

Educating for Mental Well-being

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Introduction

“Mind is very important and the school system should give more importance to enabling our students to have strong, stable, minds,” said a teacher in eastern Bhutan who started a mindfulness club in a high school.

The mental health of any society is a measure of its overall well-being. Bhutan’s recent experience with escalating mental health disorders, substance abuse, and growing stress and anxiety among the young generation, is alarming. Mental disorders are being identified while services are trying to catch up with those needing assistance.

Bhutan’s development philosophy - Gross National Happiness - is a framework that includes psychological well-being, with indicators that look at quality of life, life satisfaction, and spirituality. The external forces of globalisation that comes with increasing competition and expectations to get to a good college and a job, along with all the attractions of a material world, have created an environment where mental health programming needs re-examining.

This article explores current trends in the mental health of students and youth and highlights what some schools and institutions, including civil society organisations, are doing to promote mental well-being. It also highlights some trends elsewhere, what is replicable for Bhutan, along with recommendations by educators, counsellors and stakeholders. What are the most critical areas needing attention today? What if children were taught to pay attention not only to lessons but to their own emotions as well?

What is Mental Health?

This article looks at mental health across a spectrum of mental maladies affecting people in Bhutan. A counsellor describes it as a continuum of experience from stress, to distress, to disorder.

Stress affects everyone. In Bhutan, farmers are more stressed by the uncertainty of weather and crop production than urban dwellers who are

not dependent on farming for a living¹ (GNH study). Students coping with the pressure to get top grades to ensure a scholarship and graduates sitting for the civil service exams all undergo some levels of stress.

Science tells us that stress is not always bad. Stress releases cortisol, a hormone that helps people to deal with difficult situations and to even perform better. It is a problem when stress becomes chronic or long term, as well as trauma from a natural disaster or a sexual assault, that can lead to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). People with PTSD tend to relive traumatic experiences of their childhood. This affects daily life, work and relationships. Doctors recognise that psychological wounds not only stresses the body, but burdens the immune system and upsets emotional balance.

Some youth face stress and anxiety while others suffer disorders like PTSD, bipolar disease, and obsessive compulsive disorders (OCD) which typically affect a certain percentage of the population of every society. Inadequate mental health data do not provide a full picture but reflects a growing concern.

Situation Analysis

Recent studies show a society where the young are dealing with increasing stress, depression, anxiety and mental health concerns stemming from alcohol addiction and substance abuse. The statistics and cases highlight the situation:

- The Ministry of Health recorded 28,467 mental health disorder cases from 2016 to 2020. They include mental disorders due to alcohol or multiple drug use, depression and anxiety and psychosis.
- Abusive and dysfunctional home situations also lead to trauma that can surface later in life as PTSD or lead to addiction. A certified counsellor, Tshering Dolkar, believes that childhood trauma is a cause of some of the mental health disorders surfacing today that warrants more research. “Many children and women have underlying issues from being inappropriately touched, or abused, or bullied when young. It surfaces later through anxiety or depression”.

¹ Findings from the 2015 GNH survey study undertaken by the Centre for Bhutan Studies.

- A report of Thimthrom Schools², 2022, covering 24,036 students from 33 government and private schools in Thimphu, provides valuable insights into what ails our young generation. The study is one of the first to delve into the psycho-social well-being situation in schools in Thimphu thromde. It shares findings on two age groups - students from pre-primary to grade 4 (about 43% of respondents), and from grades 5 to 12 (57%).

The Thimthrom study confirms that common mental health conditions affecting youth include depression, anxiety, panic attack, social anxiety, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), PTSD, bi-polar disorder and OCD. Those who were diagnosed with anxiety and depression were reported in seven % 936 of the respondents from the grades five to 12 group, and just 1% of the younger student respondents (146).

Abuse and bullying affect mental health. Verbal abuse topped the list, with 20% (2,800) of the older students sharing that they had been name-called and insulted repeatedly. This is followed by emotional abuse (11%; 1,493), physical abuse (9%; 1,302), cyber bullying (5%; 622) and sexual abuse (4%; 522). One percent or 108 of the younger respondent group said they had experienced bullying online, especially when playing online games; 17% have experienced physical bullying while 5% have faced emotional and social bullying.

Low self-esteem is reported by 17% of the respondents with 2,385 (grade 5 to 12) students saying that they “feel worthless”. The study notes that many of these respondents come from families where parents are divorced or fighting. Other reasons shared by the students include low school marks and not being able to live up to family expectations.

The study found the presence of self-harm behaviour. Nine percent (1,299) said that they had engaged in self-harm behaviour such as overdosing on medication or drugs. Eight percent (1,114) said they had suicidal thoughts and 5% (650) had attempted suicide.

