

SHATTERED EXPECTATIONS: QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS INTO PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING THROUGH SUICIDAL NARRATIVES OF MEDICAL ASPIRANTS

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ABSTRACT

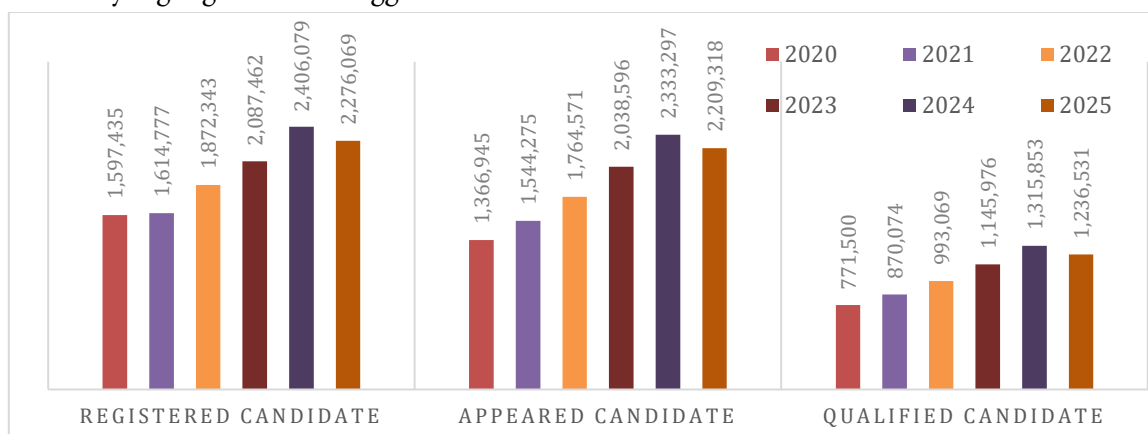
World Health Organization underscores mental health as a universal human right and a cornerstone of Sustainable Development Goal 3, the rising suicides among India's medical aspirants expose a silent crisis undermining young mind's well-being and the future of healthcare. Without mental strength, even the most brilliant minds may falter; with it, even the most challenging journeys become survivable. The increasing number of suicides among National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) aspirants in India presents a disturbing trend that highlights the urgent need to examine the psychological well-being of youth pursuing a career in medicine. This qualitative study analyses secondary data from a range of national news media sources, documenting suicide cases from 2023 to 2025 involving medical aspirants. Despite the expansion of medical institutions and rising competition in entrance examinations, there is limited scientific exploration regarding psychological wellbeing of these aspirants. The study critically explores contributing factors such as academic pressure, repeated failure, parental expectations, isolation in coaching environments, financial constraints, and the absence of structured mental health support. Drawing insights from the related literatures, this paper identifies core thematic areas including personal, institutional stressors, family-related challenges that affect aspirants' mental health and established the theoretical linkages of suicidal hazards in present scenario. The findings underscore the need for multi-level interventions, including mental health education, counselling infrastructure, coping strategies and longitudinal tracking of students' psychological well-being. The study calls for urgent policy attention and research efforts to mitigate the psychosocial risks among aspirants and build a resilient healthcare education system.

Keywords: Psychological Wellbeing, Suicide, Medical aspirants, Sustainable Development Goal 3

Introduction

The world is undergoing rapid changes in the field of education and employment (Ministry of Education, 2020). It demands for skilled and sound workers to get into several profession for placing India among the three largest economies in the Global lens. In between, the rush towards pursuing Human medicine as a profession attract young individuals the most in income and job security perspective (Holzer et al., 2022; Shaikh et al., 2013) where skilled and sound medical professionals would work towards sustainability. India, as a country is registered with the highest medical institutions and produces the greatest number of doctors worldwide as well (Charmode et al., 2020). Further, it has been the world's largest source of immigrant physicians since 1947 with 69,000 Indian-

