



# PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING OF ADOLESCENTS THROUGH LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** *Adolescence is a period of transition with dramatic changes in biological, psychological and emotional state. This transition brings responsibility, expectations and changes in relationship. Adolescents need to be psychologically competent for entering into adult life with new challenges. At this critical developmental phase of life adolescents become psychologically vulnerable as coming at the edge of a greater life ahead, environmental, psychological, biological and societal needs drive them into challenging situations. Psychological competence at this period is much needed to cope with these needs and challenges and increase resilience to face the life. Mental wellbeing is very important at this period to lead a productive and successful life at later stage as good mental health determines overall wellbeing not only for the individuals but also for the development of a nation. Psychological competence or the development of life skills is essential component to cope with the challenges and needs of this period. Life skills are important for promotion of mental wellbeing and prevention of risk factors. These skills can be acquired through life experiences but mostly through strategic life skills education.*

**Keywords:** *Adolescence, mental health, life skills, life skills education, psychological wellbeing,*

## Introduction

During 2015-2017 a worldwide incident made the society alarming and that is Blue Whale suicide challenge, victimization of the adolescents, an internet based game which drove a large number of adolescents to commit suicide globally, particularly in Russia, Brazil, China, India and few other countries. The instructor of this game leads the adolescent participants to self-harm and finally suicide through a strategic psychological motivation and challenges. Blue Whale victimization is an eye opener to have the concern regarding psychological wellbeing and vulnerability of the adolescents who are at the developing stage which is a very crucial but critical phase of their life. The adolescents are becoming psychologically vulnerable to different,

unacceptable and age inappropriate activities such as cyber hazards, violence, hostility, substance abuse etc. Due to various psychological and biological growth related changes individuals experience problems throughout the life which gradually become the reason of mental health problems. That is why today's state of good health does not ensure healthy life through out. To live a healthy and successful life it requires a sustainable solution to achieve a desirable psychological health and maintain it through life span. To overcome this situation, enhancement of psycho-social competencies of adolescents is required for prospective transition to successive stages of life to live a healthy, successful and productive life.

### **Adolescence: A Critical Transition**

Children and adolescents are the important components of human resource of the society as they are the potential and prospective citizens of the nation. This stage of life is a period of shaping up and preparing them for a healthy and productive adulthood who in turn will contribute to the socio economic progress and development of a nation in the subsequent years. The UNICEF (2011) and the SOWC report (2011) stated that adolescence is an age of opportunity for children and a pivotal time for us to build on their development in the first decade of life to help them navigate risk and vulnerabilities and to set them on the path of fulfilling their potential. This suggests that the period of adolescence, the second decade of life, is very crucial but critical phase of human developmental process.

The period of adolescence is an age of transition that bridges the childhood and adulthood. According to Erickson (1975), adolescence is a vigorous motion between two landings, one representing childhood and the other adulthood who must let go his safe hold on childhood and reach out for a firm grasp on adulthood and theorized adolescence as a stage of life during which inner identity has to be achieved which may be called as a period of identity crisis. During this period individuals undergo major physiological, biological, psychological and cognitive changes which bring complexities in life which require to be addressed properly. The process of this transition influences the development of the adolescents through combination of biological, psychological and social factors. Hurlock (2000) recorded that adolescence has been thought as a period of storm and stress, a time heightened emotional tension resulting from physical and glandular changes that are taking place resulting in experiencing emotional instability from time to time which is a logical consequence of the necessity of making adjustments to new patterns of behaviour and to new social expectations.

According to the Planning Commission of India (10<sup>th</sup> 5 year plan) adolescence is defined as “a phase of life characterized by rapid physical growth and development, physical, social and psychological changes and maturity, sexual maturity, experimentation, development of adult mental process and a move from earlier childhood socio-economic dependence towards relative independence”. Adolescence is a period for preparation for the productive life of adulthood. This period is also a stage of preparation to face the ever increasing social changes and complexities, expansion of social relations and other difficult and challenging situations of life. This period is also significant as it is of risk taking, solving own problems, peer pressure and

coping with stress. Overall wellbeing not only determines their individual development but also growth and progress of a nation. With all the discussion at different times given by various organizations and psychological experts and the characteristic features of adolescence suggests that a series of multiple developmental changes make this period unique. According to the UNICEF study (2013), adolescence population in India comprises almost one fourth of Indian population and according to the census 2011 highlights presented by Dr. C. Chandramauli (2014), it is 253 million. Some other studies suggest that the population is 242 million which is 22% of the whole population. Indian adolescents occupy a significant proportion of the world population. Quoting SEARO (2000) Vandana et al. (2011) reported that young people below 20 years of age account for 40% of the world population, while 80% are living in the developing countries.

