

Mental Health Issues among Indigenous People: A Global Perspective

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Abstract

There are about 476 million indigenous people worldwide, representing around 5,000 cultures. Globally, the people of indigenous communities face a lot of challenges like illegal land dispossession, displacement, climate change, unemployment, and physical illnesses, which increase the risk of developing mental health issues among them. There is a lack of community-specific research in identifying the unique challenges of indigenous people and their effective solutions. The present systematic analysis is an attempt to identify the major mental health issues faced by indigenous people worldwide through the lens of various research works. The article also attempts to unearth various strategies that can improve mental health and well-being. Various search engines like, Elsevier, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Springer, PubMed, etc. were utilized for the systematic review analysis. A total number of 790 articles were initially identified, out of which 80 articles (since the 1990s) were selected for the full-text review. The review analysis revealed that worldwide indigenous people encounter many mental health issues, among which depression, suicidal ideation, self-harm behavior, anxiety, stress, substance abuse and PTSD are prominent. For preventing mental illness among the indigenous communities, there is a need for a multifaceted therapeutic model to address their cultural values, practices and community-specific needs, which will, in turn, help them to enhance their overall health and well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health is a state of well-being in which every person realizes his/her own potential, copes with the stresses of life, and is able to lead a productive life (World Health Organization, 2004). Mental health issues like depression, suicide, anxiety, stress, alcohol/substance abuse and other psychological issues are prevalent among the worldwide population, but more specifically among the indigenous population (De Leeuw *et al.*, 2010). The World Health Organization (WHO, 1999) defined indigenous people as individuals who have their origins in ancestral lands and migrate through different nation or state boundaries in a colonial manner. On an estimate, there are about 476 million indigenous people worldwide. These individuals have their own social and cultural groups all over the world and share lands and natural resources wherever they live (World Bank, 2023).

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Around 260 million indigenous people live in Asia, with an approx of 700 ethnic groups, languages and tribes (scheduled tribes){Asian Century Institute, 2014}. Studies around Southeast Asia have indicated that factors like unemployment, climate change, mining, and land disposition have led them to poor mental health conditions (Tabassum, 2016). India has around 104 million (8.6%) indigenous people and it is said to be the second-largest country in the world (Patel *et al.*, 2018). As a majority of the tribal population in India resides in remote areas, they face poor transportation and medical-healthcare facilities (Kumar *et al.*, 2020), which further leads to health issues like tuberculosis, asthma, shortness of breath, etc. (Thomas *et al.*, 2021). They mostly depend on natural resources for food, medicine and other things for daily usage, but due to drastic natural calamities like floods, drought, and heat waves, their lives are being largely affected (Dani *et al.*, 2015; Sahu *et al.*, 2015; Sharma, 2018).

Millions of indigenous people live in America, of which 13 million are from North and Central America and around 19 million are from South and other lowlands. Studies conducted among the indigenous people of Central and South America reported that poverty, loss of land or land disposition, war and migration had led them to suffer from poor physical and mental health (Pedersen, 1993). Studies also reported poverty, discrimination, unemployment, family violence, family trauma, loss of family members, malnutrition, and loss of lands as risk factors for poor mental health among the Aborigines of Europe and Australia (Zubrick *et al.*, 2004; Issacs *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, Cianconi *et al.*, (2020) reported that due to migration and land erosion of original lands, suicide rates among the indigenous youths had also increased. Many studies across African countries have reported poor socio-economic conditions, malnutrition, HIV and tuberculosis among the African indigenous population (Okasha, 2002; Uren *et al.*, 2017; World Bank, 1998). Studies conducted around the world reported on the views of indigenous people towards well-being. Theoretically, Burkhart (2019) depicted ecological well-being, i.e., the connection between the environment and traditions among the indigenous population. Further, the indigenous population

is also related to communitarian well-being, i.e., family and community (Cajete, 2005), and cultural well-being, i.e., awareness, principles and practices (Mackean *et al.*, 2022).

The Current Study

Due to social discrimination, poverty, and lack of resources, indigenous people face various health hazards. Numerous researches have been conducted globally, but there is no such comprehensive research work highlighting the status of the mental health of indigenous people across the globe. Thus, amid the insufficiency of literature, the current review analysis is an attempt to fill up this knowledge gap, and to explore various mental health issues faced by the indigenous people globally. It also tries to suggest some approaches for improving mental health and well-being, and this would be predominantly meaningful for researchers, health-care providers, and policymakers to manage and prevent mental illness.

