect with useful health resources.
- Organize events that encourage good youth development. Mentoring programs, community service opportunities, and linking kids to community-based programs may give adolescents a network of supporting people.
- Make materials for beneficial, healthy living behaviours accessible to educators, students, and their parents and relatives.
- Encourage open, honest dialogue and empathy to reduce stigma.
- Inquire about family ties, PTDS, school experiences, and so on as part of regular health checks.
- Encourage the early discovery and treatment of mental and physical health issues by referring them to appropriate health services.
- Prioritise prevention above treatment strategies.
- Involve parents in conversations about connecting with their teenagers, communicating effectively with them, and monitoring their activities and health behaviors.
- Provide parents and children with information on teenage growth and health hazards.

CONCLUSION

Through the project PRISM, we are looking forward to analysing and evaluating how effective a customised step-by-step approach to the nationwide implementation of the Mental Health Framework in Pakistani educational institutes can be. While at the same time Project PRISM will promote mental health literacy at a vulnerable life stage for the early prevention of future mental health disorders and substance use, as well as reducing risk factors associated with it. SHAW Pakistan is also determined to promote and investigate the process and outcomes of digital mental health services for students in Pakistan.

Through this project and the collaborative approach of universities and health professionals nationwide, we hope to achieve a long-term impact and advocate for mandatory mental health services in Pakistan for healthy future generations and the country's prosperity.

There shall also be a reduction in the country's non-communicable disease burden by assisting in the development of healthier doctors who understand and practice a healthier lifestyle and will, in turn, transfer their skills and knowledge to their patients. As a result, population health will be promoted, and the burden of not only mental health issues but also other NCDs that are invariably linked to poor mental health and lifestyle choices will be reduced.

PRISM shall create a continuous knowledge translation and project sustainability by training future doctors in mental health prevention strategies, mental health literacy, introducing digital mental health navigation tools for existing services, stigma reduction, and compassion in medical professionals. This project shall also highlight the impact of implementation outcomes at the health policy level for mandatory mental health and wellness service recommendations in the region.[4,5]

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