

## Creating Suicide-Safe Campuses - Lessons from the IITs and the Road Ahead

**Mains:** *GS II - Health*

### Why in News?

*Recently the instances of suicide in India's leading IITs have raised the questions on the mental health of students.*

### What is the issue?

- **Suicide of students** - Entering the portals of India's premier institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) is widely seen as the culmination of years of hard work, discipline, and sacrifice.
- However, this narrative of success is often disrupted by disturbing reports of student suicides on campuses that are otherwise symbols of academic excellence.
- **Data** - Between 2005 and 2024, at least 115 IIT students were reported to have died by suicide.
- These incidents point to a deeper structural and cultural problem within higher education.
- **Deep issues** - While IITs have begun to respond with counselling services, peer support, and wellness initiatives, the challenge lies in making such measures comprehensive, consistent, and embedded into institutional culture.
- The issue is not merely one of individual vulnerability, but of systemic failure that demands coordinated responses from institutions, families, communities, and the State.

### What are the major reasons for increasing suicides?

- **Academic stress** - Competitive academic environments, fear of failure, rigid evaluation systems, and uncertain job prospects create sustained psychological pressure.
- Surveys reveal that more than 60% of students identify academic pressure as the primary source of stress.
- **Social alienation** - For many students, especially first-generation learners or those from marginalised backgrounds, the transition to elite institutions also brings cultural alienation and loneliness.
- **Other issues** - untreated mental health conditions, and exposure to peers in distress significantly increase suicide risk.
- Employment insecurity, family expectations, harassment, and social isolation.

- **Issues of stigma** - Importantly, stigma around mental health continues to deter students from seeking help.
- Thus, the crisis on campuses reflects both unmet mental health needs and an ecosystem that prioritises performance over well-being.

### What are the institutional responses?

- **Interventions from IIT** - Recognising the gravity of the issue, several IITs have initiated proactive mental health interventions.
- These include:
  - **Strengthening counselling services** with professional psychologists and psychiatrists.
  - **Peer support networks**, where trained student volunteers act as first points of contact.
- **Faculty and staff sensitization** - Enabling teachers, wardens, and administrators to recognise early warning signs.
- **Structured mental health programmes** - Such as wellness weeks, orientation sessions, and stress-management workshops.
- **Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) model** - Some IITs have also adopted internationally recognised methods like this which trains campus stakeholders to identify and respond to suicidal behaviour.
- These steps signal a shift from reactive to preventive approaches.
- **Academic Reforms to Reduce Stress** - Academic pressure remains a central trigger for distress.
- Acknowledging this, certain IITs have experimented with reforms to reduce cognitive overload.
  - **For instance**, IIT Bombay allows first-year students to drop one course per semester, providing flexibility and reducing the fear of irreversible failure.
- **Other interventions** - Other institutions have revised grading systems, introduced bridge courses, and encouraged collaborative learning over hyper-competition.
- Such reforms highlight an important insight that mental health cannot be addressed solely through counselling, it must be integrated into academic design and evaluation frameworks.

### What are the gaps and continuing challenges?

- **Low Counselling services** - They are often understaffed, with unfavourable counsellor-to-student ratios.
- **Lack of mandatory interventions** - Many interventions still depend on students voluntarily seeking help, which is unlikely in a culture where stigma remains strong.
- Moreover, peer supporters themselves may face emotional burnout if not adequately supervised.
- **Ineffective digital supports** - Digital tools such as anonymous check-ins and helplines offer promise, but their effectiveness depends on awareness, trust, and follow-up mechanisms.
- **Less frequency of campaigns** - Similarly, workshops and awareness campaigns often occur sporadically rather than as part of a sustained strategy.

## What can be done?

- **The Role of Families** - Families play a crucial role in shaping students' emotional resilience.
- High parental expectations, limited understanding of mental health, and pressure to conform to predefined success paths can exacerbate distress.
- **Regular communication between institutions and parents** - The discussion about mental health, academic realities, and available support systems is therefore essential.
- **Policy measures** - At the policy level, government initiatives such as *Manodarpan*, aimed at providing psychosocial support to students, offer a broader safety net.
- However, their success depends on effective institutional implementation, coordination, and monitoring.
- **Towards a Culture Change on Campuses** - Creating suicide-safe campuses requires more than isolated programmes, it demands a fundamental shift in institutional culture.
- Mental health must be normalised as an integral part of campus life, not treated as an exception or crisis response.
- This includes:
  - Making mental health services easily accessible and confidential.
  - Embedding well-being into curricula and orientation programmes.
  - Training students, faculty, and staff to act as informed gatekeepers.
  - Encouraging open conversations that challenge stigma.
  - Institutions that prioritise empathy alongside excellence are better equipped to identify distress early and prevent crises from escalating.
- **The Importance of Monitoring and Data** - Sustainable reform requires evidence-based policymaking.
- Regular monitoring, data collection, and independent research are essential to evaluate whether interventions are effective.
- Transparency in reporting mental health outcomes, while respecting privacy, can help institutions learn from each other and refine best practices.

## What lies ahead?

- Student suicides expose deep cultural and systemic flaws within India's higher-education ecosystem.
- While IITs have demonstrated that change is possible through counselling, peer support, academic reform, and awareness initiatives, the real challenge lies in ensuring consistency, scale, and long-term commitment.
- Suicide prevention is not a one-time intervention but a continuous process that requires collaboration among families, educational institutions, policymakers, and society at large.
- Ultimately, building suicide-safe campuses means redefining success—not merely as academic achievement, but as the holistic development and well-being of students.
- Mental health demands time, resources, and sustained attention, but investing in it is essential for the moral and social credibility of India's educational institutions.

## Reference

[The Hindu| IITs and Issues of Suicide](#)

