16TH JUNE 2020 (TUESDAY)
10:30 A.M. - 12:00 P.M.

WEBINAR

ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH FOR YOUTH DURING COVID-19

CONVENED BY

PRIA Youth and Sangath

PRIA Youth | Sangath | IT'S OK TO TALK

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WEBINAR REPORT

A recent Panel Discussion on **_COVID-19 and Young People: Impact and Solutions_** hosted by PRIA Youth on 2nd May 2020 was a first step in recognizing the issues faced by young people in times of COVID-19. The Webinar was attended by more than 120 participants from all over the globe. The webinar saw discussions on various issues that the youth in India are facing due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and mental health emerged from the discussion as one of the most important areas of concern for the youth.

The impact of the pandemic on mental health of young Indians can be seen from a recent example from Mallapuram, Kerala where a young student of class 10th committed suicide due to her inability to attend online classes . Another example can be seen from the urban slums of Shivaji Nagar, Mumbai, where a social worker named **Nasreen Ansari** identified a sudden increase in issues of mental health in the youth of her area due to the twin burdens of rising unemployment and incidences of domestic abuse. These stories bring to the fore the negative impact of the pandemic on the mental health of young people. The stigma associated with mental health disorders in India further prevents a number of young people to seek help. Further, a general absence of mental health conversations in areas like small towns and rural areas prevents youth to identify signs and symptoms of mental health disorders. Similarly the all-pervasive presence of social media and the pressures of documenting one's life even during a crisis have led to more and more young people feeling inadequate and anxious.

It is imperative to note that in India, the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant lockdown has increased the incidences of Mental Health Disorders among Indians by 20% according to a recent survey conducted by the **Indian Psychiatry Society**. Previous figures in the National Mental Health Survey of India-2015-16 estimate the prevalence of mental health disorders in people of 18-29 years at 7.39 per cent (excluding tobacco use disorder) and lifetime prevalence at 9.54 per cent. This coupled with a glaring gap in the availability of mental health professionals, with only 0.75 psychiatrists per 100,000 population in India as compared to the WHO mandated ratio of 3 per 100,000, makes addressing mental health issues all the more difficult for young Indians.

Thus, **PRIA Youth** as an organization that engages with young people, along with <u>**Sangath**</u>, an organization working on mental health, has joined hands to conduct a Webinar titled '*Addressing Mental Health for Youth in Times of COVID-19*' on 16th June 2020. The aim of the webinar was to provide a safe space for participants to raise questions about mental health and get suitable answers and information about support mechanisms, especially those online during COVID-19.

This webinar aimed at addressing the following key questions:

- **What recent trends have been observed in young individuals in India with respect to mental health?**
- **How can youth assess if COVID-19 is impacting one's mental health and how to seek help for the same through online and offline mediums?**
- **What role can young people play to support their peers and acquaintances going through mental health issues?**

The Webinar witnessed a panel consisting of two mental health professionals and a Youth-n-Democracy fellow from diverse backgrounds. Please find below brief profiles of the panellists:

- **Dr. Maliha Ibrahim** is a Mental Health Researcher and Psychotherapist with over 8 years of experience. She is a senior consultant at *Sangath* and also has her own private practice. Maliha's specialisation is adolescent and youth mental health interventions in school and community-based settings on issues related to depression/self-harm tendencies, anxiety, trauma and resilience, LGBTQIA issues and identity formation. Trained as a systemic and family therapist, Maliha also works with parents/caregivers of youth and young couples.

- **Aprajita Sharma** is a Development Communication and Extension specialist with experience in research, documentation and project management in the field of mental health. Currently, she is pursuing her Doctorate of Philosophy (Ph.D.) from University of Delhi in the area of ICTs and Mental Health. She is also a Volunteer with a mental health organisation *Mind Specialists*, an initiative under RAHAT Charitable Trust.

