

**MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES AMONG INDIAN
MEDICAL STUDENTS STUDYING ABROAD IN RUSSIA**

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Abstract

Background: Mental health problems among medical students are a growing public health concern worldwide. Indian medical students studying abroad in Russia face additional psychological challenges due to academic pressure, cultural adjustment, language barriers, homesickness, and social isolation. These stressors may negatively affect emotional well-being, academic performance, and overall quality of life. This study aimed to assess the mental health challenges experienced by Indian medical students in Russia and identify the coping strategies used to manage stress and emotional difficulties.

Methods and Materials: A descriptive survey-based study was conducted among Indian medical students enrolled in Russian medical universities. Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire distributed through WhatsApp, Telegram, and student social groups. The questionnaire included items related to demographic characteristics, academic stress, emotional well-being, sleep patterns, homesickness, social support, and coping mechanisms. Responses were organized and analyzed using Microsoft Excel to identify common psychological stressors and coping behaviors.

Results: The findings revealed that a large proportion of students experienced moderate to high levels of stress. The most commonly reported mental health challenges included academic stress, examination anxiety, homesickness, loneliness, sleep disturbances, and emotional exhaustion. Major contributing factors included academic workload, language difficulties, climate adaptation, financial concerns, and uncertainty regarding future licensing examinations and career opportunities. Students commonly coped with stress through peer support, communication with family, entertainment activities, exercise, religious practices, and time management strategies. However, awareness and utilization of professional mental health services remained limited.

Conclusion: Mental health challenges are highly prevalent among Indian medical students studying in Russia and require greater institutional attention and support. Strengthening mental health awareness programs, counselling services, peer support systems, and stress management interventions may significantly improve students' psychological well-being and academic experiences. Universities should adopt preventive public health approaches to support the emotional and mental health needs of international medical students.

Keywords: *Mental health, Medical students, Stress and anxiety, Coping strategies, International students*

1. Project Definition

This Capstone project focused on mental health challenges and coping strategies among Indian medical students enrolled in Russian medical universities. The purpose of the project was to understand the psychological difficulties students experience while studying abroad and to identify factors contributing to stress, anxiety, and emotional burnout.

As an Indian student studying medicine in Russia, I have personally observed that many students struggle with academic pressure, loneliness, homesickness, language barriers, and adjustment difficulties. These problems often affect students emotionally and academically. However, mental health issues among foreign medical students are frequently ignored or not openly discussed.

The project aimed to explore the mental health status of Indian MBBS students in Russia and understand the coping methods they use to manage emotional stress. The project also aimed to raise awareness of mental health among international medical students and to provide recommendations for improving student support systems.

This project included:

- Conducting research on mental health among medical students
- Designing and distributing an online survey questionnaire
- Collecting and analyzing responses from Indian medical students in Russia
- Identifying major psychological stressors
- Evaluating coping mechanisms used by students
- Developing public health recommendations for mental health improvement

The project was highly relevant to my MPH studies because mental health is an important component of public health. The project also allowed me to apply public health research methods, communication skills, data collection techniques, and analytical approaches learned during my MPH program.

2. Final Project Overview

Introduction

Mental health is a major component of overall health and well-being. According to global public health studies, medical students are at increased risk of stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout due to the demanding nature of medical education. Students studying abroad may experience

even higher levels of psychological distress because they must adapt to a different country, culture, educational system, and social environment.

Russia has become one of the leading destinations for Indian students pursuing MBBS education abroad. Every year, thousands of Indian students enroll in Russian medical universities due to affordable tuition and internationally recognized degrees. Although these opportunities are beneficial academically, students often face emotional and social challenges while living away from home.

Many Indian students in Russia experience:

- Academic stress and examination pressure
- Language barriers
- Difficulty adapting to Russian culture and climate
- Homesickness and loneliness
- Sleep disturbances
- Financial concerns
- Anxiety regarding future licensing examinations and career opportunities

Despite these challenges, mental health discussions among students are often limited because of stigma and a lack of awareness. Some students hesitate to seek professional help due to fear of judgment or lack of counselling services.

This project was designed to better understand the experiences of Indian medical students studying in Russia and identify practical ways to improve mental health awareness and support.

