

# Decoding the Myths: Exploring the Mental Health Misconceptions in College Students

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\* Sitara Kapil Menon

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## Abstract

*Mental health issues have taken a centre stage in health sector with growing number of cases every year. Knowledge and awareness about mental illness among general population has increased with the available opportunity of sharing information on various open-source social networking platform in the recent years. Despite this, lack of awareness and related issues has always been an obstacle in reaching to the maximum and optimizing the impact. This study aimed to understand the awareness about mental health related matters among the young population particularly college students in the age group of 17-25years. A survey questionnaire with several common myths and facts was used to serve the aim of the study. Several interesting findings yielded out of the data analysis. Overall, the data indicated adequate awareness about mental health. Specifically, the results indicated good awareness about the prevalence of mental illness, the need for treatment, rehabilitation of mental health patients. The areas of concern with respect to awareness quotient is found to be lack of adequate knowledge of mental health professionals and lack of awareness about the etiological factors underplaying mental disorders was also clearly reflected.*

**Keywords:** Mental health, myth, awareness, mental health professionals

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## Introduction

The health status of the population in a country is a good predictor of its overall success and growth. The World Health Organisation's definition of health, includes physical, social, spiritual and mental health, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Of these, mental health is becoming a primary concern with alarmingly increasing prevalence and incidence of mental illnesses each passing year. Although mental health concerns have come in the fore front in the recent times, the issues of stigmatization and discrimination associated with mental illness has always made it a taboo topic among general population. India has been one of the first countries to make a pledge to promote the mental health of its people through National Mental Health Programme initiated in the early 1980s. Despite that mental health awareness has often been dealt lethargically amidst other competing priorities. In general, even today society does not deal with mental health issues as notably as other physical health concerns. Primarily because mental disorders are still generally considered as being a consequence of a lack of self-discipline and willpower and this prevalent irrational belief is due to lack of enough awareness of

the underlying causes. Such stigma associated with mental health coupled with lack of easy accessibility and affordability has led to inadequate mental health movement in the country. The National Mental Health Survey (NMHS), 2016 found that nearly 80% of those suffering from mental disorders did not receive treatment for over a year and also pointed out large treatment gaps in mental healthcare, ranging from 28% to 83% across different mental disorders (National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro-Sciences (NIMHANS), 2016). In another survey conducted by UNICEF and Gallup in early 2021 across different countries, only 41 per cent of young people between 15 -24 years of age in India said that it is good to get support for mental health problems, compared to an average of 83 per cent for 21 countries.

Although survey findings found that around one in seven 15 to 24-year-olds in India reported often feeling depressed or having little interest in doing things, but such poor awareness to seek help despite high prevalence of mental health disorders is indeed a disturbing statistic. For the same reason, the progress in the field of mental health infrastructure and its awareness among general population has been far from satisfactory.

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\*Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Smt. Chandibai Himathmal Mansukhani College, Ulhasnagar, Thane District, Maharashtra 421004, India.

Many studies have highlighted the importance of awareness needed to make people comfortable to acknowledge and support the cause. One study by NIMHANS reported that persons with mental illness are unable to receive necessary care due to limited awareness, availability, accessibility and affordability (Gururaj, 2016) This same study further points out the fact about treatment gap for the mentally ill in Indian society. This it explains is due to the poor awareness among people and the availability of limited resources.

Another study indicates that despite high rates of mental disorders in university students, very few seek professional help and there is not enough literature to know about the university staff’s attitudes to and knowledge about mental health problems, or whether these factors influence their experience with and assistance of students with these problems .Ensuring staff’s complete mental health literacy training and have adequate skills to respond appropriately to students with mental health problems may help in connecting young people to appropriate care in a university context. (Gulliver,2019)

Generally, it is found that mental health awareness is low in college students potentially resulting in impaired mental wellbeing. One study on Mental Health Literacy, psychosocial determinants and help seeking behaviours among male university students concluded that interventions focusing on increasing mental health knowledge and improving beliefs can improve Mental

Health Literacy among male college students. (Rafal G.,2018)

Exploring the misconceptions about mental health issues can build the first step to more open help seeking behaviour. This study aims to understand and analyse the level of mental health awareness among college students and to suggest measures for better mental health literacy accordingly.

**Method**

194 college students in the age group of 17-21 years across different streams of subjects filled an anonymous online survey. Ethical standards were maintained. Informed consent was taken and confidentiality was ensured. The survey questionnaire consisted of common myths about mental illness and the participant’s responses were analysed for accurate identification of the myths. Random sampling was used. Percentages of the correct responses for each statement was used to study the level of awareness.