- **Pooja Malik** is **Youth-n-Democracy fellow** with **PRIA Youth**, and is pursuing her bachelors in the field of Home Science. As part of the fellowship she is implementing her social action research project on the issue of Drug abuse. Pooja's academic interest lies in the areas of communication and extension.
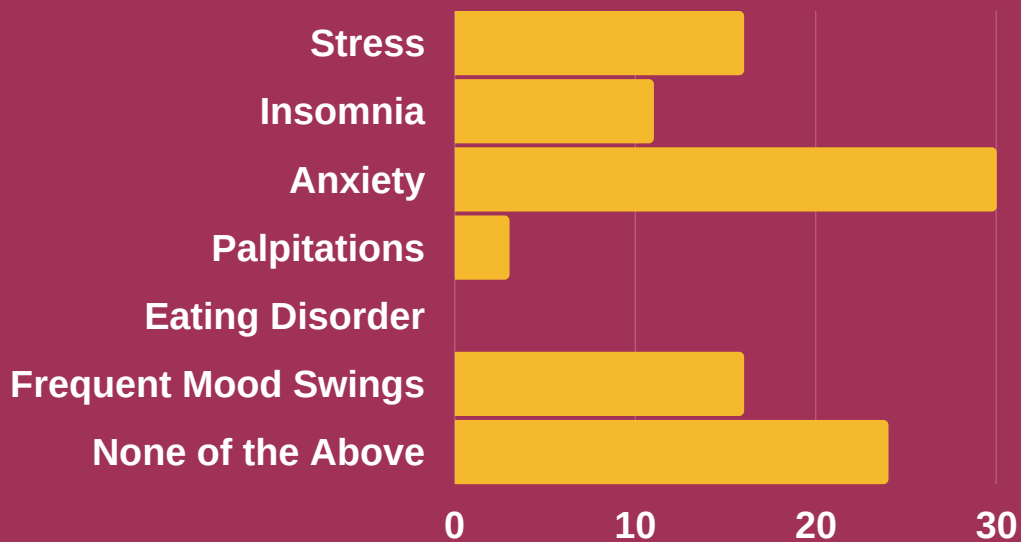
60 Active Participants

182 Total Registrations

Sector Representation: Education, Research, Corporate Social Responsibility, Development Sector, Policy Implementer

Questions raised and answered in the live Q&A- 30

Webinar Outreach

- Stress
- Insomnia
- Anxiety
- Palpitations
- Eating Disorder
- Frequent Mood Swings
- None of the Above

0   10   20   30

Poll Results: Have you experienced any of the following issues during the COVID-19 lockdown period?

(Total number of respondents: 37)

IMPACT

The discussion began with highlighting the recent trends and impact on mental health of young individuals due to COVID-19 and the resultant lockdown. In this regard, **Pooja** answered that mental health as an issue has become the talking point in India only recently. She shared that the COVID-19 lockdown and a recent suicide by a well-known celebrity has exacerbated the issue of mental health and brought it to everyday conversations. She highlights that according to a recent report by Times of India, there has been a *significant rise in mental health issues* in India between the 3 months period of lockdown and unlockdown. On behalf of the youth, **Pooja** highlights that the lockdown period has increased anxiety among young Indians drastically due to *fear of recession, job loss*, *inability to socialise with friends and peers,* and *a halt in extracurricular activities*. She also expresses concerns over the *rise in cases of substance abuse and addiction* by the youth due to the lockdown; she explains that dwindling mental health in young individuals leads them to take recourse in drugs and alcohol as a result of which the government is receiving almost 260 calls every day for addiction treatments.

Aprajita, another panellist added that recent studies being conducted by research organizations are highlighting a spike in mental health issues due to the lockdown. In addition to the above, **Aprajita** also rightly mentioned that the situation of COVID-19 induced lockdown is a completely new phenomenon for the world. The general public has no past experiences of such an event which forced billions of people to stay home by disrupting every aspect of their daily routines. This aspect coupled with regular news updates on COVID-19 rising cases and deaths in itself can be a trigger for a multitude of mental health disorders in young people.