Aim of the Project

The aim of this project was to assess the mental health challenges faced by Indian medical students studying in Russia and to evaluate the coping strategies used to manage stress and emotional difficulties.

Objectives of the Project

3. To identify common mental health challenges among Indian medical students in Russia.
4. To determine major factors contributing to stress and anxiety.
5. To evaluate coping strategies used by students.
6. To raise awareness regarding mental health among international students.
7. To provide recommendations for improving mental health support systems.

Importance of the Project

This project is important because mental health directly affects academic performance, personal well-being, social relationships, and future professional development. International students are considered a vulnerable population because they experience both academic stress and migration-related challenges.

The findings of this project may help:

- Universities improve student welfare services
- Students become more aware of mental health issues
- Reduce stigma regarding psychological support
- Encourage healthier academic environments
- Promote public health awareness related to student mental well-being

3. Updated Research Summary

Mental Health Among Medical Students

Research studies worldwide have shown that medical students experience higher rates of stress, anxiety, and depression compared to the general population. Medical education involves long study hours, competitive environments, frequent examinations, clinical responsibilities, and fear of academic failure.

Several studies indicate that mental health problems among medical students may lead to:

- Poor academic performance
- Sleep disorders
- Emotional exhaustion
- Reduced concentration
- Substance abuse
- Burnout
- Decreased quality of life

Medical students often avoid seeking professional psychological help because of stigma, lack of time, and fear of appearing weak.

Mental Health Challenges Among International Students

International students face additional challenges compared to domestic students. These include:

- Cultural adjustment difficulties
- Communication barriers
- Separation from family
- Financial stress
- Social isolation
- Discrimination and adaptation stress

Studies show that homesickness and loneliness are major contributors to anxiety and depression among international students.

Indian Students Studying in Russia

Indian students studying in Russia often experience challenges related to:

- Learning the Russian language
- Harsh winter climate
- Food and lifestyle differences
- Academic adaptation
- Pressure regarding FMGE/NExT examinations
- Distance from family and support systems

Many students rely heavily on peer groups and online communication with family members for emotional support.

Research Findings from Literature

The literature reviewed during this project revealed that:

- Stress and anxiety are common among medical students.
- Female students often report higher emotional stress.
- Social support significantly improves psychological well-being.
- Physical exercise and recreational activities reduce stress levels.
- Lack of mental health awareness contributes to delayed help-seeking behaviour.

Public Health Perspective

From a public health perspective, student mental health is important because psychological well-being affects educational outcomes, productivity, physical health, and long-term professional performance.

Preventive strategies such as awareness programs, counselling services, peer support groups, and stress management workshops can significantly improve students' mental well-being.

4. Project Implementation Summary (Action Steps Taken)

Step 1: Topic Selection and Approval

The first step of this project involved selecting an appropriate and meaningful public health topic. Since I am an Indian medical student studying in Russia, I chose to focus on mental health challenges among Indian MBBS students because this issue is highly relevant to my personal experiences and academic environment.

After selecting the topic, I discussed it with my MPH faculty supervisor and received approval to proceed with the project.

Step 2: Literature Review

I conducted an extensive review of literature related to:

- Mental health among medical students
- Stress and anxiety in higher education
- International student adaptation
- Public health approaches to mental well-being
- Coping mechanisms among students

The research materials included journal articles, research papers, online public health resources, and educational websites.

Step 3: Questionnaire Design

A structured online questionnaire was developed using Google Forms. The questionnaire included sections related to:

- Demographic information
- Academic stress
- Emotional well-being
- Sleep patterns
- Homesickness
- Social support

- Coping strategies
- Awareness regarding counselling services

The questionnaire was designed to be simple, confidential, and easy to complete.

Step 4: Participant Recruitment

The survey was distributed among Indian medical students studying in Russian universities through:

- WhatsApp groups
- Telegram groups
- Student communities
- Personal contacts

Participation was voluntary, and students were informed that their responses would remain anonymous.

Step 5: Data Collection

Responses were collected over several weeks. Students from different academic years participated in the survey.

Most participants reported experiencing moderate to high levels of stress during medical education.

