



MADHYA PRADESH BHOJ (OPEN) UNIVERSITY



MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING POLICY 2026

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TERMINOLOGY

- i. Mental Health is not just the absence of mental disorder. It is defined as a state of well-being in which the individuals realize their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and are able to make a positive contribution to their community. Mental health refers to a broad array of activities directly or indirectly related to mental well-being. This is in keeping with World Health Organisation's definition of health: A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease. Mental health is also related to promotion of mental well-being, prevention of mental disorders, and treatment and rehabilitation of people affected by mental disorders.
- ii. Mental health problems refer to conditions ranging from psycho-social distress affecting a large number of people to mental illness and mental disability affecting a relatively small number of people.
- iii. Mental illness refers to specific conditions such as Schizophrenia, Bipolar Disorder, Depression or obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD).
- iv. Mental disability refers to disability associated with mental illness. While mental illness is a medical construct, disability is better understood using a medico-social model and the two terms are not used synonymously in this document. Not all persons with mental illness will have a disability, although many will experience it due to various barriers which may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.
- v. Persons with mental illness and person(s) with mental health problems refers to persons who have mental illness and mental health problems respectively. It is necessary to emphasize that mental health illness or mental health problem does not constitute a person's Identity and that a person and an illness and/or problem are distinct from each other.
- vi. Persons affected by mental illness include person(s) with mental illness and significant others such as family members and care-givers.
- vii. Recovery is defined as a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellbeing, live a self-directed life and strive to reach their full potential.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Mental Health and Wellbeing Policy of MPBOU commits the university to building a mentally healthy, inclusive, and stigma-free open and distance learning ecosystem that supports the wellbeing and academic success of all learners and staff within a rights-based framework. Drawing on the National Mental Health Policy 2014, it is founded on values of equity, justice, integrated and evidence-based care, quality, participation, and a holistic understanding of mental health that recognizes social determinants such as poverty, gender, and marginalization. The policy's goals are to reduce distress, exclusion, disability and drop-out related to mental health problems, enhance mental health literacy, and strengthen institutional leadership and governance for mental health promotion and support

The policy establishes a Mental Health Club (MHC), a Nodal Officer, and Wellbeing Coordinators at regional and major study centres, with dedicated budgetary support to ensure effective governance and accountability. It mandates integration of life skills and wellbeing education into induction and curricula, stress-sensitive assessment practices, and regular awareness programmes, using digital platforms, webinars, and a dedicated portal to reach geographically dispersed ODL learners. Prevention and early identification are addressed through stigma-free, non-discriminatory provisions, gatekeeper training for academic and administrative staff, establishment of counselling (in-person and online/tele-counselling) and clear referral linkages to public mental health services, along with specific protocols for crisis and suicide-risk situations, substance-use awareness, and focused support to vulnerable learner groups.

A strong rights and ethics framework underpins confidentiality, voluntary help-seeking, reasonable accommodation in academic processes, and access to grievance redressal against discrimination or harassment on mental health grounds. The policy emphasizes capacity building of faculty, counsellors, and staff, possible peer support structures, and inter-sectoral collaboration with health, social welfare, women and child development, disability departments, NGOs, and community organizations to extend support beyond the university. Finally, it promotes research on mental health in ODL, creation of a simple mental health information system, and periodic monitoring and review so that MPBOU's response remains dynamic, evidence-informed, and aligned with national mental health priorities.

1. Preamble

Madhya Pradesh Bhoj Open University (MPBOU), a state open and distance learning university, recognizes mental health as an integral and essential component of overall health and academic success. The National Mental Health Policy of India (2014) emphasizes a rights-based, participatory, and holistic approach to mental health, with special attention to vulnerable and marginalized groups, stigma reduction, and universal access to services. In line with this, MPBOU commits to promoting mental wellbeing, preventing mental health problems, enabling early identification and support, and ensuring non-discriminatory access to appropriate services for all its learners, faculty, and staff in both physical and virtual environments.

2. Vision, Values and Principles

2.1 Vision

To foster a mentally healthy, inclusive and stigma-free open and distance learning ecosystem in which all members of the MPBOU community can realize their potential, cope with academic and life stresses, learn and work productively, and contribute positively to society within a rights-based framework.

2.2 Values and Principles

MPBOU's Mental Health and Wellbeing Policy is guided by the following values, adapted from the National Mental Health Policy:

- I. **Equity:** Ensure context-sensitive and accessible mental health support for diverse learners (rural, urban, tribal, learners with disabilities, working professionals, women, elderly learners, incarcerated learners, etc.) across Madhya Pradesh and beyond.
- II. **Justice:** Prioritize vulnerable and excluded groups, including students facing socio-economic hardship, persons with disabilities, and learners in remote or marginalized communities.
- III. **Integrated care:** Embed mental health promotion and support within existing academic, student support, and human resource systems, with linkages to public health and specialist services where needed.