Maliha, a mental health expert highlighted that even though recent events have been triggering for a large number of young people all over India, what needs to be remembered is the notion of individualism of such issues. She elaborates that it is important to note that such events affect each individual differently depending on different contexts. She also adds that as individuals, we are moulded in routines and *any changes to the set patterns induce some sort of mental health issues*. Therefore in a situation of lockdown where *humans are adapting to new routines, new developments and new changes daily*, the effects on mental health are inescapable. **Maliha** also pointed out that young people are increasingly bracing themselves for a post-COVID world where jobs, education, peer and family relations are expected to be altered to suit new needs which could put additional pressures on the youth's mental health.

ASSESSMENT

The discussions so far had established that COVID-19 has exacerbated mental health issues; however it is also important for an individual to have knowledge of assessing and recognizing mental health issues in one's own life.

Maliha, beautifully facilitated the assessment procedure for the participants in this regard. She used the *'Analogy of a square with four equal parts'* as the main points of impact through which an individual can understand if they are going through a mental health episode. The four boxes in the square consist of the following values:

- *Body* – Losing appetite, eating too much, feeling tired and having unexplained body aches etc. come under the category of 'Body'.
- *Thoughts* - Having repetitive thoughts about the future or feeling tensed about losing jobs, friends or family and having a feeling of losing control over the outcomes comes under the category of 'Thoughts'.
- *Feelings*- Feeling fatigued, frequent mood swings and feeling low for a large part of the day comes under the category of 'Feelings'.
- *Behaviour*- If a person is feeling detached from friends and family and is unable to fully express themselves then this is counted under the category of 'Behaviour'.

Aprajita, outlined *'Four steps to address Mental Health through online and offline mediums'*.

- She explained that **accessing available resources and information** with regards to mental health is the first step in addressing mental health.
- The second step is to **assess and compare the symptoms and signs** that an individual can associate from the given information.
- The third step is to **recognize the magnitude of one's mental health issues and observe** if they can be resolved through self-care methods and available helplines.
- She highlights that **seeking professional help through therapy or consulting** a psychiatrist is the fourth step in addressing mental health issues.

In this regard, **Aprajita** highlighted the work of **Mind Specialists**, an organization working on mental health. She explained that their website is a repository of information related to mental health and can be easily accessed online. The website **outlines and describes different types of mental health disorders** like **Depression**, **Bipolar Disorder**, **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder**, **Schizophrenia** and **Anxiety** etc. The website also features scientifically proven **self-assessment tests and self-care tips** that an individual can take to assess their mental health issues and reach a valid conclusion.

- In addition to the above, **Aprajita** also expressed the availability of various mental health apps on Playstore like *Calm, What's Up, Headspace, 7 Cup*s etc. which can be easily accessed to do an online self-assessment.
- She also highlighted the various i**nternational and national helplines (Child Helpline Number: 1098)** which can be accessed by phone calls; information about these can also be easily accessed through search engines.

