



PAPER LEAKS AND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH: WHEN EXAMINATION INJUSTICE BECOMES A PUBLIC MENTAL HEALTH CONCERN IN INDIA

INTRODUCTION

A student sits at a study table late at night. Books are open, notes are scattered around, and the examination date is getting closer. For months, sometimes years, the student has prepared for one important examination. Parents may have spent money on coaching, books and travel. Teachers have encouraged the student to work harder, while relatives ask about marks, rank and future plans. Slowly, the student may begin to believe that one examination will decide the next stage of life.

Then comes the news: the question paper has been leaked.

For an examination authority, this may be a security failure or a criminal matter. For students, the experience can be very different. Years of hard work may suddenly feel uncertain. Confidence may be replaced by anger, fear, disappointment and helplessness. In India, where competitive examinations can strongly influence higher education and career opportunities, a paper leak is therefore not only an examination problem. It is also a social justice and public mental health concern.

ACADEMIC PRESSURE AND EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

Indian students already experience considerable academic pressure. NCERT's nationwide survey of more than 3.79 lakh school students found that 81% identified studies, examinations and results as a major source of anxiety. The survey also reported that satisfaction with personal and school life declined as students moved into higher stages of schooling. Some students feared that people would think less of them if they did not perform well academically (National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT, 2022).

This does not mean that 81% of students have an anxiety disorder. It shows how closely academic performance is connected with students' emotional and social lives. In India, an examination often means much more than a test of knowledge. A good rank may be connected with family pride, social status, employment and financial security. Poor performance, in contrast, may bring disappointment, criticism or shame. Families, schools, coaching institutions, social media and constant comparison with successful students can increase this pressure. As a result, students may begin to see examination success as proof of their personal worth. When a paper leak occurs, the emotional impact can be greater than the cancellation of an examination. Students may question whether their hard work mattered, whether the process was fair and whether they can trust the next examination.

PAPER LEAKS AS AN ADDITIONAL MENTAL HEALTH STRESSOR

Research suggests a clear association between academic pressure and mental health difficulties. A systematic review of 52 studies found that 48 reported a positive association between academic pressure or

examination-related periods and at least one mental health outcome, including anxiety, depression, self-harm or suicidal behaviour (Stearns et al., 2023). Most of these studies were cross-sectional. Therefore, the findings show an association and do not prove that academic pressure alone causes mental health problems.

The same scientific caution is necessary when discussing paper leaks. It would be incorrect to say that a paper leak directly causes depression or suicide. A young person's mental health is influenced by many factors, including previous psychological difficulties, family relationships, financial problems, social isolation and other stressful experiences.

Nevertheless, examination injustice can become an additional major stressor. A student who is already struggling emotionally may find it harder to cope when an examination is cancelled, postponed or questioned because of malpractice. The loss of control can be particularly difficult. Students are generally taught that studying hard and preparing well will improve their chances of success. When the examination system itself appears unfair, some may begin to feel that their effort is no longer enough. This can lead to frustration, helplessness and reduced motivation.

INEQUALITY MAKES THE BURDEN WORSE

The consequences of a paper leak are not the same for every student. Social and economic background matters.

Imagine two students whose examination is cancelled. One belongs to a financially secure family and can afford another year of coaching, books, accommodation and travel. The other student's family may already have borrowed money or made major sacrifices for the first attempt. For that student, another examination does not simply mean more preparation. It may mean another year of financial strain for the entire family.

Students from economically disadvantaged families may also have fewer resources to manage repeated delays. The same disruption can therefore produce different levels of hardship depending on family income, location, social support and access to educational opportunities.

This is where social work has an important role. Student distress should not be seen only as an individual problem. Anxiety may be connected with poverty, family expectations, lack of information, social isolation and limited access to support. A meaningful response must therefore address both emotional distress and the social circumstances surrounding the student.

NEET-UG 2024 and the Importance of Trust

The NEET-UG controversy showed how widely examination uncertainty can affect young people. More than 23 lakh candidates appeared for the examination across 4,750 centres in 571 cities, including 14 cities outside India (Supreme Court of

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India, 2024). The Supreme Court examined allegations relating to irregularities and paper leakage and concluded that the available material did not justify cancelling the examination for the entire group of candidates (Supreme Court of India, 2024). The importance of this case is not that every candidate experienced severe psychological distress. Rather, it demonstrated how uncertainty surrounding a high-stakes examination can affect a very large population at the same time.

Trust is essential. Students need to believe that the same rules apply to everyone. When this trust is questioned, anxiety may continue even after the examination ends. Students may ask: Was my result fair? Did someone receive an unfair advantage? Will the next examination be safe? In a highly competitive system, loss of trust can itself become a source of distress.

SUICIDE REQUIRES CAREFUL DISCUSSION

The relationship between examinations and suicide must be discussed responsibly. Suicide cannot be explained by one examination, one result or one paper leak. It is a complex outcome shaped by multiple psychological, family, social and economic factors. Academic stress is one of the reported risk factors in the literature on suicide among Indian adolescents. A 2024 scoping review identified mental health problems, family difficulties, academic stress, violence, social factors and economic difficulties among important reported risk factors (Senapati et al., 2024). A paper leak should never be described as a direct cause of suicide. However, it may become an additional serious stressor for a young person who is already vulnerable or experiencing severe distress. Students showing persistent hopelessness, serious withdrawal, major sleep problems, inability to manage daily activities or thoughts of self-harm need early and appropriate support.

A STUDENT-CENTRED RESPONSE

India has recognised examination malpractice as a serious legal issue. The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024 addresses unfair practices, including the leakage of question papers or answer keys and other actions that compromise examination integrity (Government of India, 2024).

Strong laws and accountability are necessary, but legal action alone cannot address the psychological and social consequences for students. India needs a student-centred response.

First, prevention: Examination authorities must strengthen security during the preparation, storage, transport and distribution of examination materials.

Second, transparent communication: When an examination is disrupted, students and families need timely, clear and reliable information. Delays, rumours and conflicting messages can increase fear and uncertainty.

Third, mental health support: Schools, colleges and examination authorities should establish clear counselling and referral pathways. Support should begin when the crisis occurs, not only after a tragedy.

Fourth, social support: Parents and teachers should reduce blame and excessive pressure. Students need to hear that an examination is important, but it does not define their value as a person.

Social workers can contribute through psychosocial assessment, family counselling, crisis intervention, psychoeducation, referral and linkage with educational, welfare and mental health services. They can also help identify students who may be especially vulnerable because of poverty, family conflict, social isolation or limited access to support.

BEYOND THE EXAMINATION HALL

The deeper problem is not only the leaking of question papers. It is also the enormous weight society has placed on a single examination. Examinations are necessary, but academic setbacks or administrative failures should not become emotionally unbearable.

India needs fair opportunities for re-examination, transparent admission systems, career counselling, multiple educational pathways and stronger mental health services for students. Parents and teachers also need to change the message given to young people. Instead of saying, "You must succeed at any cost," we need to say, "Do your best. We will support you whatever happens."

A paper leak does more than compromise a question paper. It can disturb a student's sense of fairness, security and hope. It can create emotional and financial pressure for families and uncertainty among thousands or even millions of young people. Examination integrity must therefore be understood as more than an administrative responsibility. It is also a mental health responsibility, a social justice responsibility and a responsibility towards the dignity of young people. An examination should measure what a student knows. It should never determine whether a student feels worthy, respected or hopeful about life. If India wants a stronger and fairer education system, it must protect not only the question paper but also the young person sitting behind the answer sheet.

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