**Results & Discussion**

A total number of 194 participants took part in the online survey about awareness of mental health. The maximum percentage of sample population falls in the age group between 17-21 years. Maximum number of participant’s scores falls in average. Very few individual scores fell below average reflecting adequate percentage of population aware of mental health subject. (Figure 1)

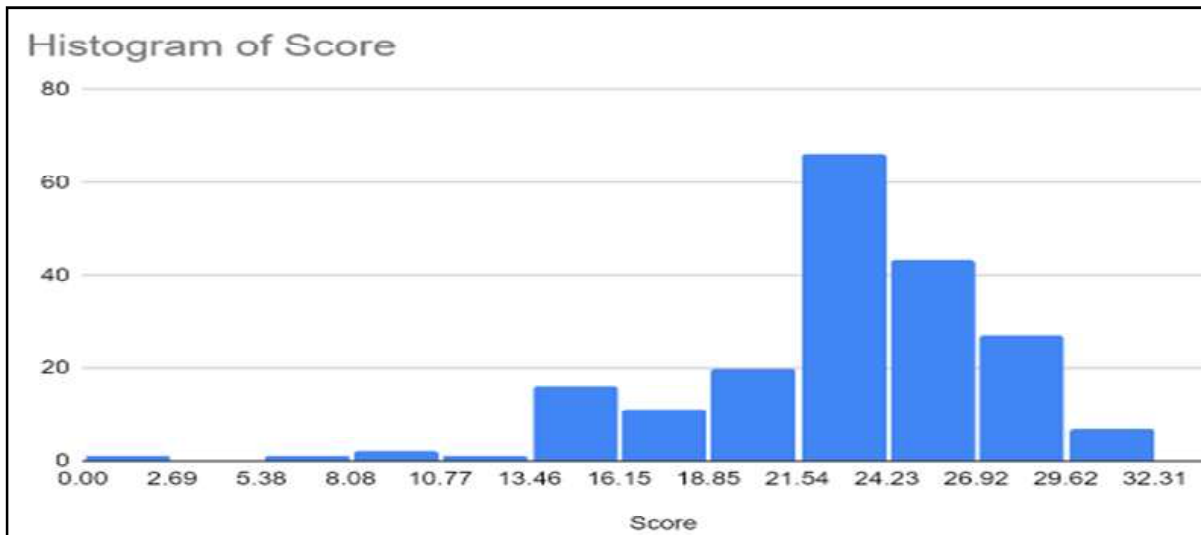


Figure 1 Distribution of scores

Analysis and discussion of the results:

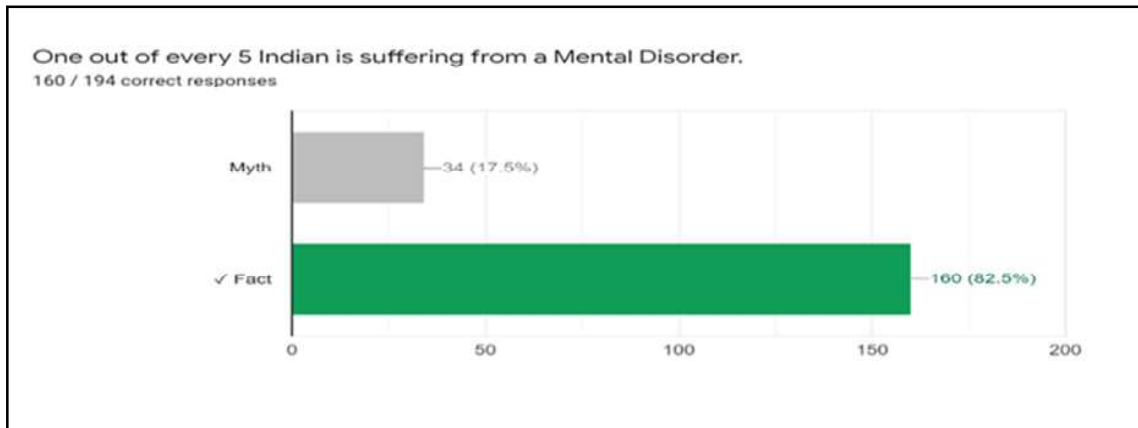
Awareness of the participants about the current rampant existence of mental illness in Indian context is evident through the study results. Previous researches

in this topic have found that lack of knowledge about the mental illnesses poses a challenge to the mental health care delivery system. If the public’s mental health literacy is not improved, this may hinder public