However she also cautioned about the **digital divide** that exists when accessing online services for mental health. At the same time, she also highlighted that seeking offline help may not be viable and as widely available due to the lockdown and social distancing norms.
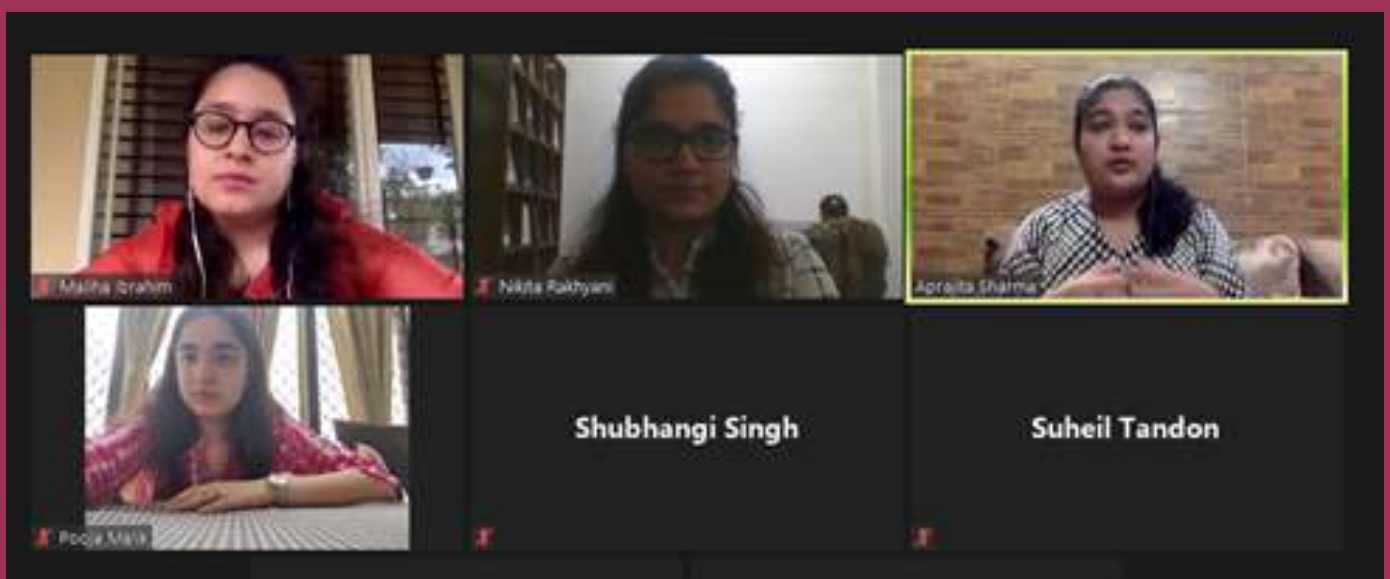
BREAKING THE STIGMA

There is an unspoken stigma attached to mental health in the Indian society and de-stigmatizing the issue requires urgent attention of all stakeholders. To understand how this can be achieved, **Maliha** addressed that it is important **to have conversations** about mental health on a day-to-day basis. These conversations should not be limited to diagnosis and clinical treatment of mental health disorders, but about smaller things that affect one's mental health like daily stress, anxiety, panic attacks, bullying, relationship struggles, anger issues and other psycho-social issues etc.

Speaking on the issue of addressing youth's mental health through non-professionals, **Aprajita** underlined the importance of having **peer-to-peer support system** which does not negate the individual's feelings and also lend an empathetic ear to anyone going through mental health issues. This should be supplemented by **encouraging the individual to accept their issues and help them talk** about it with a larger audience and ultimately seek professional help.

Pooja on behalf of the youth spoke about the kind of support young people need in this time from their family, peer groups, educational institutions and the government and highlighted the following points:

- **Family members** should be **accepting of the young person's feelings**. They should encourage them to talk about their thoughts and feelings and also learn to give them their private space when needed.
- Similarly, due to a sudden shift in learning to online mediums, many students are anxious and are unable to cope up with digital methods of education due to connectivity issues, non-conducive home environments or disabilities. **Colleges** should be **more accepting and flexible in their approach** and include fun and engaging activities, workshops and mental health discussions with students to break the monotony of regular classes.
- **Civil Society Organizations** working with the youth or mental health issues can **use resources available to them to spread awareness** through webinars, workshops, social media handles etc.
- The **Central and State governments** can use their **official channels like TV, Radio, Social Media** and other government departments **to spread awareness regarding mental health**. It has been observed that announcements made at the level of PMO have an outreach of billions, and therefore any decision on mental health taken on the national and state level can quickly penetrate daily conversations of the masses.

Aprajita also recalled that some sections of the society like **LGBTQIA+, women and marginalized youth** that are *more vulnerable to mental health issues* due to social determinants. However, it should not be forgotten that mental health issues are not exclusive to certain sections of the society, as men and privileged sections can also be equally affected by it.