trained physicians working in the US, UK, Canada, and Australia in 2017 (Walton-Roberts & Rajan, 2020). Currently, the statistical data of National Testing Agency (NTA) says the applicants for National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) to enter into medical schools are increasing with 2 lakhs more registrations every year in India with the minimum eligibility of qualifying class 12, the crucial age of being troubled with immense pressure to make right career decision for their future (Subhrajyoti, 2023). The weight of these decisions can lead to feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, disrupting their mental equilibrium and may lead to suicide. Over the last decade (2013-22), 103,961 student suicides were recorded with a 64% increase compared to the prior decade (2003-12)(Singh et al., 2022) after analyzing the figures of NCRB, 2022. People aged 15 to 24 years have the highest suicide rate in India and consistent with international trends in youth suicide (Gupta & Basera, 2023). Not only, University Grants Commission (UGC)'s immediate appeal to collect institutional data on students suicides in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Ministry of Education, 2025)but also, majority of the suicides occurred among 15-20 years students preparing for NEET (Gupta et al., 2025)is quite alarming for India's accountability to protect young lives while it carries 254 million youth aged between 15–24, with nearly half of its population under 25 (Wojnar, 2022). Despite central and state-level interventions aimed at preventing student suicides, the emotional fragility of aspirants remains largely unaddressed. A powerful reminder of this came in 2023, when Kota's District Collector OP Bunkar wrote an open letter to NEET and JEE aspirants, echoing the plea of a previous collector in 2016: "You are not alone in the city. I am here (main honna)" (Press Trust of India, 2023). Such appeals underscore the persistent mental health crisis in India's coaching hubs. It gives the clean chit towards declination of psychological wellbeing of aspirants, indicating an individual's capacity to effectively deal with life's challenges and environments that deteriorate with higher suicidal thoughts (Takwin & Atmini, 2018; Twinkle et al., 2023)and believed to serve as inoculation or immunity against stress and drastically reduce the need for negative coping strategies (Ukeh & Hassan, 2018). Moreover, the significant gap between the success rate and application in NEET indicating the cut throat competition in the field of medicine often may result Psychological adverse effects and simultaneously highlighted the struggle for existence to enter into the field of human medicine.



Source- www.nta.ac.in

Figure 1 Result sheet of NEET from 2020-2025

Now, aspirants choose institutions where simultaneously general education (class- XI and XII) and coaching for NEET are provided that shouting at the thirst for medical profession. Still, no such extensive research efforts have been founded to understand the aspirants' complex situations and support them during their struggles. Thus, researchers tried to explore psychological well-being from the secondary data sources gathered on suicidal cases of medical aspirants as lower psychological well-being is associated with higher suicidal thoughts (Takwin & Atmini, 2018; Twinkle et al., 2023) through the following research questions.

Research questions

1. What are the common psychological patterns and circumstances observed across medical aspirants' suicide cases between 2023 and 2025?
2. What are the contributing factors responsible for suicidal ideation and acts among medical aspirants?
3. How the established psychological wellbeing models explain the association between psychological wellbeing and suicides among medical aspirants.

Methodology

The study adopted a narrative review design to understand the psychological wellbeing of medical aspirants in India who have died by suicide during their preparation for NEET. Due to the scarcity of research evidences, secondary data were collected from nationally recognized news sources and media outlets such as *The Times of India*, *NDTV*, *The Indian Express*, *India Today*, *The Hindu*, *Medical Dialogues*, and others, documenting suicide cases between 2023 to 2025. The analysis was guided carefully by established models of psychological wellbeing to understand the psychological patterns of sufferings. This indirect approach was adopted due to lack of centralized data and the sensitivity surrounding suicide among adolescent aspirants. Additionally, triangulation with psychological theory provided a robust foundation for interpretation and insights.