METHOD

Data Sources

The paper reviewed available secondary sources and related articles. Various electronic databases like Elsevier, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Springer, etc. were used for searching secondary information. Some Government & non-government websites and grey literature were also searched.

Search Strategy

Searches were based on keywords like indigenous, aboriginal, ethnic groups, mental health, prevalence, disorders, etc. Different research papers and websites related to Indigenous communities and their mental health issues were also narratively synthesized, following the inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 1).

Data Analysis

At first, the search was systematically started with 790 research articles, grey literature and other government websites. After screening the articles and write-ups following the inclusion and exclusion

Table 1: Study inclusion and exclusion criteria

Parameters	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Publication type	Published scholarly journals and articles	a. Book chapters and sections b. Conference and dissertation abstracts
Publication date	1991-2023	Papers published before 1991
Language	English	Other languages
Accessibility	Full paper available online	Full paper not available online

criteria, in total, 710 articles were excluded as those were not found relevant to the present qualitative analysis. The paper finally reviews 80 articles related to indigenous people across the globe, the various challenges they face and their mental health status. Out of the 80 articles, 22 articles were utilized to prepare the introductory part of the paper showing the factors affecting indigenous mental health; 33 articles were used for qualitative review analysis related to the mental health status of the indigenous people and the rest 25 articles were utilized to explore individual as well as community-based approaches/measures to prevent mental illness in a broader context (Figure 1).

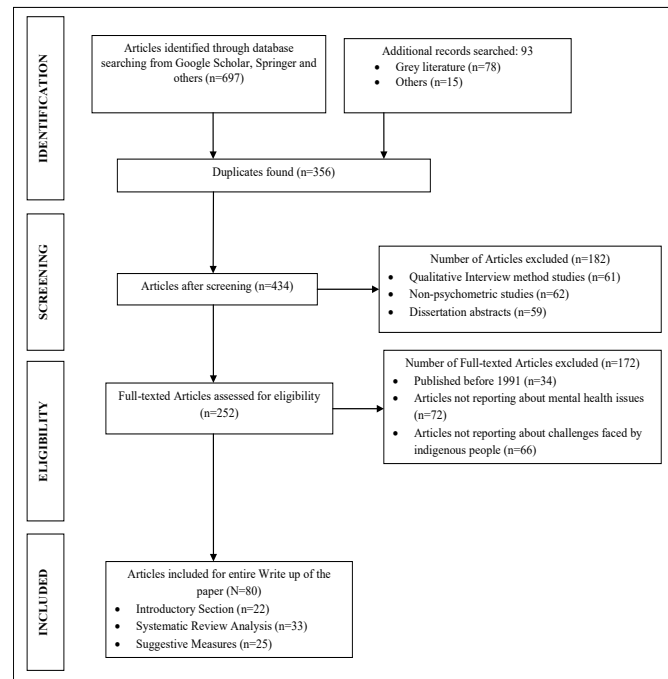
DISCUSSION

Section I: Major Mental Health Issues Faced by the Indigenous Population across the Globe

Mental health among the indigenous population is an important issue across the globe. Various research conducted in Asian, American, European, Australian and African countries reported a variety of psychological issues faced by the indigenous or aboriginal population around the world. The major mental health issues faced by the indigenous population are given below:

Depression

Depression is a major mental health issue affecting a large number of people around the globe. Research on aboriginals showed a higher level of depression among the indigenous population of Asian countries (Ansari *et al.*, 2023; Faruk *et al.*, 2021; Singkhorn *et al.*, 2021), including tribal individuals

**Figure 1:** Prisma chart showing the systematic review analysis

of India (Ghosh, 2013; Gopal & Ashok, 2012; Sindhu *et al.*, 2022; Singh *et al.*, 2013). Like Asian research, high level of depression was also found among the indigenous population of America (Firestone *et al.*, 2022; Holter *et al.*, 2023; Lawal *et al.*, 2021; Logie *et al.*, 2021; Servan-Mori *et al.*, 2021) and Australia as well (Haregu *et al.*, 2022; Walker *et al.*, 2019).