Maliha explained the efforts made by organizations like **'Sangath'** and **'Its Okay to Talk'** to **break the stigma around mental health** through their projects and involvement with the youth. She highlighted that as mental health organization, Sangath is undertaking various surveys with existing participants to gauge the level of changes in mental health status of students due to COVID-19. Similarly, they are also organizing workshops, focused group discussions, participatory research and interviews to gather data for their ongoing studies. In addition to the above, as an organization they are **arranging for a dedicated helpline to combat mental health issues** and also to **engage with different stakeholders** using infographics, videos and posts through social media to raise awareness about mental health and forming a community of support online.
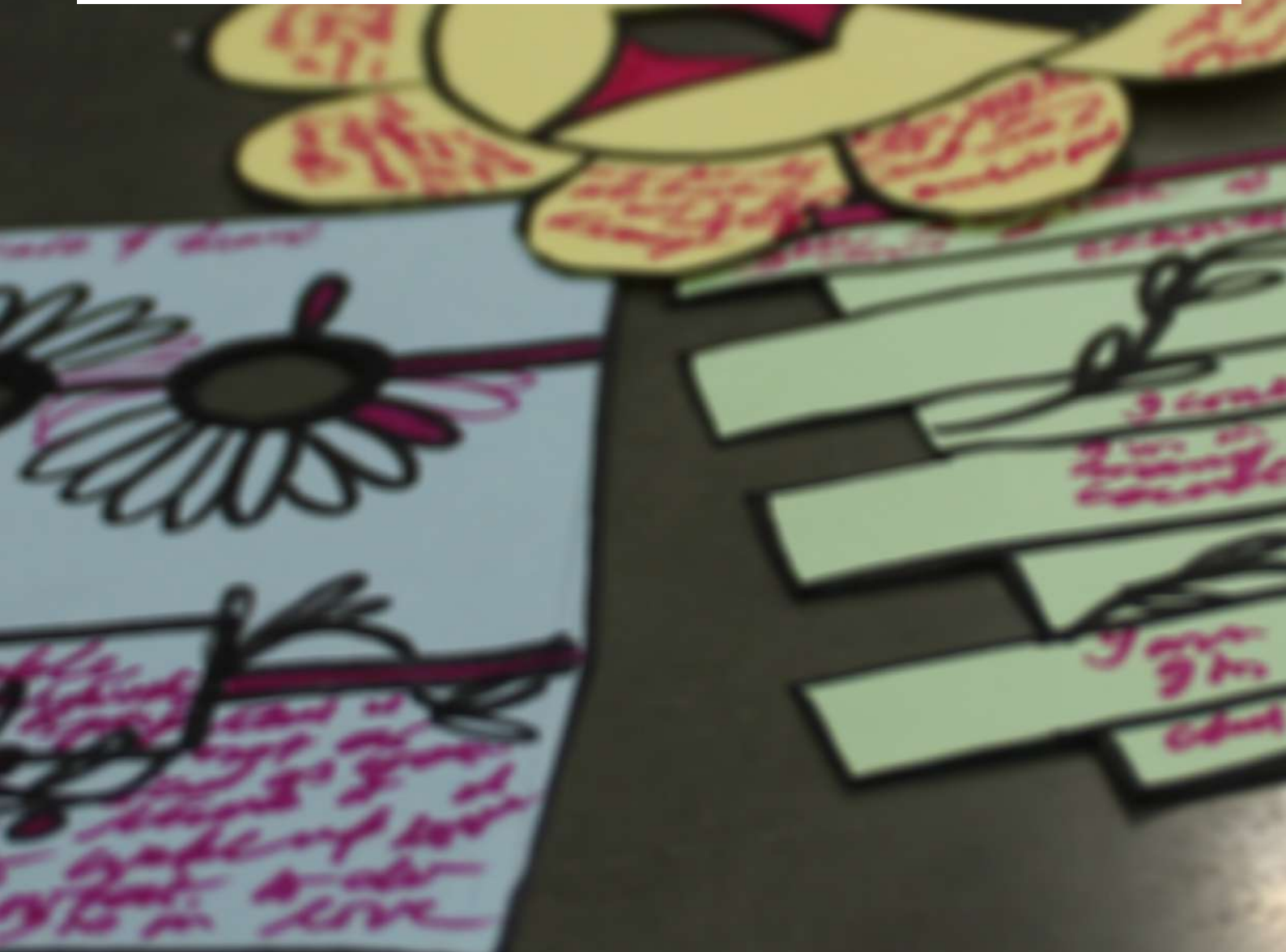
SOLUTIONS