- IV. **Evidence-based care:** Use research, feedback, and good practices to guide interventions and periodic improvement.
- V. **Quality:** Strive for acceptable quality standards for counselling, referral, and support services, appropriate to an ODL setting and user expectations.
- VI. **Participatory and rights-based approach:** Involve students, staff, and caregivers in planning, implementing, monitoring, and reviewing mental health initiatives, while upholding dignity, autonomy, and confidentiality.
- VII. **Governance and accountability:** Establish clear roles, structures, and monitoring mechanisms within MPBOU for mental health and wellbeing.
- VIII. **Holistic approach:** Recognize the link between mind, body, social environment and learning; address social determinants such as poverty, gender-based violence, marginalization, and digital exclusion in programme design where feasible.

3. Goals and Objectives

3.1 Overall Goals

Aligned with national goals, MPBOU will:

- I. Reduce distress, disability, exclusion and academic drop-out associated with mental health problems across the learner and staff life-cycle.
- II. Enhance understanding and awareness of mental health and wellbeing within the MPBOU community.
- III. Strengthen leadership, governance, and institutional capacity for mental health promotion and support.

3.2 Specific Objectives

MPBOU shall pursue the following objectives, contextualised to ODL:

- I. Provide universal, non-discriminatory access to basic mental health information, psychosocial support, and referral services for all enrolled learners and employees.

- II. Identify and reduce risk factors related to mental health in the ODL context, such as isolation, exam stress, multi-role burden (work-family-study), digital divide, and financial hardship.
- III. Promote mental health literacy, life skills, and resilience through curriculum, co-curricular activities, and digital platforms.
- IV. Reduce stigma and discrimination related to mental illness and disability within all university processes, including admission, examination, evaluation, and employment.
- V. Facilitate timely identification and appropriate referral for learners and staff at risk of self-harm, suicide, substance misuse, or severe mental illness.
- VI. Ensure respect for rights, privacy, and safety of persons with mental health problems, and prevent harassment or victimization.
- VII. Build internal and networked human resource capacity for counselling, gate-keeping, and supportive academic environments.
- VIII. Integrate mental health considerations in student support services, HR policies, grievance redressal, and disaster/emergency responses.

4. Scope and Applicability

This policy applies to:

- I. All registered learners of MPBOU, including distance, online and blended mode learners, across all levels and programmes.
- II. All teaching, non-teaching, contractual, and outsourced staff.
- III. All MPBOU study centres, regional centres, partner institutions, and virtual learning environments.

It covers promotion of mental wellbeing, prevention and early identification of mental health problems, support and referral, and protection of rights in all academic and administrative processes.

5. Governance and Institutional Mechanisms

In line with the national policy emphasis on effective governance and accountability:

I. Mental Health Club (MHC)

- Constitute a university-level Mental Health Club, with representation from: senior administration, academic schools, regional centres, student support, female and male faculty, learners, and experts in psychology/psychiatry.

II. Nodal Officer (Mental Health and Wellbeing) under Students Services Centre (SSC)

- Appoint a trained faculty/official as Nodal Officer to coordinate implementation, liaise with external mental health services, and facilitate capacity building.

III. Regional and Study Centre Roles

- Designate a Wellbeing Coordinator at each regional centre and major study centre (could be a senior counsellor or coordinator) responsible for local implementation, awareness activities, and referral facilitation.

IV. Budget and Resources

- Earmark an annual budget for mental health promotion, training, counselling services, and research, recognizing health expenditure as social investment.

6. Promotion of Mental Health in an ODL Environment

Reflecting national policy directions on mental health promotion in education and workplace settings:

I. Life Skills and Wellbeing Education

- Integrate age- and context-appropriate life skills education (LSE) modules into induction/orientation programmes and selected courses (e.g., soft skills, teacher education, social sciences).

- Themes: stress management, time management, coping with failure, digital citizenship, gender sensitivity, inclusion, help-seeking, and resilience.

II. Curriculum and Pedagogy

- Review curriculum and assessment patterns to reduce unnecessary stress (e.g., flexible exam schedules, multiple exam opportunities, supportive feedback, use of continuous assessment where possible).
- Ensure study materials avoid stigmatizing language about mental illness and marginalized groups, in line with rights-based perspectives.

III. Awareness and Sensitization

- Organize periodic webinars, open lectures, online campaigns, and commemorative events (World Mental Health Day, etc.) for learners and staff.
- Develop and disseminate simple digital and print materials in Hindi and English on mental health, common problems, and available support.

IV. Digital Platforms and Help-seeking

- Create a dedicated Mental Health and Wellbeing portal/section on the MPBOU website and LMS containing self-help resources, FAQs, emergency contacts, and referral pathways.
- Establish helplines or tie-ups with state-supported helplines, ensuring clear protocols for operating hours, confidentiality, and escalation.

V. Workplace Wellbeing (Staff)

- Encourage healthy work practices, reasonable workloads, supportive supervision, and flexible arrangements where

possible for staff with significant caregiving or health responsibilities.

- Include mental health sessions in staff development programmes.

7. Prevention, Early Identification and Support

Aligned with national strategies for prevention of mental illness and reduction of suicide and attempted suicide:

I. Stigma Reduction and Inclusion

- Explicitly prohibit discrimination on grounds of mental illness or psychosocial disability in admission, evaluation, (where applicable), employment, promotion, and service conditions.
- Ensure that students with mental health conditions receive reasonable accommodations (e.g., extra time, flexible scheduling, deferment without penalty, online alternatives) as per due process.