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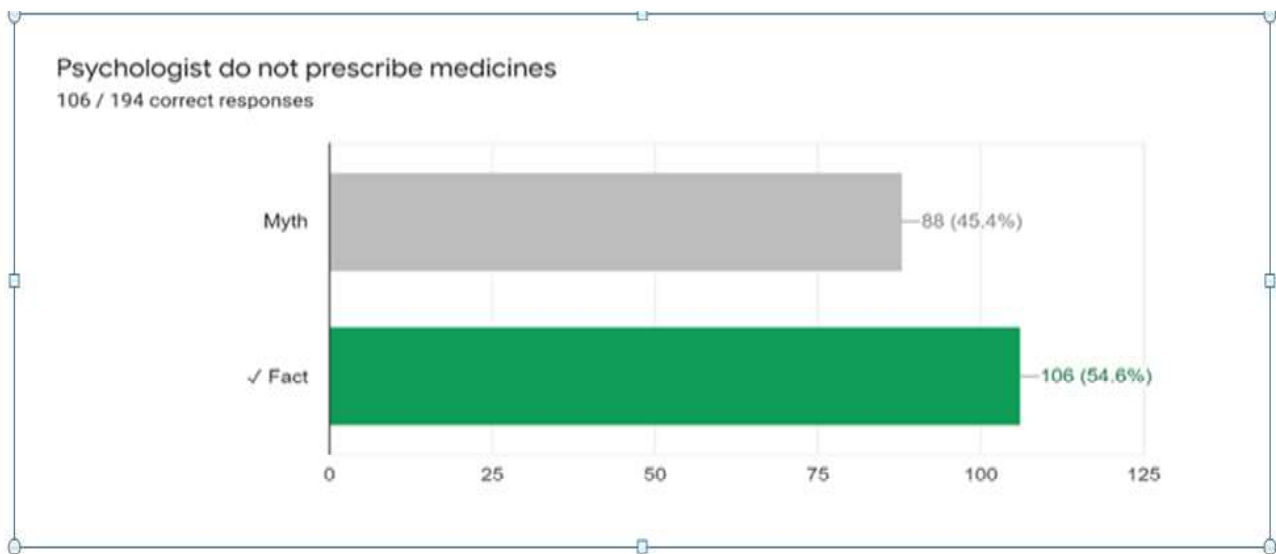
acceptance of evidence-based mental health care. Also, many people with common mental disorders may be denied effective self-help and may not receive appropriate support from others in the community

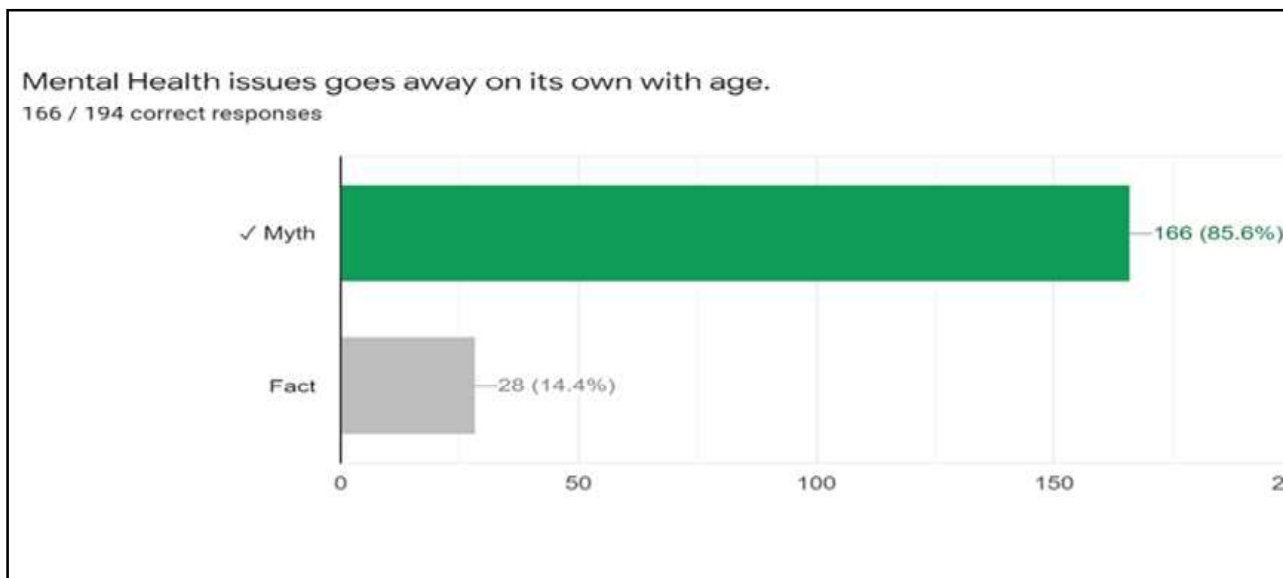
(Jorm,2000). The results here indicate a good section of study population (82.5%) understand that mental disorder is significantly common which is a positive sign.