The above discussion suggests that adolescence is a period of transition with rapid change in physical, biological and psychological aspects of an individual affecting the emotional state. The challenges individuals come across to enter into adulthood are different in nature such as choosing friends, developing or breaking carrier, making or leaving relationships, adopting right kind of attitude and behaviour, following discipline, understanding, one's need to go through life situations, interacting appropriately with peers, parents, teachers and society, resolving conflicts, decision making, solving problems, mood changes etc. Due to these factors the adolescents display abnormal activities like misbehaviour, extreme violence, substance abuse, anti-social activities and even suicide. Therefore, a balanced mental health is a key for a healthy development of adulthood and subsequent years of life. Mental health at this period is an essential component for their proper growth and development to become a productive citizen of a nation. There is an increased understanding that children, who are not mentally healthy, can have an adverse impact on the stability and economic viability of a nation (Belfer 2005). According to WHO (2014), half of all the mental illnesses begin by the age of fourteen and three quarters by mid-twenty and estimated that mental health disorders account for about 12% of the global burden of diseases which will rise up to 15% by 2020. Therefore during the period of adolescence there is a need to equip the adolescents with the psychological competencies to cope with the challenges and pressure in a dynamic manner to overcome the emerging mental health related problems. Here comes the concept of development of life skills or skills to live.

### **Life Skills**

According to British Council, Greece, life skill is a term used to describe a set of basic skills enables individuals and groups to effectively handle issues and problems commonly encountered in daily life. To maintain a sound mental health and to live a successful productive life, individual has to cope with various changing social situations and everyday life challenges. In 1990's psychologists working on mental health started thinking on the concept of life skills for promotion of psychological wellbeing and defined life skills in many ways. Nelson-Jones (1993) defined life skills as personally responsible sequences of self-helping choices

in specific psychological skills areas conducive to mental wellness. People require a repertoire of life skills according to their developmental tasks and specific problems of living. According to Powell (1995), life skills are like coping skills consonant with the development of the basic human developmental process, namely those skills necessary to perform task for a given age and gender in the areas of psychological, physical, sexual, vocational, cognitive, moral, ego and emotional development. Considering all the parameters of life skills WHO (1993) came out with the definition of life skills as abilities for adoptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with demands and challenges of everyday life. Above definitions of life skills suggest that life skills are the ability that makes a difference in everyday living, a competency that enables a person to live in an independent society and function effectively in this ever changing world.

Altogether life skills are abilities that help young to promote mental wellbeing, empower them to take positive actions to protect themselves, promote overall health, promote positive social relationships, change themselves and their lives by changing behaviour and thoughts, know oneself accurately, improve performance in specific areas, cope with emotions, able to explore alternatives, make rational decisions, communicate effectively and become assertive. According to Khalatbari (2011), life skills include a set of abilities that increase compatibility power and a positive and effective behaviour that enables a person to accept the responsibility related to social role without damaging other people and deal with the challenges and problems of daily living. WHO (1997) states that childhood and adolescence are the developmental period during which one acquires these skills through various method and people.

### **Classification of Life Skills**

We have discussed that life skills are basically psychological competencies, interpersonal skills and resilience for the child and adolescent development and used as health promotional activities which help them deal effectively with demand and challenges with everyday life. Life skills have been categorized by different mental health professionals based on the socio cultural context. Brooks (1984) in his life skills taxonomy classifies life skills into 305 descriptors, grouped into four broad categories, 1. Interpersonal communication and human relations skills 2. Problem solving and decision making skills 3. Physical fitness and health maintenance skills 4. Identity development and purpose in life skills. On the other hand, Hopson et al. (1986) divided life skills into four categories, 1. Learning or academic skills that include study skills, literacy, learning from experiences etc. 2. Relating skills that include communication, making, maintaining and breaking relationships, assertiveness, conflict management 3. Working and playing skills that include time management, money management and carrier planning 4. Developing self and other skills include creative problem solving, decision making, stress management, transition management, managing negative emotions, self-awareness and maintaining physical wellbeing. WHO in its definition termed life skills as ability for adoptive and positive behaviour. Adoptive refers to a person's ability to be flexible in approach and adjust in different life situations. Positive behavior means an individual to be forward looking and even in difficult situations can find