II. Gatekeeper Training

- Train academic counsellors, study centre coordinators, regional centre staff, and frontline administrative staff as “gatekeepers” to recognize signs of distress, suicidal risk, substance misuse, and to respond empathetically and refer appropriately.
- Provide clear guidance on boundaries, confidentiality, and referral to professional services.

III. Counselling and Referral Services

- Establish a university-level Counselling Unit (in-person in Bhopal and online/tele-counselling for distance learners) staffed by qualified counsellors/psychologists.
- Develop referral linkages with government mental health facilities (District Hospitals, Medical Colleges, DMHP) and

empanelled psychiatrists/psychologists for cases requiring clinical intervention.

IV. Suicide Risk and Crisis Response

- Adopt protocols for responding to suicidal ideation/attempts and acute crises, aligned with national guidance on suicide reduction.
- Key elements: immediate empathetic response, ensuring safety, contacting emergency services where necessary, informing appropriate authorities while maintaining privacy, and post-crisis follow-up.

V. Substance Use Prevention

- Integrate information and sensitization on alcohol and substance misuse into student induction and life skills modules.
- Promote de-addiction services and helplines run by state/central agencies and NGOs.

VI. Special Focus on Vulnerable Groups

In line with the national focus on vulnerable populations, MPBOU will:

- Identify and proactively support learners with:
 - a) Disabilities (including psychosocial disability)
 - b) Socio-economic hardship
 - c) Single parents, caregivers, elderly learners
 - d) Learners in remote, tribal, or conflict-affected areas
 - e) Learners affected by disasters or emergencies
- Collaborate with social welfare, women and child development, and disability departments to facilitate access to schemes and benefits where applicable.

8. Rights, Confidentiality and Ethics

Consistent with the national rights-based approach:

I. Respect for Rights and Dignity

- Uphold the dignity, autonomy, and privacy of individuals seeking or receiving mental health support.
- Ensure voluntary participation in counselling, except where intervention is required to prevent imminent harm in accordance with law.

II. Confidentiality

- Maintain confidentiality of counselling and mental health information, with disclosure only on a need-to-know basis or where legally mandated or necessary to prevent serious harm.

III. Non-discrimination and Reasonable Accommodation

- Affirm that mental illness or mental health problems do not define the identity of a person and shall not be grounds for exclusion from academic or employment opportunities, subject to safety and essential competence requirements.
- Reasonable accommodations shall be considered through a defined process, involving medical/psychological opinion where needed.

IV. Grievance Redressal

- Provide channels for learners and staff to report discrimination, harassment, or rights violations related to mental health, linked with existing grievance and anti-harassment mechanisms.

9. Capacity Building and Human Resources

In line with the national focus on human resources for mental health:

I. Training for Faculty and Academic Counsellors

- Include mental health sensitization, basic counselling skills, and referral pathways in orientation and refresher programmes.

- Emphasize supportive feedback, inclusive teaching, and identification of distress in online and face-to-face interactions.

II. Training for Administrative and Support Staff

- Provide brief training modules on empathetic communication, handling distressed callers/visitors, and confidentiality.

III. Specialist Human Resources

- Recruit or engage qualified counsellors/clinical psychologists on full-time/part-time/consultant basis.
- Explore partnerships with medical colleges, District Mental Health Programme (DMHP), NGOs, and professional bodies to augment capacities.

IV. Student Peer Support

- Consider structured peer support/“buddy” initiatives, with training and supervision, to provide low-intensity support and promote connectedness in the ODL environment.

10. Community Participation and Convergence

Reflecting the national emphasis on community participation and inter-sectoral collaboration:

I. Student and Caregiver Involvement

- Involve learner representatives and caregivers (where appropriate) in the MHC and in feedback mechanisms on services.
- Encourage formation of student-led wellbeing clubs/networks, including online communities moderated with clear guidelines.

II. Inter-sectoral Collaboration

- Collaborate with Health and Family Welfare Department, DMHP, district hospitals for referral and joint programmes, Social Welfare, Women and Child Development, and Disability departments for schemes and support

along with NGOs and community-based organizations working in mental health, gender, disability, youth, and livelihoods.

- Linkages with Local Bodies where MPBOU study centres are located with government institutions, explore participation in local health and education committees to integrate mental health promotion activities.

11. Research, Monitoring and Evaluation

In line with the national emphasis on research, monitoring, and evaluation MPBOU shall:

- I. Encourage research on mental health in ODL: stressors, coping, digital divides, interventions, and outcomes, with ethical safeguards.
- II. Facilitate collaborations between MPBOU and medical colleges, psychology departments, and research institutions.
- III. Develop a simple Mental Health Information System capturing:
 - Utilization of counselling and helpline services
 - Participation in awareness programmes
 - Feedback and satisfaction measures
- IV. Students Services Centre (SSC) shall review implementation annually and propose revisions, ensuring the policy remains dynamic and responsive, as envisaged in the national policy.

References

Government of India. (2014). *New Pathways New Hope. National Mental Health Policy 2014*. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.