² The study, Situation analysis of schools in Thimphu Thromde with a focus on psycho-social well-being, was initiated by the Education Office of the Thimphu Thromde, conducted by the School Guidance Counsellors of schools in Thimphu Thromde. The study's objective is to get a general understanding of the vulnerabilities and needs of the students and to plan a way forward. The overall aim was to enhance the wellbeing and safety of all students.

Younger students are not spared; 2 % (206) of the grades PP to 4 respondents said they engaged in self-harm behaviour such as beating themselves or hitting their heads on the wall or table. This happens when parents do not listen to or scold the child or when parents quarrel and fight in their presence.

About 1% (116) of the same respondents said they had used harmful substances in the past three months. Primary-level children using harmful substances like tobacco, marijuana, and alcohol is a clear warning for schools and parents.

The study identified 1,220 at-risk and vulnerable youth who have been referred to relevant schools for follow-up action, indicating a need for more professional support for psycho-social and mental health in Thimphu schools.

- Other data show that about 34% of students encounter bullying in boarding schools compared with 24% in day schools.³ A guideline on handling bullying in schools, issued by the Pema Center, shows that nearly 3 out of every 10 students (27 percent) reported being bullied; 2.4 percent being bullied 10 times or more. The Pema Center is training teachers to deal with bullying which is harmful and detrimental to a child's health, well-being, and learning.
- Emotional abuse is the most common cause for women seeking counselling in RENEW (Respect, Educate, Nurture, and Empower Women, a civil society organisation). Many of them are less able to provide social-emotional security for their children. Emotional abuse affects a person psychologically but there are no physical signs, so it is harder to trace and to take the perpetrators to task, according to RENEW. The CSO provides a help-line and counselling services for family members affected by gender-based and domestic violence.⁴

³ kuenselonline, <https://kuenselonline.com/34-percent-of-boarding-students-experienced-bullying-in-schools-abmei/> accessed on 22.3.23

⁴ RENEW handed over the mandate for the Bhutan Board for Certified Counsellors (BBCC) to the Education Ministry's Bhutan Qualifications and Professional Certification Authority (BQPCA) in March, 2023. RENEW was involved in developing standards for certification of the counselling profession and professionals in Bhutan in partnership with the National Board for Certified Counsellors in the United States.

- Teachers from schools and colleges acknowledge common problems. One of them is alcohol addiction among youth and parents that lead to mental and behavioural disorders. Alcohol is a cause of social and emotional abuse and instability in families with long-term impact especially on pre-teens. A teacher points out: “Children are often asked to buy alcohol for their parents, so they start trying it from a young age.”

Teachers, educators, and counsellors observe that some parents do not give their children enough attention. Children from a primary school in Thimphu say that their parents come home late and they often go to sleep without meeting their parents. Observers point out that the demands of the urban lifestyle, with nuclear families and both parents working, have resulted in some neglect of children. The mobile phone is now, by default, a baby-sitter, companion and parent. “Young parents have little exposure to good childcare and child upbringing,” says an educationist.

Some young parents are, today, leaving their children in Bhutan in the care of grandparents as they work abroad. “This will have an impact on the child’s social emotional well-being. You can’t replace a parent,” says Karma Pokto, a teacher of more than three decades.

Another perception is that Bhutan wants to keep up with the world, so school, employment and society have become much more competitive, resulting in greater pressure on the average person, especially the young.

These recent studies and observations of educators are both a warning and reminder that much more needs to be done. The next section describes just some of the many experiments in tackling mental health in schools.

Tackling Mental Health Through a More Holistic Approach

Mental, social, and emotional well-being is now recognised as a key factor in education that could reduce substance abuse and ailments affecting the performance of children and students. The Education Ministry’s roadmap for the next decade will make a fundamental shift towards mental health.⁵ This will translate into greater action in schools, with active sports and engagement activities like scouting. The Education Department plans

⁵ Mental health will be a key performance indicator in the progress of schools.

to increase the number of counsellors in the education system, and has trained teachers in emotional intelligence and mindfulness meditation in a programme called “Search Inside Yourself”.

Life skills programmes introduced in 2008 were aimed at enabling youth to deal with peer pressure, develop higher self-esteem, and enable them to deal with stress. Sessions learnt from such laudable trials need to be now integrated into more targeted and focused activities that build on social-emotional resilience of both children and parents. Often, programmes lose steam once development partners shift support.

Many experiments have been carried out over the years to nurture the social-emotional learning of children. “Sometimes it’s old wine in a new bottle,” says an educationist. “We tried many things in too little time, sometimes leaving our teachers and students confused.” Today, focus is being placed on anti-bullying, on parenting without violence, and a globally relevant education programme. The new data available at this stage of education reform gives Bhutan an opportunity to look at emerging needs, and to work across sectors to introduce a holistic approach. Studies are needed to monitor progress and impacts on the society and schools.