Suicidal Ideation, Suicide and Self-harm Behavior

Self-harm behavior and suicide have become a global issue as millions of people are dying by suicide every year. Different research all over the world has indicated high suicidal ideation among indigenous

people. Comparative analysis indicated that the risk of suicide was higher among Sami tribes of Europe than that of non-Sami ones (Silviken *et al.*, 2006; Silviken, 2009; Stoor *et al.*, 2015). Some American studies also indicated a higher risk of suicide (Hop Wo *et al.*, 2020), suicide attempt (Kumar & Tjepkema, 2019; Servan-Mori *et al.*, 2021) and suicidal ideation (Firestone *et al.*, 2022) among the American indigenous population. The risk of suicide attempts was also found among the aboriginal people of Canada, where females were found to be more vulnerable (Hajizadeh *et al.*, 2019; Pollock *et al.*, 2016). In contrast, the study of Beautrais and Fergusson (2006) showed a high suicide rate among the males of Maori tribes of New Zealand.

Anxiety

Anxiety is a serious issue faced by indigenous people worldwide. Studies on the Asian indigenous population showed a high prevalence of anxiety (Ansari *et al.*, 2023; Maharana *et al.*, 2022; Sindhu *et al.*, 2022). Likewise, high level of anxiety was found among the indigenous individuals of America (Firestone *et al.*, 2022; Lawal *et al.*, 2021; Servan-Mori *et al.*, 2021) and Europe (Kaiser *et al.*, 2010).

Stress

Stress is a natural reaction towards any situation which we consider as threatening. To some extent, stress is important to achieve a goal, which is known as eustress, but extreme stress can lead to anxiety, irritability, indecisiveness and poor attention. Research on Asian indigenous people (Faruk *et al.*, 2021; Maharana *et al.*, 2022) revealed high stress among them due to their adverse socio-economic conditions. Similar findings were also reported in some American and European literature (Hansen & Sorlie, 2012; Lawal *et al.*, 2021).

PTSD and Trauma-Related Issues

Due to racial discrimination, displacement, poverty and other distressing conditions, the indigenous people face more traumatic experiences and hence they are prone to trauma and stressors related disorders including acute stress disorder, adjustment disorder, PTSD, etc. (Currie *et al.*, 2015; Lewis *et al.*, 2021; Nadew & Tatsioni, 2012; Nasir *et al.*, 2021).

Alcohol and Substance Abuse

Addiction is a global social issue and indigenous people are more vulnerable to it as in many indigenous cultures, usage of alcohol is a part of various religious and social customs and alcohol use is often perceived as culturally accepted behavior. In America and Australia, alcohol, cannabis and other drugs consumption are reported more among the indigenous people (Nadew & Tatsioni, 2012; Nasir *et al.*, 2021). Studies in Asian countries also showed that alcohol, substance abuse as well as betel quid dependency are more common among tribal communities (Chaturvedi & Mahanta, 2004; Sadath *et al.*, 2019).

Other Mental Health Issues

Apart from the above-mentioned mental health issues, there are many other psychological and lifestyle issues faced by the indigenous population worldwide. Some Indian studies depicted poor self-esteem, low academic achievement, aggression and impulsivity among the tribal population (Ghosh, 2013; Singh & Rao, 2018). Similarly, Gopal and Ashok (2012) also reported high attentional issues and thought problems among the tribal adolescents of India. Another American study also revealed poor self-perception, more social isolation, and more sleep related issues among the aboriginals (Froese *et al.*, 2008).

The overall qualitative analysis revealed that the indigenous population mostly suffers from depression followed by suicide and self-harm behavior, anxiety and stress, irrespective of their geographical location (Table 2).