The results reflect ambiguity in participants related to the distinction between psychologist and other mental health professionals. Psychologists and Psychiatrists are most often confused for their role and methodology in treating mental health patients. The results show relatively close margin scores between understanding whether it is fact or myth that psychologists do not prescribe medicines. Nearly half of the population could not understand the right distinction and fared poorly in their awareness on the statement 'Psychologist do not prescribe medicines'. It indicates a misconception that the only way mental health professionals deal with

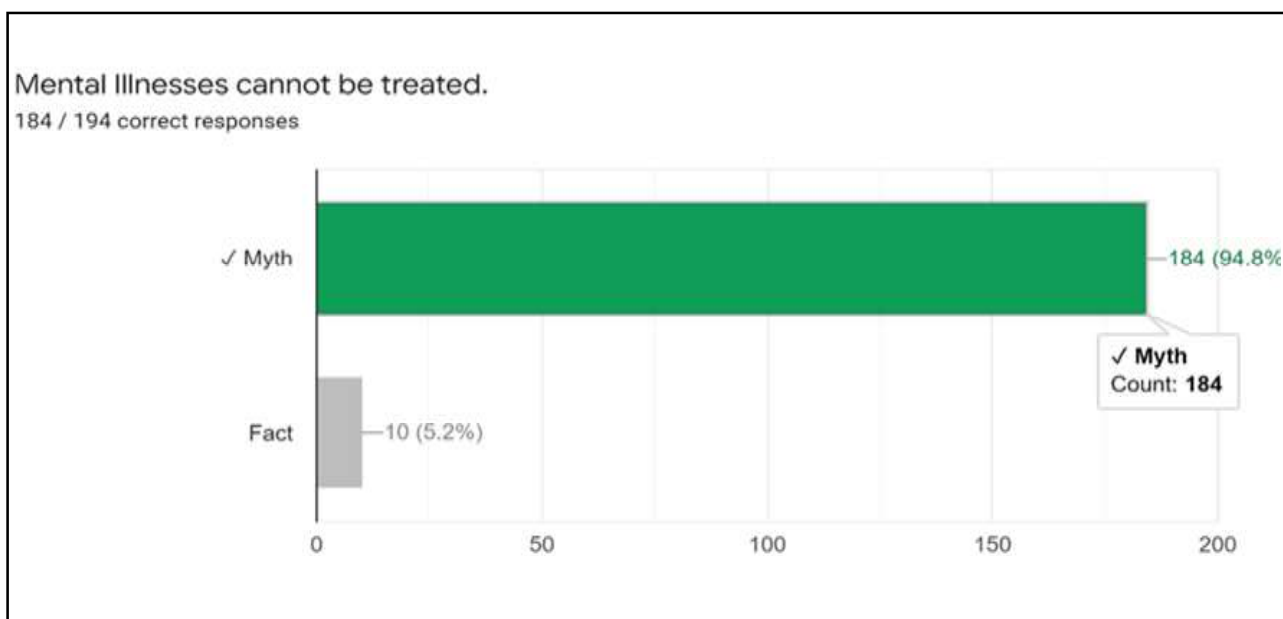
mental health issues is through medicinal treatment. Hesitancy with drug treatment for mental health issues in such cases may repel one to seek any help. There seems to be lack of awareness of psychotherapy and counselling in dealing these issues. The knowledge of efficacy of these forms of treatment would increase the number of individuals seeking treatment. The right distinction between Psychiatrists and Psychologist as mental health professionals apparently remains blurred among general public. The clarity in this regard is significant as it is directly related to the chances of seeking appropriate help.





Mental health issues go away on its own is also another popular myth which is tested for awareness among participants. This myth agreement by the participants would have indicated their belief that person with mental illness is responsible for their state and can change their situation. In the results 85.6% of the sample refuted this belief as a myth and displayed awareness in this regard. This is an important and a

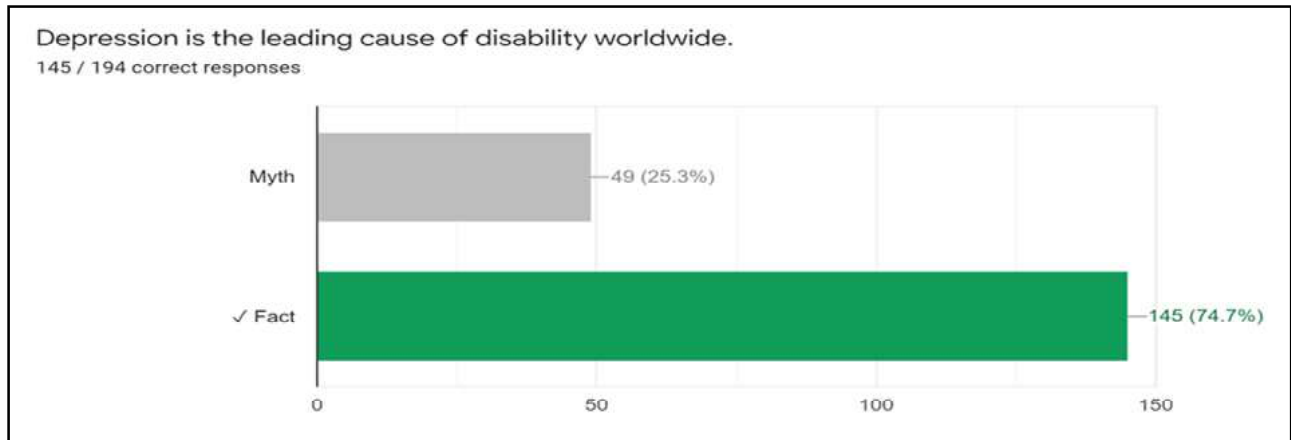
very positive finding since for many years in the past, mental illness was considered as a consequence of an individual's weakness and lack of will to overcome it. In India specifically a lot of cultural practices also hindered with right approach to treatment. Today, there seems to be adequate awareness through print and social media that mental illness just like physical illness needs treatment and cannot go away on its own.



