

MENTAL HEALTH AND ACADEMIA



Ms. Sharada Nair

About the Speaker

Ms. Sharada Nair is a senior counseling professional based in Chennai with over two decades of experience in mental health and educational settings. With a background in Medical and Psychiatric Social Work, she has worked extensively across schools, child welfare organizations, and counseling centers. She currently serves as a school counselor and has previously worked as an adoption scrutiny officer and social service coordinator in multiple institutions.

She is a qualified practitioner and supervisor in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and has specialized training in child, adolescent, and family therapy. She is associated with professional counseling and training partnerships and is a member of recognized counseling and supervision bodies. Her work focuses on student mental health, developmental processes, and stakeholder collaboration in academic environments.

Seminar Overview

The seminar explored the intersection between mental health and academic life, with a focus on how students, educators, parents, and institutional systems can better understand and support psychological well-being in educational settings. Ms. Sharada Nair emphasized that mental health in academia is not limited to crisis intervention but includes continuous awareness of developmental, emotional, and environmental factors that influence learning and growth.

The session highlighted that learning is a lifelong process and that mental well-being significantly affects how individuals adapt, engage, and perform within academic systems. Early awareness, stigma reduction, and collaborative stakeholder responsibility were identified as central pillars in promoting healthy academic environments.

Mental Health in Academic Contexts

The seminar identified multiple contributors to mental health challenges in academic settings, including academic pressure, deadlines, social comparison, life transitions, loneliness, isolation, trauma, and digital lifestyle patterns. Particular attention was drawn to loneliness and isolation among students, which often go unnoticed but form a significant base for emotional distress.

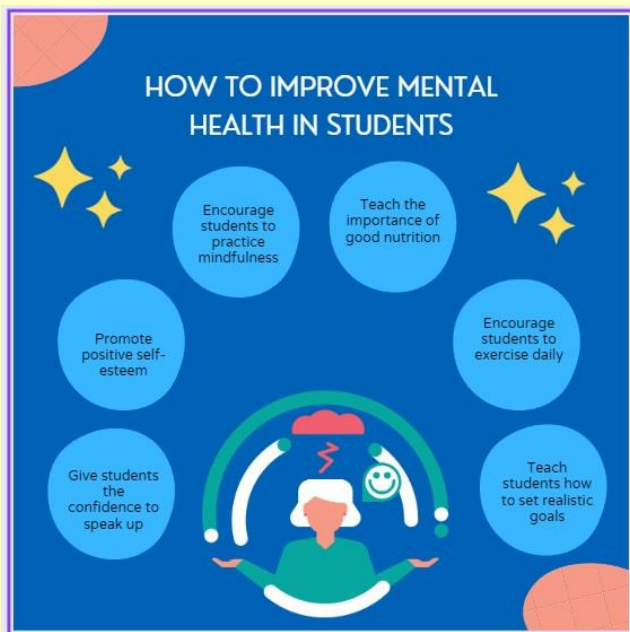
Ms. Nair stressed that mental health must be viewed with the same seriousness as physical health. Difficulties in functioning are often preceded by subtle emotional and behavioral

signals, and early recognition allows timely support rather than late-stage intervention.

Importance of Developmental Milestones

A key theme of the seminar was the importance of understanding developmental milestones across multiple domains, physical, social, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and recreational. These milestones represent ranges rather than rigid timelines, and variation between children is normal.

Stakeholders were encouraged to observe pace and pattern rather than compare children to fixed standards. Awareness of developmental variation reduces unnecessary pressure while helping identify when additional support may be needed. Recreational development was highlighted as frequently neglected, despite its essential role in emotional regulation and rejuvenation.



Role of Stakeholders in Student Mental Health

The seminar emphasized that student mental health is shaped by a network of stakeholders, including:

- Students
- Parents

- Teachers
- School administration
- Non-teaching staff
- Support personnel

Each stakeholder influences the child's emotional ecosystem. Ms. Nair stressed that stakeholders must practice self-awareness and self-care before attempting to support students. Demonstration of healthy coping, emotional regulation, and help-seeking behavior by adults teaches children these skills through observation and imitation.

Alignment between school values and parental expectations was described as critical. Conflicting value systems between home and school can create emotional insecurity and confusion for students.

Communication, Expectations, and Emotional Needs

The seminar discussed how miscommunication and unmanaged expectations often generate distress. Children interpret expectations differently from adults, and statements such as "it is for your own good" may not translate into emotional reassurance unless experienced positively by the child.