After a detailed discussion on Impact and Assessment, the panellists addressed one of the most crucial verticals of the panel discussion i.e. **'Solutions'**. Answering one of the questions by a participant, ***'How can young people bring a balance between work and self-care?'*** Aprajita answered that it is crucial to take care of one's wellness during this time. She explained that **understanding one's feelings** and **coping up** with stress effectively is the main component of *'Emotional Wellness'*, this is achieved through self-care. Previously, daily lives with respect to work and education were physically distinct due to travelling and attending institutions outside of one's home, this allowed an individual to have a private life as well. However due to the lockdown, the lines between work/education and personal life have been blurred substantially. This situation is a major reason for rising burnouts and anxiety among young individuals.

In this regard, **Aprajita** stresses on the importance of doing the following steps:

- *Having a fixed schedule and routine* in one's life despite the lockdown. She advises on dividing the day into shifts of a few hours for work and rest for self-care.
- *Designate a work space* in the house which should strictly be used for work. Having a separate work-space from personal space helps to create boundaries.
- *Taking breaks* is extremely important for one's wellness. One should take conscious and voluntary breaks from work for lunch, nap, family time etc. in order to get a quick reboot.
- It is important to *follow time-tested tips on self-care* like eating well, sleeping well, exercise, meditate and learn to prioritize oneself.

Speaking from a young person's perspective on dealing with the pressures of productivity during lockdown, **Pooja** answered that the constant pressure of being productive despite the fears of COVID-19 and an uncertain future can prove to be counter-productive for a young individual. She suggests that families should be understanding and flexible about the young individual's choices of spending time during the lockdown. She also explains that it is essential for the individual to have an open conversation about mental health with their families and peers and educate them on the same. To tackle the worries and uncertainties, **Pooja** suggests young people should spend time by completing projects that they have always wanted to take up and also doing small tasks that make them happy. She also stresses on the importance of being *active listeners and support groups for one's peers, friends and families*. In her opinion, mental health issues can be resolved to a great extent if the person going through them has a supportive system.

Aprajita spoke from the point of view of an educator using online mediums to impart learning. She argued that to keep ***online learning interesting and accessible for a large number of the students***, it is essential that educators use engaging games and activities to impart lessons. Similarly enough breaks should be provided to students to cope up with the rigorous teaching. In addition to that, educators themselves should try to make themselves available for students outside of academic hours so students can seek support for mental health problems arising due to rising academic and social pressures.

On being asked about the availability of mental health specialists for marginalized youth, **Maliha** highlights the situation of increased substance abuse, domestic violence, and feeling of suffocation in the youth of marginalized groups living in constrained spaces. She shares the initiatives of ***Blue Dawn Organization*** which is specifically working with marginalized youth in urban environments. Similarly, an organization named ***Girl Effect*** runs the ***Chha Jaa Project*** which can be accessed through phones, works with women issues and the intersectionality of their issues which also factors in mental health. Similarly, speaking on lines of mental health of the LGBTQIA+ communities, she highlights the role of ***Mariwala Health Foundation*** which is using their platforms to initiate dialogues in this realm. One of the most crucial aspect of making mental health services accessible to the marginalized and rural areas, **Maliha** highlights the importance of Civil Society Organizations in ***empowering the local youth*** through peer-to-peer trainings, developing methodologies to address the issue of mental health suited to local conditions and to also pair with local grassroots organizations to spread the message across.