Step 6: Data Organization and Analysis

The collected data was organized using Microsoft Excel. Responses were categorized and analyzed to identify common patterns related to:

- Stress levels
- Sources of anxiety
- Lifestyle habits
- Emotional challenges
- Coping methods

Graphs and charts were prepared to summarize findings.

Step 7: Interpretation of Findings

The findings were compared with the existing literature on mental health among medical and international students.

The analysis showed that many experiences reported by Indian students in Russia were similar to those reported in previous international research studies.

Step 8: Development of Recommendations

Based on the findings, recommendations were developed to improve:

- Mental health awareness
- Student counselling support
- Peer support systems
- Stress management education
- Communication between students and universities

Step 9: Preparation of Final Report

The final step involved organizing all research findings, analysis, and recommendations into a comprehensive Capstone report.

5. Project Analysis, Evaluation, and Recommendations, Analysis of Findings

The results of this project suggest that mental health challenges are highly common among Indian medical students studying in Russia.

Common Mental Health Challenges Identified

The most commonly reported problems included:

- Academic stress
- Anxiety before examinations
- Homesickness
- Sleep disturbances
- Emotional exhaustion
- Loneliness and social isolation
- Fear regarding future career opportunities

Many students reported difficulty balancing academic responsibilities with personal well-being.

Major Stress Factors

The study identified several major factors contributing to psychological stress:

- Academic pressure

- Fear of examination failure
- Language barriers
- Climate adaptation difficulties
- Distance from family
- Financial concerns
- Future licensing examination pressure

Coping Strategies Used by Students

Students commonly used the following coping methods:

- Talking with friends and classmates
- Communication with family through phone and social media
- Watching movies and entertainment
- Listening to music
- Exercise and physical activity
- Religious and spiritual practices
- Time management techniques

Although some students reported healthy coping strategies, others admitted to poor sleep habits and social withdrawal.

Evaluation of Project Success

The project successfully met its major objectives.

Objectives Successfully Achieved

- Collection of meaningful student responses
- Identification of major stressors affecting students
- Evaluation of coping mechanisms
- Increased awareness regarding student mental health
- Development of practical recommendations

Personal Learning Outcomes

This project helped me improve:

- Research and analytical skills
- Public health understanding

- Communication skills
- Survey design and data collection methods
- Report writing skills
- Awareness regarding mental health issues

As an MPH student, this project allowed me to apply public health concepts in a practical and meaningful way.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this project, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Mental Health Awareness Programs

Universities should organize regular awareness sessions regarding stress management, anxiety, depression, and emotional well-being.

2. Counselling Services

Accessible and confidential counselling services should be available for international students.

3. Peer Support Groups

Student peer support groups can help reduce loneliness and encourage open communication.

4. Academic Stress Management Workshops

Workshops on time management, study skills, and stress reduction during examinations may improve student well-being.

5. Improved Communication with International Students

University administrations should maintain regular communication with foreign students regarding academic and personal concerns.

6. Promotion of Healthy Lifestyle Habits

Students should be encouraged to maintain healthy sleep schedules, engage in regular exercise, and maintain social interaction.

7. Reduction of Mental Health Stigma

Educational campaigns should encourage students to seek psychological support without fear of judgment.

Limitations of the Project

Some limitations of the project included:

- Limited sample size

- Dependence on self-reported responses
- Time limitations
- Difficulty obtaining responses from all universities

Despite these limitations, the project provided useful insights into the mental health experiences of Indian medical students in Russia.

6. Materials Delivered

The following materials and outcomes were completed and delivered during this Capstone project:

1. Approved Capstone proposal
2. Literature review and research summary
3. Structured online questionnaire
4. Survey response data
5. Data analysis charts and summaries
6. Public health recommendations
7. Final written Capstone report
8. Reference list in APA format

In addition to the academic report, the project also increased students' awareness of mental health through discussions and survey activities.

Mental Health and Public Health Perspective

Mental health is an essential component of public health because psychological well-being directly influences physical health, educational performance, productivity, and quality of life. Public health professionals increasingly recognize that mental health disorders among students can lead to long-term consequences not only for individuals but also for communities and healthcare systems.