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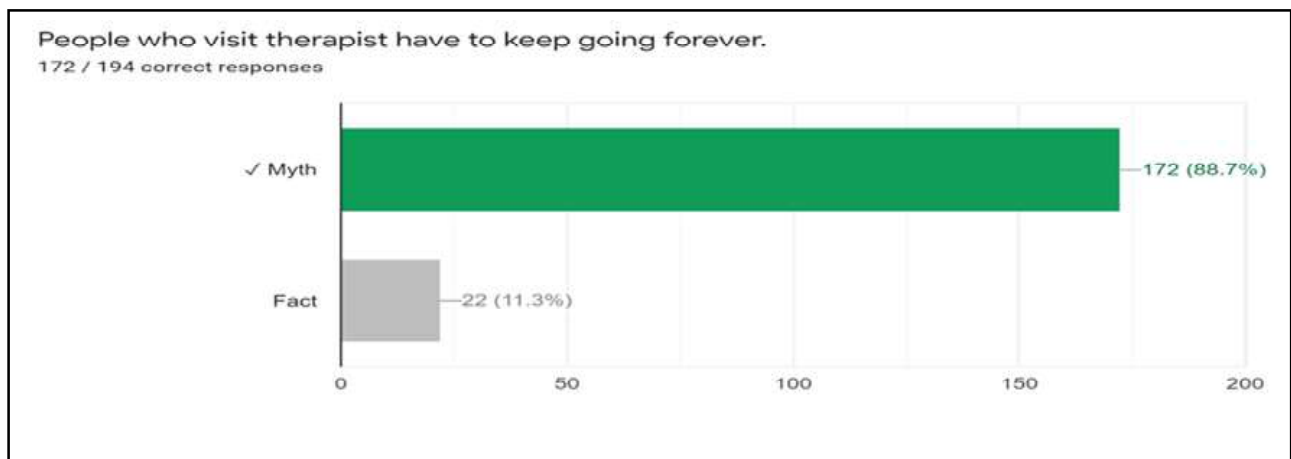
The study sample showed awareness that mental illnesses are treatable. Maximum percentage of responders believed mental illness can be treated showing good awareness in this regard. The understanding that mental illnesses are treatable reflects feelings of hope and awareness of available help which is a good sign. As mentioned earlier, in earlier times culturally accepted practices had triggered the

misconception that mental illness is caused by external forces or supernatural forces as a mark of punishment for bad deeds beyond one's control. These ideas were very much prevalent in the society to the extent of denying professional help for someone inflicted with mental health disorder. The results in this study observe a clear positive finding that study participants believed that mental illnesses are treatable.



Knowledge about the existing prevalence of mental illness specifically depression was explored. 74.7% could correctly identify the statement 'Depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide' as fact showing awareness. In the recent few decades, depression has become a pretty common mental illness characterized by persistent sadness and a loss of interest in pleasurable activities along with an inability to carry out daily activities, loss of energy; change in appetite; sleeping more/less; anxiety; reduced

concentration; indecisiveness; restlessness; feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, excessive guilt. In severe cases, depression can lead to suicide; over 800 000 people die due to suicide every year and is the second leading cause of death in 15-29-year-olds. According to WHO report, depression is ranked as the single largest contributor to global disability. Considering the debilitating prevalence and impact, knowledge of its high prevalence will serve as a positive contributor towards fighting this menace.



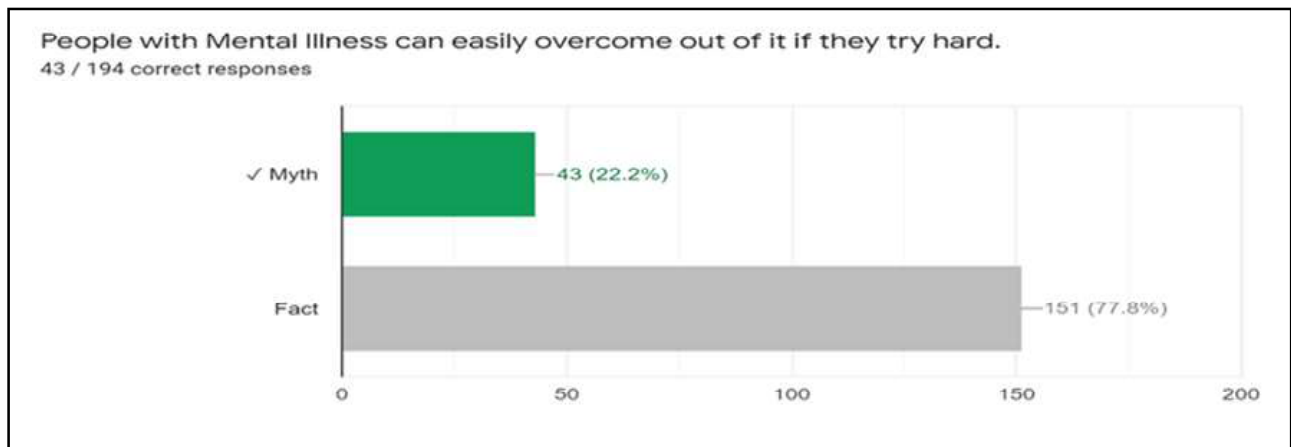
The statement 'People who visit therapist have to keep going forever' attempted to understand the resistance to seek treatment in mental illness. To check whether there is a belief that treatment for mental illness is unending or in other words whether mental illness is