Result

Suicidal cases of Medical aspirants

Psychological wellbeing is generally more challenging for medical students who face several personal, academic, and socio-cultural challenges (Ferguson, 2002; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). A report of a decade long study revealed 358 suicide deaths among medical students, residents, and physicians from 2010 to 2019 in India (Chadha et al., 2025) happened. Specifically, in 81% of suicidal cases, medical aspirants preferred to hanging themselves followed by poisoning and jumping (D. Gupta et al., 2025). However, limited scientific research on this issue is the greater hindrance due to challenges in information collection (Kishor et al., 2021) that might be a factor in case of aspirants also. So, researchers rely on the secondary data available in different online newspaper articles like *The New Indian Express*, *Financial express*, *The Indian Express*, *The Times of India*, *The Tribune*, *The Economic Times*, *India TV*, *NDTV*, *The Hindu*, *Medical dialogues* and *India Today* etc to prepare a consolidated report on the suicidal cases registered for the aspirants in different corners of India aspiring for NEET and dreaming to pursue medicine as a profession. In the year 2023, a 17-year-old NEET aspirant of Uttar Pradesh died by suicide after allegedly consuming poison at a coaching institute in Kota (Press Trust of India, 2023) and a teen from Chennai committed suicide after failing NEET twice (Madhav, 2023). Next year, a 20-year-old student of Thanjavur, who took his life after failing the NEET exam twice (Gokul, 2024), a 18-year-old NEET aspirant from Madhya Pradesh (ET, 2024), a 21-year-old medical aspirant from Mathura, Uttar Pradesh (Mallick, 2024), a 17-year-old medical aspirant from Bihar (Jaiswal, 2024), One 18-year-old NEET aspirant from Bharatpur, Rajasthan committed suicide a few hours before the exam who was the school topper in his 12th (Indo-Asian News Service, 2024), two 20-year-old NEET aspirants from Haryana and Uttar Pradesh (Press Trust of India, 2024a, 2024b). Additionally, a 16-year-old NEET aspirant and a student of Class-XI of Jharkhand, who was found hanging in her hostel room, a medical aspirant from Raisana village committed suicide (Saxsena, 2023). The news article from *medical dialogues* (a state newspaper of Rajasthan) reported on the tragic suicide of a NEET aspirant in Rajasthan, who had attempted NEET three times and failed, took his own life by jumping in front of a train soon after the results were released (Rajput, 2024). Recently, a 18-year-old NEET aspirant, who had been preparing for NEET-UG in Kota for over a

year, allegedly hanged himself in his PG room in Pratap Nagar, possibly due to a love affair (TOI, News desk, 2025) and a 18-year-old NEET aspirant from Odisha was found hanging from the ceiling fan of his hostel room in Kota which is the 3rd case of the year 2025 (TNN, 2025). A 16-year-old medical aspirant from Bihar hanged himself from a ceiling fan in his hostel room in Kota, just 20 days after joining a coaching centre to prepare for NEET (Press Trust of India, 2025b) similar with a 18 years Madhya Pradesh girl's case (Press Trust of India, 2025a). Two separate incidents of NEET aspirants who committed suicide a day after the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test for Undergraduates (NEET-UG) held on May 4, 2025. Reportedly, the two students died by suicide owing to the pressure and fear of failure in the national-level undergraduate medical examination (Uniyal, 2025). The analysis of secondary data on suicide cases among NEET aspirants across India reveals an alarming trend of psychological distress, academic pressure, and inadequate support systems affecting adolescents and young adults aged 16–21. These incidents, widely reported in national newspapers, highlight repeated failures in the NEET exam, intense coaching institute environments (notably in Kota), isolation in hostel settings, family expectations, and even interpersonal issues like love affairs as major contributing factors.

Factors responsible for committing suicide

India has remarkable diversity, encompassing a rich tapestry of socio-cultural traditions, varied languages, regional and religious identities. The geographic variability associated with academic pressures significantly contributed to suicide among NEET aspirants (D. Gupta et al., 2025). Further, Medical students have personally navigated the challenges of preparing for competitive exams like NEET. They possess a unique ability to understand and articulate the experiences of medical aspirants due to their first-hand journey through the rigorous path of medical education. Although no such vigorous study conducted to identify the factors, but, Nebhinani et al. in 2020 collected medical students' reflections about the causes of increasing suicides among medical aspirants. They mentioned numbers of challenges into 4 categories i.e., student related, coaching related, family related and others.

- **Related to Student**

Medical aspirants often struggle with several emotional, social, and structural stressors that originate due to deficient guidance, loneliness, parental and peer pressure, unresolved relationship issues etc. Many of them find it challenging to bounce back from the difficulties due to unbalanced lifestyle, low esteem and poor management skills. Further, lack of assertiveness, poor interpersonal and communication skills undermine psychological wellbeing of the aspirants.