opportunity for solution to problems. Later WHO in an inter-agency meeting (WHO 1999) held on 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> April 1998, identified a core set of life skills initially in five basic areas relevant across culture- 1. Decision making and problem solving, 2. Creative thinking and critical thinking, 3. Communication and interpersonal skills, 4. Self awareness and empathy 5. Coping with emotion and coping with stress. These further were classified into ten core life skills and they are 1. Self-awareness 2. Empathy 3. Interpersonal relationship 4. Communication skills 5. Decision making 6. Problem solving 7. Creative thinking 8. Critical thinking 9. Coping with emotion and 10. Coping with stress. These ten core life skills which are generic in nature have been identified considering varied dimensions of competencies required for effective human functions for successful living. They are based in developmental theory and applicable across the life span of individuals. Regarding these ten core life skills Vandana (2009) stated that these skills are basis to every culture and can be used for promotion of psychological competencies among the adolescents. In the line of WHO's ten core life skills, Khalatbari et al. (2011) pointed out ten basic and primary life skills in different words to promote mental health and prevent social harm. They include problem solving ability, the ability to make decisions, the ability to have an intelligent thinking, the ability to think critically, the ability to interact with others, the ability to have an interpersonal relationship, self-conscious ability, the ability to empathy, the ability to deal with emotion and the ability to deal with psychological pressure.

Central Board of Secondary Education (India) grouped ten core life skills suggested by WHO into three groups- 1. Thinking skills 2. Social skills and 3. Emotional skills. Thinking skills include self-awareness, problem solving, critical thinking, decision making and creative thinking. Social skills include interpersonal relationship, effective communication and empathy and emotional skills include managing emotion and coping with stress. According to CBSE there are essentially two kind of skills and they are thinking skills and social skills and emotional can be perceived as a skill. Thinking skills relate to reflection, thinking and reflect at a personal level. Social skills relate to dealing with others and include interpersonal skills. Emotional skills relate to making rational decisions and agreeing to one's point of view, self-management, mostly managing or coping with emotion, feeling, stress and resisting pressure.

### **Mental Health and Life Skills**

The concept of mental health, its promotion and prevention are the areas to be discussed to develop a better understanding about the importance of life skills education. According to WHO, (2001) mental health is not merely absence of mental illness, it is the state of wellbeing with which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stress of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make contribution to his or her community. As such, mental health means maintenance successful mental activities like maintenance of relationship, maintenance of productive daily activities and maintenance of the ability to adapt to change and cope with stress. Mental health is very important in individual life as it is an integral part of overall health. Due to various risk factors adolescents are vulnerable to various mental health problems.

Today, one who has sound mental health, may have mental health problem tomorrow. Mental health condition accounts for 16% of global burden of disease and injury in people aged between 10-19 years. Suicide is the third leading cause of death in 15-19 years. As estimated by WHO, 10-20% of adolescents globally experience mental health condition start by 14 years, yet these remain undiagnosed and untreated (WHO 2020). This was supported in a study by Kessler, et al. (2007) as review evidence from epidemiological surveys on the age of onset of commonly occurring mental diseases based on WHO World Mental Health Surveys where it was reported that the results of the study show clearly that the first onset of mental disorders occur in childhood or adolescence. Depression is the fourth leading cause of illness and disability among adolescents aged between 15-19 years and 15<sup>th</sup> for those aged 10-14 years. Anxiety is the 9<sup>th</sup> leading cause of illness and disability for adolescents aged between 15-19 years and 6<sup>th</sup> for those aged 10-14 years. Behavioural disorders are the 2<sup>nd</sup> leading cause of disease burden in adolescents aged 10-14 years and 11<sup>th</sup> between 15-19 years. 62000 adolescents died in 2016 as a result of self-harm. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15-19 years. Among substance misuse worldwide heavy episodic drinking among 15-19 years was 13.6% in 2016. Use of tobacco, cannabis was 4.7% among 15-16 years old reported in 2018. It is quite likely that a timely intervention with early onset of mental disorder would help severity persistence of the disorders and prevent from long term consequences of the problem. WHO (2019) reports that promoting psychological wellbeing and protecting adolescents from adverse experiences and risk factors that may impact their potential to thrive are critical for their wellbeing during adolescence and for their physical and mental health in adulthood. The increasing rate of mental health problem as discussed in this section suggests that it has become essential to address this problem before it becomes a severe burden for the nation as a whole. Since adolescents are the potential productive citizens of any nation to carry forward the wheel of progress and development, their psychological wellbeing is a great concern. There have to be some strategic programmes that can raise protective factors creating an environment to protect and minimise the risk factors of mental health problems. Development of Life skills at this stage can initiate a strategy of creating and promoting sustainable environment for development of positive mental health and supportive of the determinants of optimal health. The promotion and prevention of mental health will foster nurturing environment to promote self-esteem, self-efficacy, encourage healthy relationship and improve psychological competence.