uncurable. A significant 88.7% showed awareness in this regard and discarded the statement as myth. This finding goes in sync with the earlier statistic that indicated the awareness of the fact that mental illnesses are treatable.



‘Psychologist rely on scientific methods’ gauged again their awareness about mental health professional practice and was identified correctly as fact by 71.6% of sample population. However almost one quarter of population on the other continuum is still a matter of concern. Psychology for long had been considered by general public as equivalent to face reading or mind reading, there is still less understanding of the in-depth investigation methods exercised by psychologist through detailed interviewing, clinical observations coupled with the use of psychological testing which is very scientifically evidenced backed assessments methods. More awareness building in this regard must be considered.

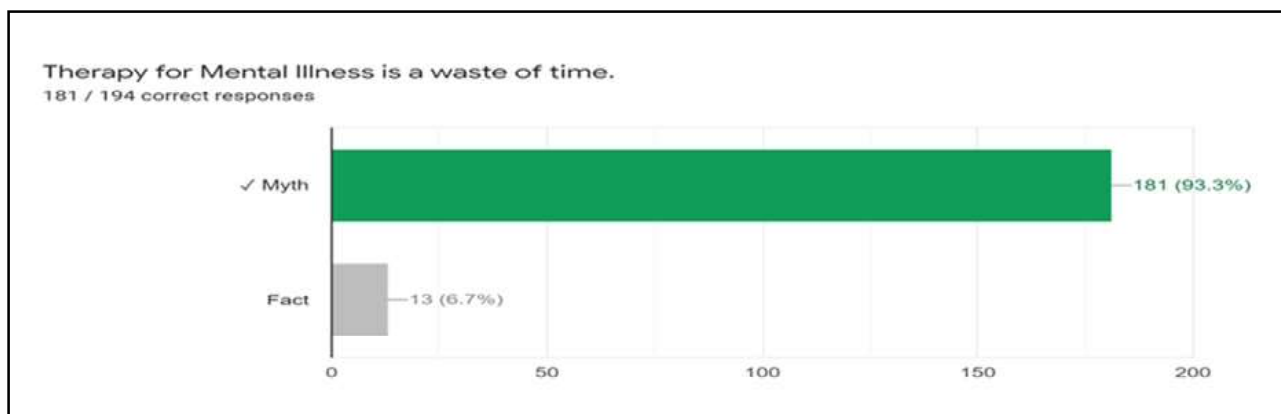
The statement ‘People with mental illness can easily come out of it if they try hard’ specifically pointed towards checking for misconception in the sample about the popular myth that mental illness is one’s control. The belief that one just needs to push self to come out of mental illness put enormous pressure and responsibility on the patient and also may create denial in them to seek professional help which in turn may deteriorate their condition further. The results on this statement only goes to explain the stigmatization mental health patients usually have to experience as their condition is seen as voluntary that is in their control. 77.8% study sample believed that people can easily overcome mental health issues if they put efforts is indeed a worrying statistic.



The statement ‘Therapy for Mental illness is a waste of time’ is marked as myth by 93.3% participants. It indeed shows a good sign that there is positive consideration for therapy for mental illness as a whole. However, the belief that people can come out on their own with efforts as reflected previously can still act a barrier for seeking professional help. The need to bring awareness about multiple risk factors and etiological