Bhutan has 489 certified counsellors, an average of only one counsellor for each middle and/or high school. Others work in health care institutions and CSOs. A teacher/counsellor, Nidup, says counselling is needed at primary level: “The root of mental health problems are there in the primary levels, and students who come to me with their problems are mostly from grade 4 to 6.” Another glaring gap in the school system is the absence of social workers to work with dysfunctional families.

Some schools are piloting new approaches. Prompted by the findings of the thromde psycho-social situation study, Jigme Losel Primary School in Thimphu is testing a more holistic approach that goes beyond just academic excellence. It has developed a calendar of activities for 2023 that caters to the five areas of academic, spiritual, emotional, social and physical learning (with emphasis on sports and scouting). This is drawn from the educational framework of the Bhutan Baccalaureate curricula that is being tested in schools under the guidance of the Royal Academy.

The Thimphu Thromde school study recommends various interventions to target general students and those at higher risk of facing mental health problems. These include enabling parents with skills and awareness to handle their own family situations and for school and parental collaborations.

“We’re looking at also engaging parents and community at large to be able to build our students’ resilience,” says Director Tashi Namgay of the Department of Education Programmes.

In keeping with the Education Department’s strategy, the study recommends a whole-of-school approach to help school leaders, teachers, staff, parents, counsellors to form strong social support networks for the youth. The suggestions will need support and resources to enhance mental well-being in schools.

At the university level, Bhutanese students now have access to Happiness and Well-being Centres⁶ that serve as hubs for counselling and well-being education. This is part of an ambitious programme that is being tested across nine colleges of the Royal University of Bhutan. The centres - set up between 2019 and 2020 - provide basic counselling, mindfulness meditation classes, yoga, and other activities. It is designed to focus on enhancing students’ ability to work on life changes, to be mindful as a coping mechanism for a fast-paced world, and to build social-emotional intelligence.

A 2021 assessment of the centres showed some initial results, from an increased awareness of mental health and positive attitudes towards counselling, and mental health awareness, to reduction in academic stress. It also recognised a need to do more to popularise the centres.

The assessment highlighted mental health stigma that make it difficult for students to seek help: “Mental health issues are often internalised as negative stereotypes and cause low self-esteem and shame.” Students quoted in the study indicated discrimination: “People around me used to mock me for seeking counselling service and they used to perceive me as weak and helpless and a kind of coward. I had to tolerate such negative

⁶ These centres were developed through the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education programme and in a partnership with the RUB, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Universidade da Maia (ISMAI), and the University of Birmingham.

perceptions and criticisms to try to bring about a change in my habitual patterns”.⁷

Educational centres and schools can play a major role in making mental health a daily conversation topic and in breaking the stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes towards persons seeking help for mental health issues. These conversations must include parents and family members. Teachers have been trained in counselling and the assessment recommends regular RUB-wide counsellor meetings and monitoring of the centres.

The Centres’ work, still in a formative stage, includes the development of a digital platform to support mental health, well-being, and counselling services.

Other Initiatives

Lhomon education, a CSO in Samdrup Jongkhar, has been conducting mindfulness workshops for teachers, called “wakefulness retreats”. It has trained about 500 teachers and youth since 2013, with rinpoches, khenpos and other meditation masters leading the training, usually over 7 to 10 days.

The training has inspired Tshering Yangzom, a teacher of 23 years, to start a mindfulness club in the Karma Ling Higher Secondary School. Students (grade 9-12) learn walking meditation, to eat mindfully, clean their surroundings mindfully, and to simply sit and observe themselves. This practice, she says, has helped herself deal with a restless mind and anxiety. “We, as teachers, are simply guides. We have to build strong minds in our children”.

Elsewhere

What can Bhutan learn from experiences with mental health programmes elsewhere?

Research into social emotional learning has had a longer history in the developed world. This has led to the development of various tools and

⁷ Quote taken from pg. 19 of the assessment report.

platforms to address mental health in schools. Terms like “mindfulness” were synthesised from dharma practice along with various therapy approaches that were inspired by Buddhist thinking but made secular and popular in the West. These are returning to Bhutan through meditation programmes.

The University of Wisconsin’s Centre for Healthy Minds⁸ has used neuroscience research to develop tools and skills to enable people to develop well-being. Among many initiatives, it has designed a kindness curriculum for preschool children and an app for people wanting to “train” their minds for improved mental health. These programmes draw from a combination of science and dharma practices but are packaged in a more secular manner, without any Asian cultural icons.