### **Life Skills Education**

Life skills education can be seen as empowering adolescents to take more responsibilities for their action (Srikala 2012). Life skills are ability or psychological competence by which an individual face the challenges of life and develop resilience. These skills are developed in an individual in two ways. An individual during the developmental process acquires life skills through life experience and some life skills are required to be instilled through strategic training to face the complex life situations. Adolescence as we know is the vital stage of transition from childhood to adulthood when rapid and significant physiological, biological and psychological changes take place. For a balanced growth and development adolescents have to develop

psychological maturation, cognitive maturation and their mental process has to be analytical. So, in one hand the adolescents undergo a rapid change within themselves and they have to face an ever changing situation of the society. This transition period of adolescence is very significant as at this period individual develop greater and increasing potential but at the same time they have risk of greater vulnerability. Therefore, adolescents have to be equipped with age appropriate skills to face the emerging challenges. CBSE has identified some key concern and issues of adolescents based on which the life skills training or education has to be designed-

1. Developing identity- at this stage adolescents face identity crisis and they require self-awareness to understand themselves and establish their personal identity.
2. Managing emotion- this is a period of the emotional turmoil and frequent mood changing reflecting different feelings which they themselves cannot understand
3. New/redefining relationship- as a part of their growth adolescents require to redefine their relationship with parents, elders, peer and friends. At this period adolescents require social skills for building positive and healthy relationship.
4. Resisting pressure- adolescents find it very difficult to handle pressure, coming out of high expectations from adults and various academic and carrier building related pressure.
5. Self-conduct- due to various changes adolescents develop aggressive self-conduct, insensible behaviour, substance abuse etc. which lead to the risk of physical and mental health.
6. Issues related to acquiring information and education- vast growing media and exposure to technology in the fast changing world many a time lead the adolescents with many unanswered questions and ill-information creating confusion.
8. Lacks proper adolescent orientation for safer life situation.

Pujar et al. (2014) conducted a study in Karnataka state with rural adolescent girls. The study concluded that the intervention of life skills education is helpful for the rural adolescent girls to take positive action and improving their coping skills of stress and problem solving ability and added that life skills are the building blocks of one's behavior and need to be learnt well to lead a healthy, meaningful and productive life.

## Discussion

Life skills are concerned with enhancing psychological competence in individuals to face the life situations and thereby promoting psychological wellbeing and mental health. To live a successful and productive life one requires maintenance of psychological wellbeing. Promotion of mental health enhancing psychological wellbeing and preventing it from the risk factors is a necessity to maintain a lifelong sound mental health. Enhancement of life skills through life skills education is an important tool of promotion and prevention of mental health.

Promotion of mental health can be strategically done through life skills education. The role of life skills in promotion of mental health is done through influencing the individuals' feelings about them and about others. It also helps to change others attitude towards them. In this process of acquiring life skills not only change the individuals but also the environment and this mutual influence promote mental health. Life skills education and its training is an effective tool for the individual to act responsibly to take over control of emotion and help to

rise above emotional impasses emerged from day to day conflict, peer pressure and entangled relationship, and protect them from high risk behaviour. Strategic training in life skills provides the adolescents with a wide range of alternative and creative ways of solving problems. WHO (1997) suggests that repeated practicing of these skills develop mastery, and application of such skills to real life situation and gain control over life situation. It is a promotional programme which includes the positive mental health and self-esteem.

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