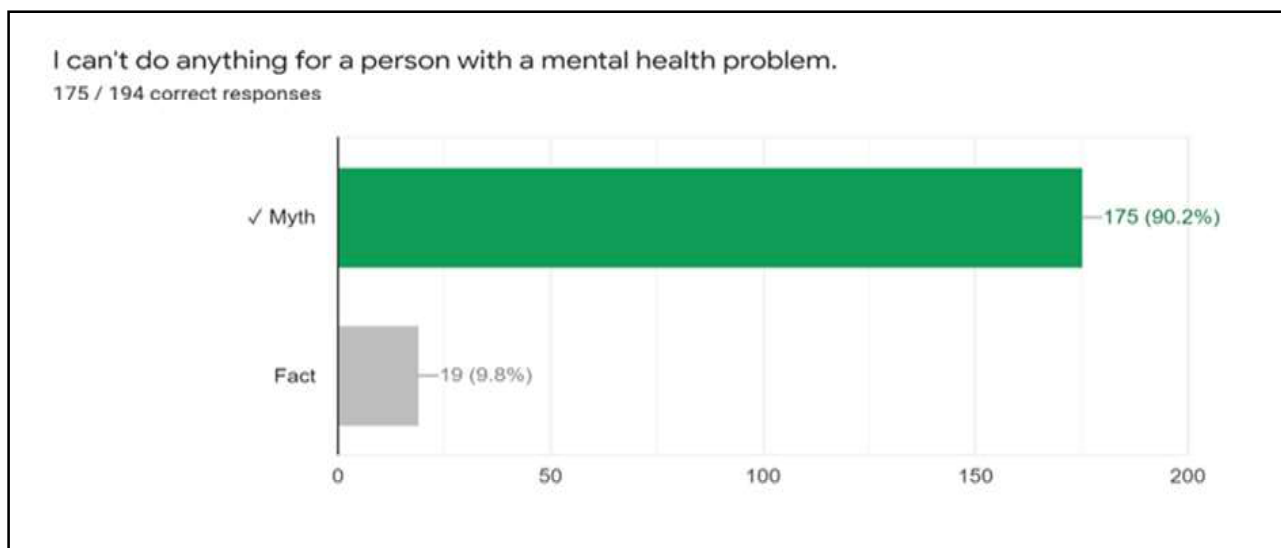
factors for mental health illness which includes biological (genetic, chronic diseases, advancing and terminal illness), psychological, social (familial, relationships, violence, disasters, discrimination), cultural (beliefs, attitudes), economic etc is significant. Effective treatment options are available also needs to be brought to public notice.

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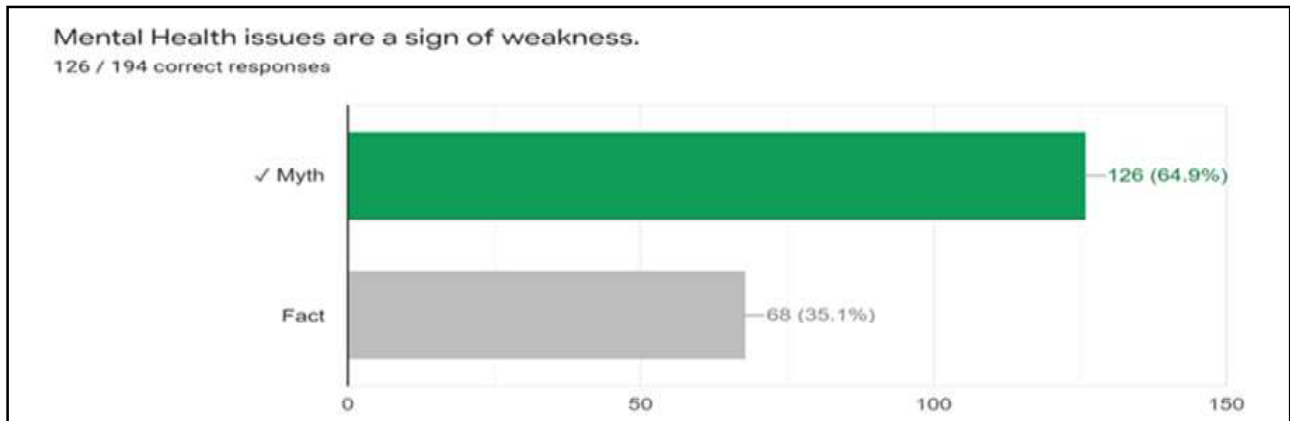
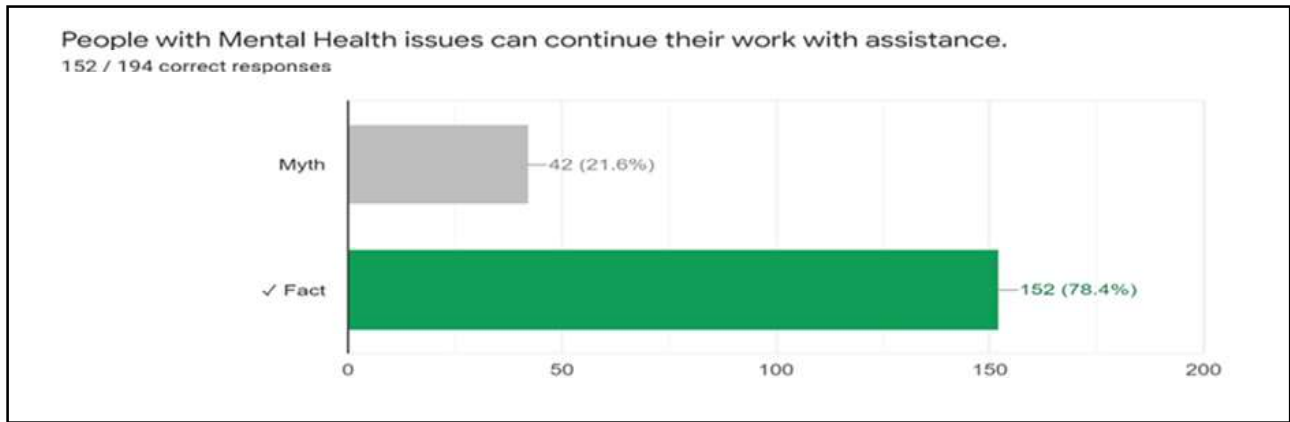
Social support is found to be good prognostic sign in almost all mental health issues. One study published in 2019 refers to the finding that perceived social support from family and friends were significantly related to lower depressive symptoms and social support is protective against depressive symptoms. In another study by Link et.al. 1999, it was concluded that while there is reason for optimism in the public's recognition of mental illness and causal attributions, a strong stereotype of dangerousness and desire for social