Maliha also used her experience with working on '***Youth Resilience'*** as part of Sangath to explain how the youth can channel their inner self to manage certain mental health issues personally. This can be done through the following:

- ***Looking back at experiences*** where one has successfully overcome low points or stressful situations in life.
- ***Set goals*** in life to be used as a yardstick for motivation and strength in dark times.
- Engage through online platforms like social media to ***seek support***.
- Use the spare time in lockdown to ***build on skills like communication skills*** that could help a person personally and professionally in the future.
- Keeping a journal, developing reading and writing skills to better **articulate one's feelings**.

Maliha also emphasized on the **rising cases of domestic violence** and abuse in families or within relationships due to the lockdown. She focused that for a majority of such events women, children, adolescents and LGBTQIA+ are on the receiving end of such traumas. Therefore as members of the civil society, it is essential that we *provide safe spaces for such victims* to share their stories and facilitate them with resources to seek help. She mentioned that organizations like *Rahi Foundation* specialize in dealing with such issues of women and children and offer helplines that can be accessed via phone calls.

Aprajita also added to the discussion by highlighting the importance of intervention in domestic abuse situations through negotiation, reporting or helplines, she mentioned that intervention by a third party in itself can be a factor to reduce or stop the abuse and should be exercised without fear.

Very Informative

Moderately Informative

Not Informative at all

| 0 | 5 | 10 | 15 | 20 |
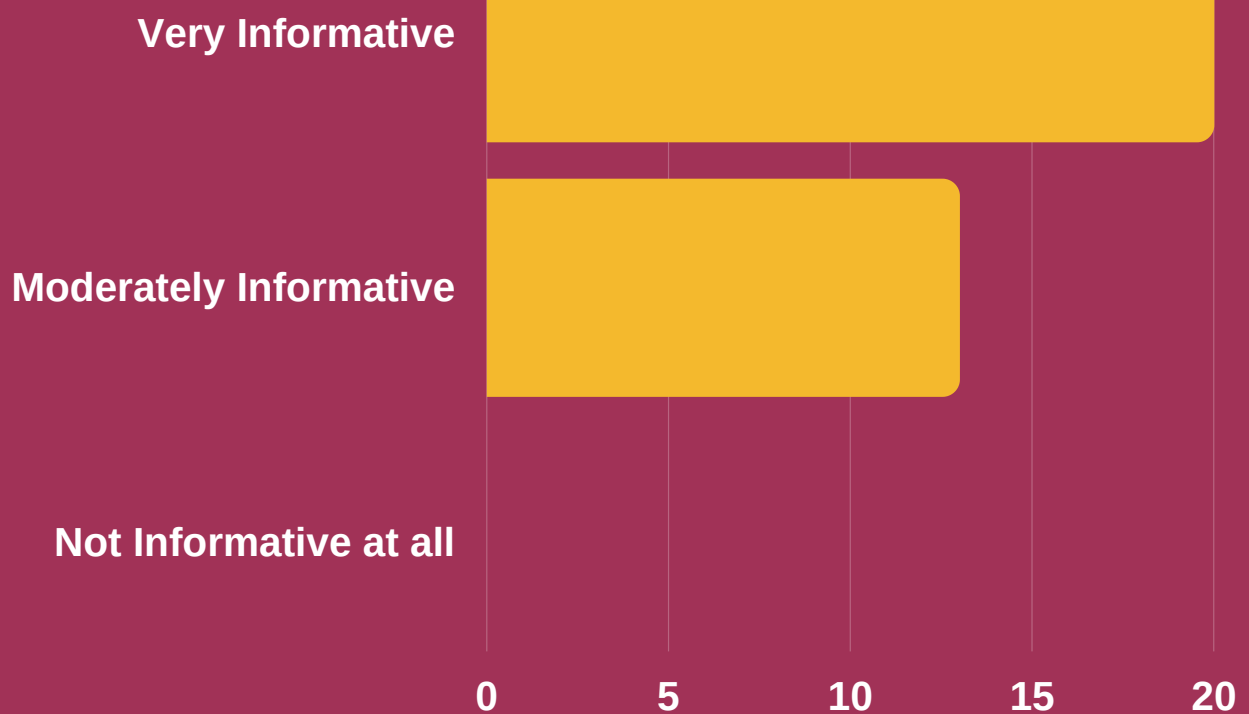
Poll Results: How informative did you find our webinar?