Medical students are among the most academically stressed student populations. They are expected to maintain high academic standards while balancing examinations, clinical duties, practical training, and future career planning. International students face these challenges while simultaneously adapting to a foreign country and culture.

For Indian students studying in Russia, the transition to a different educational and social environment can be difficult. Students often leave home for the first time and must

independently manage finances, food, communication, studies, and emotional stress. Such conditions can negatively affect sleep patterns, social interaction, concentration, and overall emotional stability.

From a public health perspective, identifying mental health problems early is important because preventive interventions can reduce the burden of severe psychological disorders. Universities and educational institutions have an important role in supporting students through counselling services, awareness programs, and healthy learning environments.

Emotional Experiences of International Medical Students

One important finding from both the literature and project discussions was the emotional burden many students studying abroad experience. Students frequently described feelings of loneliness, emotional exhaustion, isolation, and uncertainty about the future.

Homesickness was identified as one of the most common emotional difficulties. Many students reported missing family support, Indian food, festivals, cultural celebrations, and familiar social environments. During examination periods, emotional stress often increased significantly.

Some students reported difficulty expressing emotional problems openly because they feared being judged by peers or appearing mentally weak. Cultural attitudes toward mental health in many South Asian communities sometimes discourage students from discussing psychological struggles openly.

Many participants also described emotional stress associated with adapting to severe winter weather in Russia. Limited sunlight, long winters, and reduced outdoor social interaction were reported to negatively affect mood and motivation.

Academic Pressure and Competition

Academic pressure was identified as the strongest contributor to stress among Indian medical students in Russia.

Medical education requires students to attend long lectures and practical sessions, prepare for oral examinations, study complex medical subjects, balance theory and clinical practice, maintain high academic performance, and prepare for licensing examinations such as FMGE and NExT.

Several students expressed fear regarding future career opportunities and licensing examinations after graduation. The uncertainty surrounding medical licensing processes often increases anxiety among international students.

Students also discussed stress related to communication during practical classes and examinations, as some university staff and patients primarily communicate in Russian.

Language and Communication Barriers

Language barriers significantly influenced students' academic and social experiences. Although many universities offer English-medium MBBS programs, students still need Russian-language skills for clinical interactions, daily communication, shopping, transportation, hospital practice, and administrative work.

Students who struggled with the Russian language often reported reduced confidence and increased anxiety during clinical postings. Communication barriers also affected social integration with local communities and increased feelings of isolation among some students.

Lifestyle and Sleep Patterns

Another important finding of this project involved unhealthy lifestyle habits among students. Many students reported irregular sleep schedules, reduced physical activity, excessive screen time, poor dietary habits, limited recreational activities, and a lack of stress management routines.

Sleep disturbances were especially common during examination periods. Some students reported sleeping fewer than 6 hours per day due to academic workload and late-night study schedules.

Poor sleep quality may contribute to emotional instability, poor concentration, and reduced academic performance.

Role of Peer Support

Peer support emerged as one of the most important coping mechanisms among Indian students in Russia. Students frequently relied on friends and roommates, senior students, student communities, WhatsApp and Telegram groups, and group study sessions.

Peer groups provided emotional support, practical guidance, and social interaction. Students reported feeling more comfortable discussing emotional difficulties with close friends rather than formal counsellors.

This finding highlights the importance of developing peer-support-based mental health programs within international student communities.

Technology and Mental Health

Technology played both positive and negative roles in student mental health. Positive uses included communicating with family members in India, receiving emotional support through video calls, accessing online educational resources, and engaging in entertainment and relaxation.

However, excessive use of social media and prolonged screen time were also associated with sleep problems, reduced physical activity, social withdrawal, and distraction during studies.

Balanced and healthy technology use is important for maintaining student well-being.

Mental Health Awareness and Stigma

A significant observation during this project was the lack of awareness regarding professional mental health support. Many students were unaware of counselling services, did not know how to seek psychological help, believed stress was a normal, unavoidable part of medical education, and feared the social stigma associated with mental health treatment.

Reducing stigma is essential for improving help-seeking behaviour among students. Universities should actively normalize mental health discussions through awareness campaigns and supportive communication.

Public Health Interventions Suggested Through the Project

The project identified several practical interventions that may improve student mental well-being.