- **Related to Coaching environment**

Commercial business strategies in educational institutions frequently take precedence over students' holistic development in the high-stakes world of NEET preparation coaching. With little regard for students' emotional and psychological welfare, this commodification of education feeds an unrelenting competition for profit. Many institutions' unclear exit or refund policies put students and their families in a difficult financial situation. Coaching institutions never bother about pedagogical accountability in favour of operating independently with little regulatory oversight. Rigid curriculum and a lack of support for motivation are common. Students are segregated according to their performance, which perpetuates academic hierarchies and breeds bias and discrimination. The culture has inadequate channels for redressal, insufficient supervision, and poorly structured support systems exacerbate student alienation. The broader education system's emphasis on excessive testing and lack of integrated evaluation mechanisms adds to the burden, creating an environment where academic success is pursued at the cost of psychological resilience.

- **Related to Family environment**

Family dynamics affect medical aspirants' mental health so badly where their personal interests may be neglected and suppressed under the preferences of their parents or elders. They suffered from emotional strain, lowered sense of self-worth and inflated expectations. Further, feeling of guilt or inadequacy in homes with gender bias or poor financial status, parental mental health concerns, ongoing conflict, and inadequate emotional support. Generational differences or overly protective parenting weakens their coping skills and drives them closer to burn out and suicidal ideation.

- **Others**

Peer pressure, social stigma, and limited access to professional mental health care, play a critical role in increasing psychological distress among medical aspirants. Anxiety related to reservations, lack of career counselling, and societal pressure to succeed increase vulnerability of aspirants that requires to analyse the socio environmental factors.

Psychological wellbeing: a preventive framework

Psychological well-being is a condition of individuals who have a positive attitude towards themselves and others, can make their own decisions and regulate behaviour, can regulate and create an environment that is compatible with their needs, have life goals, make adolescents' lives more meaningful, and try to explore and develop themselves (Ryff, 2013). It involves feeling good about oneself and forming healthy relationships. Achieving psychological well-being often requires coping mechanisms, emotional resilience, and a supportive environment. There are models suggested by renowned psychologists believed that psychological wellbeing involves striving for perfection and achieving one's true potential. Among those, Ryff's Six-Factor Model, Seligman's PERMA Model provide a robust lens to analyse the connection between psychological well-being and suicide of NEET aspirants.