(Total number of respondents: 33)

WAY FORWARD

The panel discussion led to an enriching dialogue and deliberations on the issue of Mental Health in Youth during COVID-19. The discussion allowed PRIA Youth to address some major questions that were raised by the participants before and during the webinar.

The panel discussion led to the following key messages and points:

- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown induced by it has impacted the mental health of Young individuals massively. **The impact has largely been due to uncertainties of career, physical restriction of staying at homes, inability to socialise, adjusting to new routines and constant reporting of the pandemic data by media houses.**
- To mitigate the impact on mental health, **the webinar also addressed easy tools and resources to assess one's situation and gain information regarding the same.**
- The webinar also addressed **simple tips and tricks on 'Self-Care' as a primary and important tool to resolve mental health issues on an individual level.**
- A conscious effort was made by the panellists to **de-stigmatize the issue of mental health**. They also advocated for **normalizing seeking help for mental health through support groups and mental health experts.**
- The webinar also helped in **understanding the perspective of young people** on mental health and allowed us to understand the kind of support they need from families, peers, CSOs, academic institutions and the government to counter their mental health issues.
- In the end, the webinar also advocated for ways through which individuals can reach out to people dealing with mental health issues. The panellists equipped the participants with **various resources (both online and offline) in the form of websites, helplines, and methods through which support can be garnered and a safe community can be created** for such those individuals dealing with mental health issues.

We hope to use our platforms and resources to reach out to more young people in the future regarding their mental health issues. We also hope to partner with organizations working in the realm of mental health like Sangath, Its Okay to Talk and Mind Specialists to generate more resources and ultimately push for youth-centric policies at the government level.

LIST OF IMPORTANT MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

List of Mental Health Helplines: http://itsoktotalk.in/find-help/

Mental Health Mobile Applications: https://www.psycom.net/25-best-mental-health-apps/

BLUE DAWN: Dalit and marginalized youth mental health: https://thebluedawn.org/

Mental Health Mobile Applications: https://www.psycom.net/25-best-mental-health-apps/

LGBTQIA+ MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVES

Anubhuti- youth led mental health and covid coping initiatives: https://www.anubhutitrust.org/

LGBTQIA MH resources: https://bit.ly/3ds6ql5

LGBTQIA collectives: https://bit.ly/31d8gUs

Other informative resources: https://bit.ly/2B4Z3mF

HANK NUNN INSTITUTE (Locations in Delhi, Jaipur and Bangalore but online support across the country): http://hanknunninstitute.com/

Action for Domestic Violence (Amnesty International): https://bit.ly/2VfUIE1

SANGATH & ITS OKAY TO TALK

Sangath's Website Link: https://www.sangath.in/

Sangath's Facebook Page: https://www.facebook.com/Sangath/

It's Okay to Talk Website Link: http://itsoktotalk.in/

It's Okay to Talk Facebook Page: https://www.facebook.com/itsokbaatkaro/

COVID-19 Mental Health Resources Compiled by Sangath: https://bit.ly/2BANIdU

MIND SPECIALISTS

Mind Specialists Website: www.mindspecialists.com

Mind Specialists Facebook Page: www.facebook.com/MindSpecialists

Mind Specialists Instagram Page: www.instagram.com/mindspecialistsindia

Mind Specialists YouTube Page: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpF-lRd9yhhTPtheKRndSPQ

Drug Awareness Campaign (Social Action Project by Pooja Malik): https://bit.ly/2AYkjdU

Chaa Jaa (Girl Effect's initiative for digital engagement):
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtFXX6FvFUxJBfvPxr7hgpg

RAHI Foundation: https://www.rahifoundation.org/

Child Helpline Number: 1098

PRIA Youth

PRIA Youth Facebook Page: https://www.facebook.com/PRIAYouth/

PRIA Youth Instagram Page: https://www.instagram.com/pria_youth/?hl=en