



THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN PROMOTING STRESS MANAGEMENT & MENTAL WELL-BEING AMONG LEARNERS AND COMMUNITIES

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INTRODUCTION

In the rugged and remote Himalayan terrain of Uttarakhand, where communities in districts like Chamoli Garhwal contend with geographical isolation, economic hardship, seasonal livelihood patterns, and limited access to professional services, mental health remains a deeply underaddressed concern. Youth, students, and rural families face a complex web of stressors — academic pressure, unemployment anxiety, migration of family members to urban plains, natural disaster vulnerability, and social stigma around seeking mental health support. In such a landscape, education emerges not merely as an academic enterprise but as a transformative force capable of building psychological resilience, emotional literacy, and community well-being.

Mental health challenges among students in India are alarmingly prevalent. According to various national surveys, a significant proportion of school and college students report symptoms of anxiety, depression, and chronic stress, with the problem accentuated in rural and hilly regions where professional psychological support is virtually absent. The students of Government Inter College, Tangsa Dasholi, and similar institutions across Chamoli Garhwal are no exception — many navigate the pressures of examinations, uncertain futures, family expectations, and the emotional toll of living in ecologically fragile, economically stressed communities.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant policy shift by explicitly recognizing the importance of socio-emotional learning (SEL), mental well-being, and holistic development alongside academic achievement. It calls for integrating stress management tools, counselling infrastructure, and mindfulness-based practices within the educational ecosystem. At the national level, schemes such as the Manodarpan initiative under the Ministry of Education and the Ayushman Bharat Health and Wellness Centres provide institutional backing for school mental health programs.

Uttarakhand, through its State Mental Health Authority and education department, is gradually aligning its school programs with these mandates.

This article examines the critical role that formal and informal education can play in promoting mental well-being and stress management among students and communities in Uttarakhand. It explores the institutional landscape, the integration of mental health education under NEP 2020, key government schemes, lived experiences of learners, persistent challenges unique to hilly and remote contexts, and actionable recommendations for building a mentally healthier educational ecosystem in the state.

Understanding Stress Among Students and Communities in Uttarakhand

Stress among students and community members in Uttarakhand is multi-dimensional and context-specific. Unlike urban counterparts who may face social competition and digital overload, rural students in Chamoli Garhwal contend with a distinct combination of stressors that intertwine poverty, ecology, and culture.

Academic and Examination Stress

Students preparing for board examinations and competitive entrance tests often face intense pressure without access to coaching, mentoring, or counselling. The fear of failure, parental expectations tied to educational attainment as a pathway out of poverty, and inadequate study infrastructure at home generate chronic anxiety. Many students study by kerosene lamp in areas with unreliable electricity, further compounding the stress of academic preparation.

Migration-Induced Emotional Distress

A defining feature of Uttarakhand's social fabric is widespread male out-migration to cities and the armed forces. Children growing up in households with absentee fathers and overburdened mothers experience emotional neglect, attachment disruptions, and reduced psychological security. The resulting 'pahaadi ekalpan' (hill loneliness) deeply affects the mental health of both students and the communities they belong to.

Disaster Vulnerability and Ecological Anxiety

Living in seismically active, landslide-prone

Himalayan zones, communities face recurring ecological trauma. Events like the 2021 Chamoli flood disaster leave lasting psychological scars

— grief, post-traumatic stress, and helplessness — that rarely receive formal therapeutic attention. Students who witness or survive such events often struggle to re-engage with education without acknowledgment of their trauma.

Stigma and Help-Seeking Barriers

Cultural norms in hilly communities often equate mental distress with personal weakness or spiritual failing, discouraging open conversation about psychological struggles. There is limited awareness of mental health as a medical concern, and teachers, parents, and community leaders are often ill-equipped to identify or respond to signs of psychological distress in young people.

Institutional Foundations for Mental Well-being Education in Uttarakhand

Uttarakhand's framework for integrating mental health within education involves multiple layers of governance, from national policy mandates to state-level implementation agencies and school-level interventions.

State Mental Health Authority (SMHA), Uttarakhand

The State Mental Health Authority oversees compliance with the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017, and coordinates district mental health programs. Increasingly, it is engaging with the education department to extend school-based mental health awareness programs, especially in remote districts where clinical professionals are scarce.

Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK)

The RKSK is a national adolescent health program that specifically addresses mental health as one of its six thematic areas. In Uttarakhand, peer educators trained under RKSK in schools serve as frontline ambassadors for emotional well-being, creating supportive networks among adolescents in districts like Chamoli, Rudraprayag, and Pithoragarh.

School Health and Wellness Program (SHWP)

Under the joint collaboration of the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare and the Ministry of Education, the School Health and Wellness Program reaches government schools with trained

Health and Wellness Ambassadors — typically teachers designated and trained to address physical and mental health needs. Government inter colleges in Uttarakhand are gradually being brought under this umbrella.

Counselling Infrastructure in Higher Secondary Institutions

While urban colleges in Dehradun and Haridwar have begun establishing formal counselling cells, rural inter colleges in Chamoli Garhwal largely lack trained counsellors. The reliance on subject teachers and class in charges to informally manage student distress is widespread but insufficient, underscoring the critical gap between policy intent and ground reality.

Mental Well-being Integration from School to Higher Education under NEP 2020

NEP 2020 represents a landmark acknowledgment that education must address the whole child

— cognitive, emotional, social, and physical. Its vision of holistic development explicitly incorporates mental health as a core educational outcome, with specific provisions across different stages of schooling.

Classes 1–5: Foundational Emotional Literacy

At the foundational stage, NEP 2020 emphasizes creating emotionally safe classrooms through joyful, activity-based learning that reduces performance anxiety. Simple breathing exercises, cooperative games, art and storytelling are recognized as tools for building emotional regulation and a sense of belonging from the earliest years of schooling.

Classes 6–8: Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

In the preparatory and middle stages, NEP 2020

proposes age-appropriate SEL modules covering self-awareness, empathy, conflict resolution, and healthy communication. In Uttarakhand's context, this can be aligned with local values of community solidarity and ecological connectedness, making mental health education culturally resonant for hill students.

Classes 9–10: Stress Literacy and Coping Skills

At the secondary level, where examination pressure peaks, NEP 2020 calls for structured programs on stress identification, time management, and constructive coping strategies. Guidance teachers in Uttarakhand government schools are being trained under Manodarpan guidelines to deliver such content through dedicated life-skills periods and school assemblies.

Classes 11–12: Career Counselling and Mental Resilience

Senior secondary students in districts like Chamoli Garhwal face compounded stress as they navigate board examinations, career choices, and often impending migration decisions. NEP 2020 calls for career guidance integrated with psychological support — a combination that acknowledges the deep link between occupational uncertainty and mental distress for hill youth.

Higher Education: Counselling Cells and Well-being Curricula

At the college and university level, NEP 2020 mandates the establishment of student wellness centres with trained counsellors, peer support programs, and curriculum components addressing mental health literacy. For degree colleges in remote Uttarakhand, technology-mediated counselling through platforms like iCall and Vandrevalla Foundation helplines offers a viable bridge until on-campus infrastructure matures.

System-Wide Goal: 'Caring School' as a Policy Vision

NEP 2020's broader vision of transforming schools into caring, inclusive learning communities is especially significant for hilly regions where the school often serves as the most consistent

institutional presence in a child's life. Making schools emotionally safe spaces — free from fear of failure, corporal punishment, and social exclusion — is foundational to mental well-being promotion in communities like Tangsa Dasholi.

Key Government Schemes Promoting Mental Well-being Among Learners

Manodarpan Initiative (Ministry of Education)

Launched during the COVID-19 pandemic and sustained thereafter, Manodarpan provides psychosocial support to students, teachers, and families through a dedicated helpline (8448440632), online resources, and trained school counsellors. In Uttarakhand, awareness campaigns under Manodarpan have reached select urban and semi-urban schools, though penetration in remote inter colleges of Chamoli Garhwal remains limited.

Ayushman Bharat – Health and Wellness Centres

Under Ayushman Bharat, sub-health centers are being upgraded into Health and Wellness Centres (HWCs) that include mental health screening as a mandated service. For communities around schools in rural Uttarakhand, HWCs serve as the primary point for basic counselling, referral, and psychiatric medication access, bridging a critical gap in the mental health care continuum.