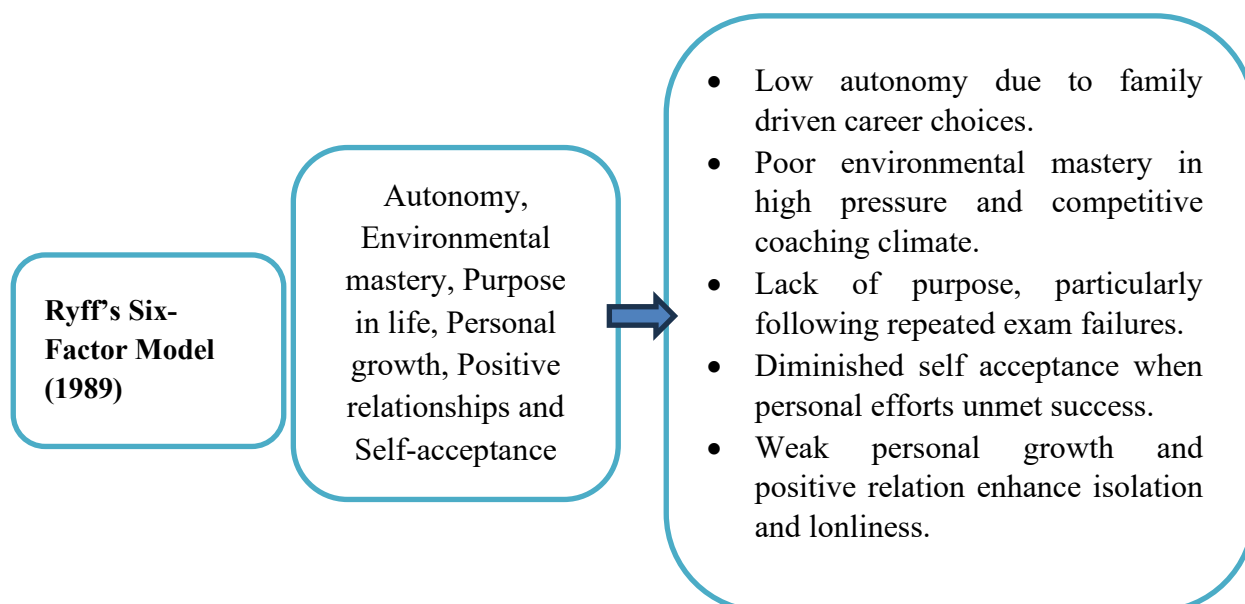


Figure 2 Ryff's Six-Factor Model linkages with the suicidal hazards

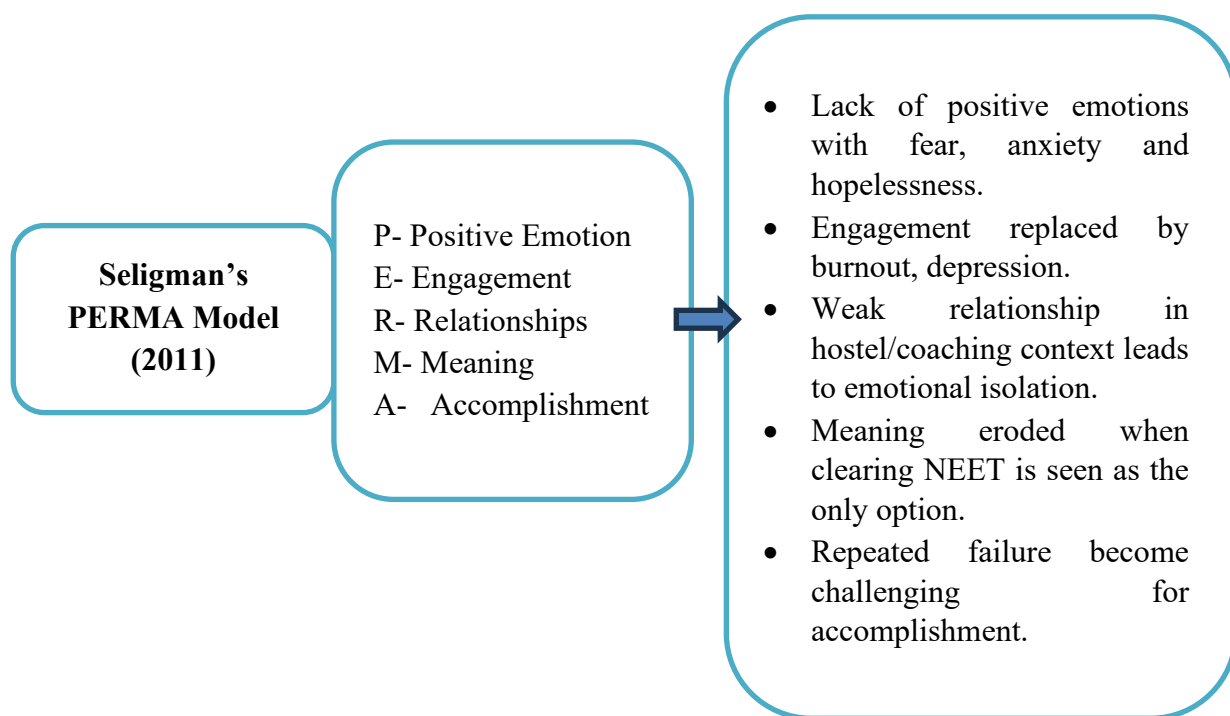


Figure 3 PERMA Model linkages with the suicidal hazards

These models of psychological wellbeing significantly identify the affected risk factors and tendency to commit suicidal attempt. This will not only be helpful for early detection of mental health risks among NEET aspirants but also designing and implementing specific mental health programs and counselling strategies devoted to psychological wellbeing. Coaching institutions, educational institutions (board exams and competitive entrances within the same academic environment) can promote healthier academic environments that value mental health alongside academic performance without losing their fame. The understanding of the psychological components can seed career flexibility, build resilience and confidence to choose alternative pathway as per own strength reducing the “NEET or Nothing” mindset.