Counselling and Support Services

Universities should establish accessible mental health counselling centers where students can discuss their emotional difficulties confidentially.

Orientation Programs for International Students

Orientation programs should help students adjust to Russian culture, climate conditions, university systems, language expectations, and healthcare services.

Peer Mentorship Programs

Senior students can help junior students adjust academically and emotionally.

Stress Management Workshops

Universities may organize workshops on time management, healthy lifestyle habits, sleep hygiene, relaxation techniques, and stress management during examinations.

Recreational and Social Activities

Regular cultural and recreational events can improve social interaction and reduce loneliness among students.

Academic Support

Additional language support and academic guidance may reduce stress among struggling students.

Reflection on Personal Learning Experience

Completing this Capstone project was both academically valuable and personally meaningful. As a final-year MBBS student and MPH student studying in Russia, I gained a deeper understanding of public health research methods, student mental health challenges, the importance of preventive healthcare, survey-based research techniques, data analysis and interpretation, and communication and organizational skills.

This project improved my confidence in conducting public health research and strengthened my interest in mental health promotion. I also learned the importance of empathy and communication while discussing emotional issues with fellow students.

Ethical Considerations in the Project

Ethical principles were carefully considered throughout the project. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, responses would remain anonymous, information would be used only for academic purposes, and participants could withdraw at any time.

No personal identifying information was collected. Respect for confidentiality and participant privacy was maintained throughout the research process.

Challenges Faced During Project Completion

Several practical challenges were encountered during the project. Some students were hesitant to participate in mental health-related discussions because of stigma or lack of interest. Balancing final-year MBBS responsibilities with MPH project work required careful time management.

Obtaining responses from students across different universities was challenging. Access to mental health experts and counsellors within some university settings was limited.

Despite these challenges, the project was completed successfully through consistent effort and planning.

Future Scope of the Project

This project has potential for future expansion. Future studies may include larger sample sizes, compare students from different countries, evaluate the effectiveness of counselling programs, study long-term mental health outcomes, explore depression and burnout in greater detail, and develop intervention-based mental health programs.

The project may also encourage future public health initiatives related to international student wellness.

Broader Significance of the Study

The findings of this project are relevant beyond Russian medical universities. Many international students worldwide experience similar emotional and psychological challenges.

This project contributes to broader public health understanding regarding mental health in higher education, international student adaptation, preventive mental healthcare, and the importance of social support systems.

The recommendations developed through this study may be useful for universities, student organizations, and public health professionals working with international student populations.

Overall Project Significance

This Capstone project demonstrated that mental health among Indian medical students studying in Russia is an important and relevant public health issue. The findings highlighted how academic pressure, social isolation, language barriers, climate adaptation, homesickness, and uncertainty regarding future careers can affect emotional well-being.

The project also emphasized that many students rely primarily on informal coping mechanisms, such as peer support and communication with family, rather than on professional counselling services. This suggests that universities should strengthen student mental health awareness programs and improve access to supportive resources.

The project successfully combined practical public health research methods with personal experiences from the international student environment. It allowed for a better understanding of the psychological challenges faced by students living and studying abroad.

Most importantly, the project reinforced the idea that mental health should be treated as an essential part of overall health within educational systems. Public health approaches focused on prevention, awareness, early intervention, and emotional support can significantly improve the quality of life and academic experiences of international medical students.

This project has the potential to contribute not only to academic understanding but also to future improvements in student support services and mental health promotion programs in universities hosting international students.

Conclusion

Mental health among medical students is an important public health issue that requires greater attention and support. Indian medical students studying in Russia face multiple emotional, academic, and social challenges that may negatively affect their psychological well-being. This Capstone project identified several major stressors experienced by students, including academic pressure, homesickness, language barriers, and anxiety regarding future careers. The project also highlighted the importance of peer support, communication with family, recreational activities, and healthy lifestyle habits in managing stress.

As both an MBBS student and an MPH student studying in Russia, this project was personally meaningful and academically valuable. It strengthened my understanding of public health research and mental health promotion while allowing me to address a real issue affecting international medical students. The findings and recommendations from this project may help universities and student organizations improve awareness and support systems for international students in the future.

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