National Mental Health Programme (NMHP) and District Mental Health Programme (DMHP)

Chamoli district operates under the District Mental Health Programme (DMHP), which trains community health workers and ASHA workers to identify mental health concerns at the grassroots level. Efforts to extend DMHP activities into schools and colleges through teacher sensitisation workshops are ongoing, though human resource shortages remain a limiting factor.

CBSE and UKBSE Wellness Initiatives

Both the Central Board of Secondary Education and the Uttarakhand Board of School Education have issued circulars emphasizing student mental health

and reducing examination-related stress through examination reforms, open-book assessments at junior levels, and reduced syllabus loads during crisis periods. These measures, while systemic, need deeper cultural embedding at the school level.

Skill India and Livelihood Training as Mental Health Intervention

There is an underappreciated connection between skills education and mental well-being: employment uncertainty is a major driver of student anxiety. Programs under the Uttarakhand Skill Development Mission (UKSDM) and PMKVY that equip students with practical, marketable skills in eco-tourism, organic farming, and handicrafts serve a dual purpose — reducing economic anxiety while building self-efficacy and a sense of purpose, both protective factors for mental health.

STUDENT AND COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES WITH MENTAL WELL-BEING IN UTTARAKHAND

Silence and Suppression in Hill Communities

In conversations with students and teachers at Government Inter College, Tangsa Dasholi, and similar institutions, a recurring theme emerges: mental distress is typically expressed as physical complaints — headaches, fatigue, loss of appetite — rather than psychological symptoms. Cultural norms discourage open discussion of emotional struggles, leading to prolonged suffering without diagnosis or support.

Teachers as Informal Mental Health Supporters

In the absence of trained counsellors, teachers in rural Uttarakhand schools often serve as de facto emotional anchors for students. A trusted teacher's attentive relationship with a struggling student can be profoundly protective. However, this role is informal, unrecognized, and unsupported — placing an invisible emotional burden on teachers themselves, contributing to educator burnout.

Positive Impact of Yoga and Mindfulness in Schools

Several government schools in Uttarakhand have incorporated yoga and pranayama into morning assemblies and physical education periods, drawing on the region's deep cultural connection to contemplative practice. Students and teachers report that even brief daily practices reduce examination anxiety, improve attention, and foster a calmer classroom environment, reflecting the tangible benefit of culturally embedded well-being practices.

Women and Girls: Compounded Stress, Invisible Burden

Female students in Chamoli Garhwal carry disproportionate domestic responsibilities alongside academic ones, with limited autonomy and heightened vulnerability to domestic stress and gender-based anxiety. Many girls discontinue schooling not only due to financial barriers but also because the emotional cost of navigating patriarchal family structures alongside academic pressure becomes unsustainable without any support system.

Community Resilience: The Healing Role of Collective Culture

Despite these challenges, Uttarakhand's communities possess remarkable indigenous resources for emotional resilience — collective festivals, jajmani networks of mutual support, the healing role of devi-devta traditions, and the psychological anchor of a strong connection to land and nature. Education that honors and integrates these cultural strengths, rather than dismissing them, can meaningfully support community mental well-being.

KEY CHALLENGES IN PROMOTING MENTAL WELL-BEING THROUGH EDUCATION IN HILLY REGIONS

Acute Shortage of Trained Counsellors

Uttarakhand's hilly districts have a critically low ratio of trained mental health professionals to population. Government inter colleges in areas like Dasholi block of Chamoli district have no full-time counsellors. The few psychologists and social workers in the district are primarily hospital-based,

with no systematic linkage to schools and colleges.

Stigma as a Structural Barrier

Mental health stigma in hill communities is not merely individual prejudice but is embedded in cultural norms, religious frameworks, and community governance structures. Reducing this stigma requires sustained, multi-generational community engagement — far beyond what school programs alone can achieve without broader social change initiatives.

Geographic Isolation and Infrastructure Deficit

Poor road connectivity, unreliable internet, and seasonal disruptions to school operations in landslide-prone Chamoli Garhwal significantly limit the reach of digital mental health resources, online counselling platforms, and training programs for teachers. The Manodarpan helpline, for instance, is often inaccessible to students in areas with poor mobile network coverage.