distance persist. These are likely to negatively affect people with mental illness. Consequently, this statement 'I can't do anything for a person with mental health problem' evaluated if there is awareness about how one can make a difference in a mentally ill patient's life. 90.2% study population responded positively and indicated through their response that they consider they can play a role in the life of a person with mental health concerns.



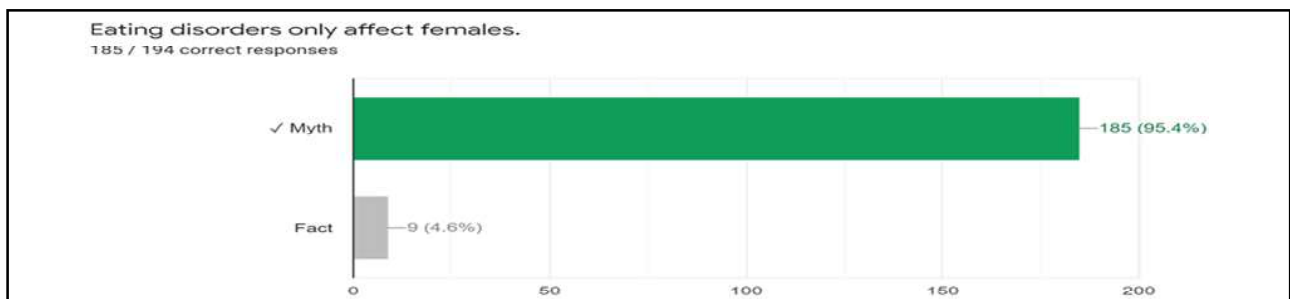
The responses on 'People with mental health issues can continue their work with assistance' are crucial with respect to understanding myths related to vocational rehabilitation of mentally ill patients. As a result of stigmatization and taboo associated with mental illness, rehabilitation of mental health patients has always been a matter of great concern especially with respect to vocational rehabilitation. Interestingly in this study, the sample population have shown good awareness in this regard. This statement is indicated as a fact by good

78.4% sample population displaying a very positive sign about the study population's awareness in this regard. 64.9% could identify the statement 'Mental health issues are a sign of weakness' as myth which is a good sign. Almost 35% terming this a fact is worrisome as this section of population may still be resorting to blaming and stereotyping mentally ill patients. As discussed before, in this regard education about the various etiological factors underlying mental illness needs to be prioritized.



The last statement in the questionnaire checked for gender stereotyping in the context of prevalence of mental health issues. In one national web-based survey study, the role played by gender in moderating mental-illness stigma was studied and the results indicated that when cases were gender typical, respondents felt more negative affect, less sympathy, and less inclination to help, compared to when cases were gender atypical. This study explained the results by

the fact that gender-typical cases were significantly less likely to be seen as genuine mental disturbances (Wirth,2009).Alternatively, it is of utmost importance to curb this gender stereotypes related to mental illness. Eating disorders is commonly thought to be a women’s illness. In the present study the sample population showed good knowledge with 95% correctly identifying the myth statement that ‘eating disorders affect only females.



In summary, the results indicate good awareness about the prevalence of mental illness, importance of therapy, possibility of vocational rehabilitation of mental health patients and also showed agreement for necessity of social assistance. The areas of concern with regards to awareness quotient is knowledge of

mental health professionals, their role and importantly lack of awareness about the etiological factors underplaying mental disorders was clearly reflected.

**Conclusions & Implications**

1. There needs to be focus on awareness programs educating population about the different



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mental health professionals and their area of expertise. Such programs will ensure clarity about whom to approach thereby increasing the number of people seeking professional help.

2. Psychoeducational programs as a social engineering solution to reach out to the maximum is

necessary. The awareness about the etiological factors of mental illness through such programs will elicit more empathic social support for mental health patients which is a precursor for good prognosis and relapse prevention.

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