Discussion

Life is an intricate tapestry woven with threads of both success and adversity. These ups and downs serve multiple psychological functions which can't be surpassed by individuals with low psychological wellbeing because psychological wellbeing is a condition of individuals who have a positive attitude towards themselves and others, can make their own decisions and regulate behaviour, can regulate and create an environment that is compatible with their needs, have life goals, make lives more meaningful, and developed (Ryff, 2013). When this internal equilibrium is nurtured, it acts as a psychological buffer—protecting the individual from the debilitating impact of failure, rejection, and stress. For medical aspirants, this means the difference between collapsing under pressure and adapting with courage. Yet, in the current landscape, low psychological well-being has become the silent epidemic among aspirants. As seen throughout this study, the recurring narratives of student suicides point to more than academic failure; they reflect a systematic erosion of emotional resilience. The aspirants highlighted in this analysis did not merely fall short in examinations—they were failed by a system that prioritized performance over personhood. However, in making a sustainable health care system, the utmost care should be needed not only for the students already enrolled into medicine but also for the aspirants, struggling day and night with the dreams

to serve for nation because some researchers argued that the stress of medical education is a carry-over stress from the preparatory phase (Mishra et al., 2020).

Suicide is defined as the intentional act of taking one's own life, resulting in death (Nock et al., 2008) considered as threat to public health. Several risks and warning signs of suicide have been traced in the field of medicine (Varshney et al., 2024) that have taken the lives of medical aspirants, who start their preparation in early ages just after finishing their school education. These mishappens not only reveal the ineffectiveness of guidance and counselling facilities provided by our educational institutions that supports students' comprehensive development and prepares them for future challenges but also show the negligence of researchers with very less amount of research evidences conducted for their support and help.

Researchers explored the significant association between the psychological components of widely followed psychological models and the risk factors related to suicide among NEET aspirants that provoked to understand about their psychological sufferings and to design the specific interventions meant to develop psychological wellbeing among them during preparation. Still, a significant gap exists in scientific literature and centralized data, pushing researchers to rely on journalistic sources. This underscores the urgent need for systematic research in multiple directions, including psychological wellbeing of aspirants, institutional stressors in coaching hubs, the impact of coaching culture, availability of mental health and wellness infrastructure, coping strategies and family support dynamics. Further research should also explore gender-specific challenges, media narratives around suicides, and policy gaps in mental health protection. A longitudinal approach to tracking aspirants' psychological well-being over time and a critical evaluation of suicide prevention strategies can contribute to building a resilient support system for India's future medical professionals.

Conclusion

Psychological well-being is not a luxury; it is a necessity, particularly for youth who are expected to carry the burden of national development. Whereas, the imbalanced psychological well-being in the form of committing suicides in case of medical aspirants is quite alarming for making a sustainable and developed India. Since, an increasing demand and fascination towards the medical profession among young adolescents and parents during the last two decades has been recorded, it is crucial for Government and all the stakeholders linked with this system to address these challenges in early ages in order to support the well-being of those pursuing careers in medicine or preparing themselves to get into this profession and ultimately improve healthcare outcomes for all. This study affirms that strengthening psychological well-being is the most sustainable and humane solution to reduce suicidal tendencies among medical aspirants.

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Conflict of Interest

The researcher has no conflict of interest to disclose.

Declaration of Generative AI And AI Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors declare no use of Artificial intelligence (AI) for the write-up of the manuscript.

Author Contributions

Trupti Subhrajyoti: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Investigation, Resources, Data Curation, Writing Original Draft.

Amulya Kumar Acharya: Methodology, Resources, Writing – Review and Editing.

Ethics Approval

This paper is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere. The authors declare that informed consent was not required as there were no human participants involved.

Data availability

Not applicable

Abbreviation

Not applicable

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