Teacher Overload and Burnout

With multiple subject responsibilities, administrative duties, and informal pastoral care roles, government school teachers in Uttarakhand are significantly overburdened. Expecting teachers to additionally serve as mental health facilitators without dedicated training, reduced workloads, and institutional recognition is both ineffective and ethically questionable.

Curriculum Not Designed for Emotional Learning

Examination-focused curricula with no space for reflection, creative expression, or non-cognitive skill development remain the norm in many government inter colleges. The pressure of board examinations leaves little room for teachers to prioritize social-emotional learning, even when they recognize its importance.

Gender and Caste Barriers to Help-Seeking

Young women, Dalit students, and students from tribal communities in Uttarakhand face compounded barriers to accessing mental health support — whether from shame, family control, or lack of

culturally sensitive services. Universally designed school mental health programs often fail to account for these intersecting vulnerabilities.

Lack of Data and Monitoring Systems

There is no systematic mechanism to collect, analyze, and act upon data on student mental health in Uttarakhand's government school system. Without this data infrastructure, mental health interventions remain reactive and anecdotal rather than evidence-based and proactively preventive.

Recommendations for Strengthening Mental Well-being Through Education in Uttarakhand

- Establish dedicated school counselling positions in all government inter colleges in hill districts, with specific recruitment of counsellors from local communities who understand regional linguistic and cultural contexts.
- Train and certify at least two teachers per school as mental health first-aiders under a state-wide program co-designed by the education department, SMHA, and NIMHANS, with ongoing supervision and professional support.
- Integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) as a timetabled, assessed component of the school curriculum from Classes 6 to 12, rather than as an extracurricular add-on, with locally adapted content drawing on Uttarakhand's cultural heritage of resilience.
- Launch district-level awareness campaigns co-led by teachers, health workers, panchayat members, and religious and cultural leaders to systematically reduce mental health stigma in Chamoli Garhwal and similar districts.
- Expand community mental health outreach through ASHA workers and Mahila Arogya Samitis trained in basic psychological first aid and mental health referral, with clear linkages to school-based programs.
- Leverage technology by equipping school computer labs with offline mental health educational resources and ensuring that the Manodarpan helpline and platforms like I Call

are widely publicized and accessible via toll-free numbers even in low-connectivity areas.

- Create school-based peer support groups, with structured facilitation by trained teachers, providing students with safe spaces to share difficulties, practice coping skills, and support one another — an approach particularly effective in tight-knit hill communities.
- Develop an annual student well-being survey for all government schools in Uttarakhand, feeding anonymized data into district and state planning processes to enable evidence-based resource allocation.
- Pilot nature-based and art-based mental health programs in schools that harness the ecological richness of the Himalayan landscape — nature walks, environmental projects, folk art workshops — as vehicles for emotional healing and community connection.
- Introduce gender-sensitive mental health modules specifically addressing the needs of girls, including safe space circles led by female teachers, to address the compounded stressors faced by young women in rural hill communities.

CONCLUSION

Mental well-being is not a luxury to be addressed after economic development — it is an integral precondition for all human flourishing, including educational attainment, livelihood success, and community cohesion. For the students of Government Inter College, Tangsa Dasholi, and the broader communities of Chamoli Garhwal, the recognition that education must nurture the whole person — mind, emotion, and spirit, alongside intellect — is both an urgent need and a transformative opportunity.

Uttarakhand's unique context — its ecological heritage, cultural traditions of resilience, close-knit communities, and the spiritual legacy of a region that has long been a source of meditative wisdom — offers distinctive resources for building mental well-being into educational practice. Yoga, mindfulness, nature connection, and community

solidarity are not exotic interventions imported from outside but are indigenous strengths waiting to be formally recognized and integrated into the educational ecosystem.

The policy framework — NEP 2020, Manodarpan, the District Mental Health Programme, and the School Health and Wellness Program — provides a credible foundation. What remains is the equally important work of localizing these frameworks to the realities of remote hill schools, building the human capital of trained, supported, and recognized mental health educators, and creating the cultural conditions in which seeking psychological support is seen as an act of strength rather than shame.

Empowering students and communities in Uttarakhand with the knowledge, skills, and institutional support to manage stress and cultivate mental well-being is not merely a welfare measure — it is an investment in the long-term human capital and

resilience of a region whose future depends on its ability to nurture its most vital resource: the emotional and psychological vitality of its people.

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