Section II: Strategies to Improve Mental Health and Well-being

Well-being refers to a state of being healthy and socially active. To improve our overall well-being, we need to be physically, mentally, emotionally sound and capable enough to contribute to society. Regular physical exercises or activities like walking, running, swimming, or sports are essential for maintaining overall well-being (Sabri *et al.*, 2023). Being mindful is very crucial in this fast-paced society as it enables an individual to focus on his/her thoughts, feelings,

Table 2: Major mental health issues faced by the indigenous people

Mental health issues	Study reviewed (n = 33)	Percentage (Multiple Findings)
Depression	14	42.4%
Suicide and self-harm behavior	10	30.3%
Anxiety	7	21.1%
Stress	4	12.1%
PTSD/ Trauma	4	12.1%
Alcohol and Substance abuse or dependence	4	12.1%
Others (poor self-esteem, sleep-related issues, etc.)	4	12.1%

emotions, sensations and behavior and be aware of the present situations or surroundings (Beshai *et al.*, 2023; Desjarlais, 2021). Mindfulness practices, like meditation, mindfulness breathing, eating and movement (physical activities and relaxation techniques), along with self-compassion, are fruitful for reducing the symptoms of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, aggressiveness, impulsivity and stress on a daily basis (Goldberg *et al.*, 2018). In this regard, studies on indigenous people (Gale, 2020; Nemati *et al.*, 2017) have highlighted the importance of spirituality. Individuals who are creative in nature and engage in creative activities can cope with daily hassles and are less prone to mental problems (Bungay *et al.*, 2023). Further, the practice of journaling is another way to express emotions and thoughts through writing, which is helpful to calm down our minds, as mentioned by various researchers (Keech & Coberly-Holt, 2021; Smyth *et al.*, 2018). Research on indigenous communities also highlighted the importance of engagement in creative activities and journaling (Hodgson *et al.*, 2023; Yurkovich *et al.*, 2012). Likewise, proper sleep habits play an important role in maintaining overall well-being, as poor sleep may lead to depression, aggression, anxiety and poor eating behavior (Lombardero *et al.*, 2019; Palimaru *et al.*, 2022). It is observed that to enhance sleep quality, one must avoid using social media, phone, or other electronic devices, caffeine, or nicotine before going to sleep (Fuligni *et al.*, 2018; Zsila & Reyes, 2023).

Besides these strategies, some of the community-based approaches are also very important to

reduce the prevalence and relapse of mental illness. Awareness programmes on emotional management teach us to become positive towards ourselves (Davydov *et al.*, 2010) and to share our emotions without hesitation (Sorly *et al.*, 2021), which further enhances our self-esteem and resilience. Awareness campaigns are important to raise understanding about the risk factors associated with alcohol and substance abuse, preventing individuals from addictive behaviors (Gaiha *et al.*, 2021; Lim *et al.*, 2023). Various researchers have focused on providing psycho-social therapeutic interventions at the community level, including the indigenous communities (Organista *et al.*, 2006; Renfrey, 1992) having mental health issues. Early diagnosis of mental health problems is significant to provide timely interventions like cognitive restructuring, social skill training, assertiveness training, etc., to reduce dysfunctional thoughts and behaviors like anger issues, impulsivity, temper tantrums, self-harm, etc. (Purdon, 2021). Further, community connection and social integration is crucial for a happy social and personal life (Tsai *et al.*, 2012). In addition, studies have also depicted the importance of the protection of the rights of mentally ill people across the communities (Harpur & Stein, 2018; Patel *et al.*, 2012) for ensuring their well-being, autonomy, dignity, safety, equality and inclusion in the society.

CONCLUSION

Millions of indigenous people across the globe suffer from poor physical and mental health conditions

due to poverty, climate change, land dispossession, and migration. Among the mental health conditions, depression, suicide and, self-harming behavior, anxiety, stress, PTSD, alcohol and substance abuse are prevalent. Lack of education, insufficient mental health care facilities, indulgence in unscientific healing practices, stigma, and superstitions worsen the scenario among the indigenous population.

The mental health crisis is a global concern and to be mentally healthy, one must do regular physical exercise, eat healthy food, have a proper sleep, engage in social activities, express emotions, ask for help whenever needed without hesitation, practice spiritual values and limit excessive use of mobile phones. All these measures are beneficial to reducing anxiety, worry, unrealistic fear, extreme mood variations, loneliness, impulsivity, sadness, grief, low self-esteem and negative self-perception. Moreover, enormous mental health awareness campaigns, along with proper mental health care facilities at every level, are crucial to instigating change. Thus, a comprehensive approach can contribute significantly to eradicating biases towards mental health and fostering a supportive environment for the care and treatment of mentally ill people, irrespective of their geographical or socio-economic variations.

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