Some Buddhist masters are experimenting with “alternative schools” that offer young minds the possibility of integrating wisdom and compassion with progressive education. The framework, if done well, could lead to a more socially and emotionally balanced child. The Blue Lion school in Singapore, an early childcare centre, integrates social emotional learning throughout the day for its students. By integrating Buddhist thinking into learning, the children learn to become more conscious of the life cycle, by creating a composting bin to see how things decompose. They are shown how to express emotions in colour, and learn to identify feelings of peace and acts of kindness. A teacher, Hui Hiang, explains: “ To demonstrate anger, we do woodwork. And then show the children that when they are angry, it leaves a mark, just as there’s a mark on the wood even after a nail is removed”.

Online therapy is now being tested in the United States as a means for the average person to seek help, determine their mental health and deal with stress and anxiety. Sometimes it is an automated conversational agent (like Siri in Apple) such as “woebot”, marketed as “your friendly self-care expert”.⁹ This is a service for young adults who experience stress and are unable to sleep, according to one review. Woebot acts like a robot but is described as being useful for its reassuring statements, even if it is coming from an app.

⁸ The Centre describes itself as a “healthyminds” innovation and is founded on the knowledge that we can train our brains and minds to help ourselves and others.

⁹ <https://onemindpsyberguide.org/expert-review/woebot-an-expert-review/> accessed 22nd March, 2023. Woebot, a professional review (by Colleen Style Shields, a clinical psychologist). One Mind Psyberguide.

Research shows that young adults above 18 years who used it had lower depression scores after a fortnight; but it notes that the sample group tested on was a relatively homogeneous one so it may not be easily applicable to others. It is unclear if such an app would work in Bhutan, as the conversation, speech and responses would have to be culturally appropriate.

Multiple studies point to a strong correlation between heavy social media use and an increased risk of depression, anxiety, loneliness, self-harm, and even suicidal thoughts. Social media use may also promote negative experiences such as low self-esteem, or inadequacy in your life or appearance. Bhutanese youth are increasingly connecting on social media (gaming, videos, quick exchanges) with less time for human interaction.¹⁰ Social media tends to lead users to constantly “package” themselves and to seek “approval” from others, including strangers.

The use of AI in monitoring and responding to people with mental health needs exists in some public schools in the United States.¹¹ An app called SAM is used to support school therapists to enable them to be able to identify who is at risk of self-harm. Overall, it is evident that the design and use of algorithm is full of pitfalls, risks and opportunities. They cannot be used on their own without a therapist or counsellor, or even social workers, who can assist people with mental depression to get the kind of medical attention and social support they would need. Bhutan has no social workers in schools or colleges. And Bhutan’s digital platforms are used largely to gain data and information with less interactivity.

Algorithms are being developed to predict the emergence of mental ailments in the future. Bhutan, in its plans to create a digital future, can find ways to harness AI to improve mental health.

Looking Ahead

Well-being is a skill, and experiments (both global and within Bhutan) show that these skills can be developed. The best time to start introducing

¹⁰ https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/03/06/can-ai-treat-mental-illness?utm_source=nl&utm_brand=tny&utm_mailing=TNY_Daily_022723&utm_campaign=aud-dev&utm_medium=email&utm_term=tny_daily_digest&bxid=605971fc7225410787748593&cndid=64299823&chasha=9b7a85bf189e09e1550e12fe258e6a1c&hashb=4290b9954de785945be4498c4e0e775bea26ee27&chashc=d8d01003b602f9c1e7a2815f206a6b767b588d040eeabd3913ce8bf8ebef8c5c&esrc=&mbid=CRMNYR012019 accessed 22nd March, 2023

¹¹ A 2021 study, Social Media Landscape in Bhutan by the Royal Thimphu College and Bhutan Media Foundation provide some information on social media use by youth.

such skills is in the early years of a child's life (as well as early parenting years for longer term benefits for society). A mental health programme, therefore, has to go beyond access to psychiatric services. It will require working on a more practical level to enable people to have access to services and infrastructure that contribute to reducing chronic stress situations - school performance, learning and education opportunities, housing, food security, child care, job security, and so on. It will need to go beyond the "psychological first aid" of counselling that is being offered in schools today. Preventive measures to improve the overall home, school and community environment can do much to create a conducive atmosphere for mental well-being. A scan of Bhutan's situation shows many initiatives that can be brought together for a more strategic longer-term plan and programme.

There are many experiments using Buddhist principles, but most of them are outside the regular school system. Bhutan, a country with a strong tradition of wisdom and compassion, can integrate and test many of these principles in the secular school system. Bhutanese schools and institutions can be a lab where mental well-being is cultivated. This will help raise a generation of Bhutanese who are resilient and connected and able to handle an increasingly disruptive and competitive world. It is time to coordinate and collaborate from the home to the school and the community.

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