Core emotional needs are love, acceptance, appreciation, recognition, trust, and faith and they were identified as constant drivers of behavior. Academic structures should support these needs rather than rely solely on performance metrics.

Concept formation in children was described as complex and highly individualized. Values such as respect, politeness, loyalty, and responsibility must be explained and demonstrated rather than assumed to be uniformly understood.

Emotional Skill Development in Students

Ms. Nair outlined essential emotional competencies that academic environments should nurture:

- Identifying emotions
- Expressing emotions appropriately
- Understanding emotional intensity
- Managing impulses
- Delaying gratification
- Reducing stress
- Distinguishing feelings from actions

Children often lack vocabulary and regulation skills to express emotional intensity, leading to misinterpretation by adults. Emotional literacy training and modeling by adults were presented as necessary supports.

Guilt and emotional overreaction in adolescents were discussed as common developmental experiences. Constructive reflection, learning-oriented conversations, and non-shaming responses help transform guilt into growth rather than distress.

Learning Differences and Neurodiversity

The seminar addressed increasing recognition of learning differences, neurodivergence, ADHD, and related conditions. Parents and teachers were encouraged to seek structured assessments when concerns arise and to study both strengths and challenges in assessment reports.

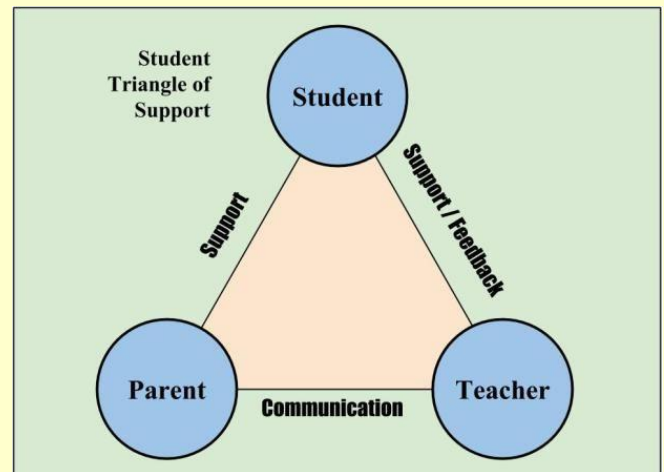
Early accommodations and support reduce energy spent on coping and allow children to invest effort in learning and creativity. Stakeholders were cautioned not to attribute all behavior to a diagnosis nor ignore diagnosis-related needs. Balanced understanding and informed support were emphasized.

Peer response to neurodivergent students often mirrors adult attitudes. When adults respond with acceptance and clarity, peer environments become more protective and inclusive.

Adolescence and Identity Formation

Pre-adolescence and adolescence were described as high-change developmental periods involving biological, emotional, and social transitions. Identity formation, peer validation, uncertainty, and emotional fluctuation are natural during these years.

Students in these stages test beliefs, values, and boundaries. Stakeholders must interpret behavioral shifts as developmental processes rather than immediate defiance or failure. Supportive dialogue and guided self-reflection were recommended over punitive reactions.



Self-Awareness and Personal Bias in Adults

Ms. Nair highlighted that adults carry inherited beliefs, cultural biases, and discomfort around topics such as sexuality and bodily development. Stakeholders must become aware of their own limitations and avoid transferring unresolved bias to children.

Open, developmentally appropriate discussion and honest acknowledgment of adult discomfort were recommended over silence or rigid prohibition. Awareness without imposition was presented as a healthier model for value transmission.

Support Systems and Help-Seeking

The seminar underscored the importance of structured support systems within and outside schools. Awareness of where and how to seek appropriate professional help reduces panic and confusion when difficulties arise.

Mental health support should be presented as a resource for perspective and coping, not as a label of defect. Interventions and strategies should be treated as experiments that can be adapted rather than rigid prescriptions.

Conclusion

The seminar established that mental health in academia is a shared responsibility across all stakeholders involved in a student's life. Emotional well-being, developmental awareness, communication clarity, and expectation management are foundational to healthy academic growth.

Ms. Sharada Nair emphasized that mental health awareness must move beyond disorder-focused thinking toward acceptance, adaptability, and emotional skill-building. When adults demonstrate self-awareness, emotional regulation, and collaborative support, students develop resilience and confidence to navigate academic and personal challenges effectively.

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