UNVEILING THE SILENT STRUGGLE
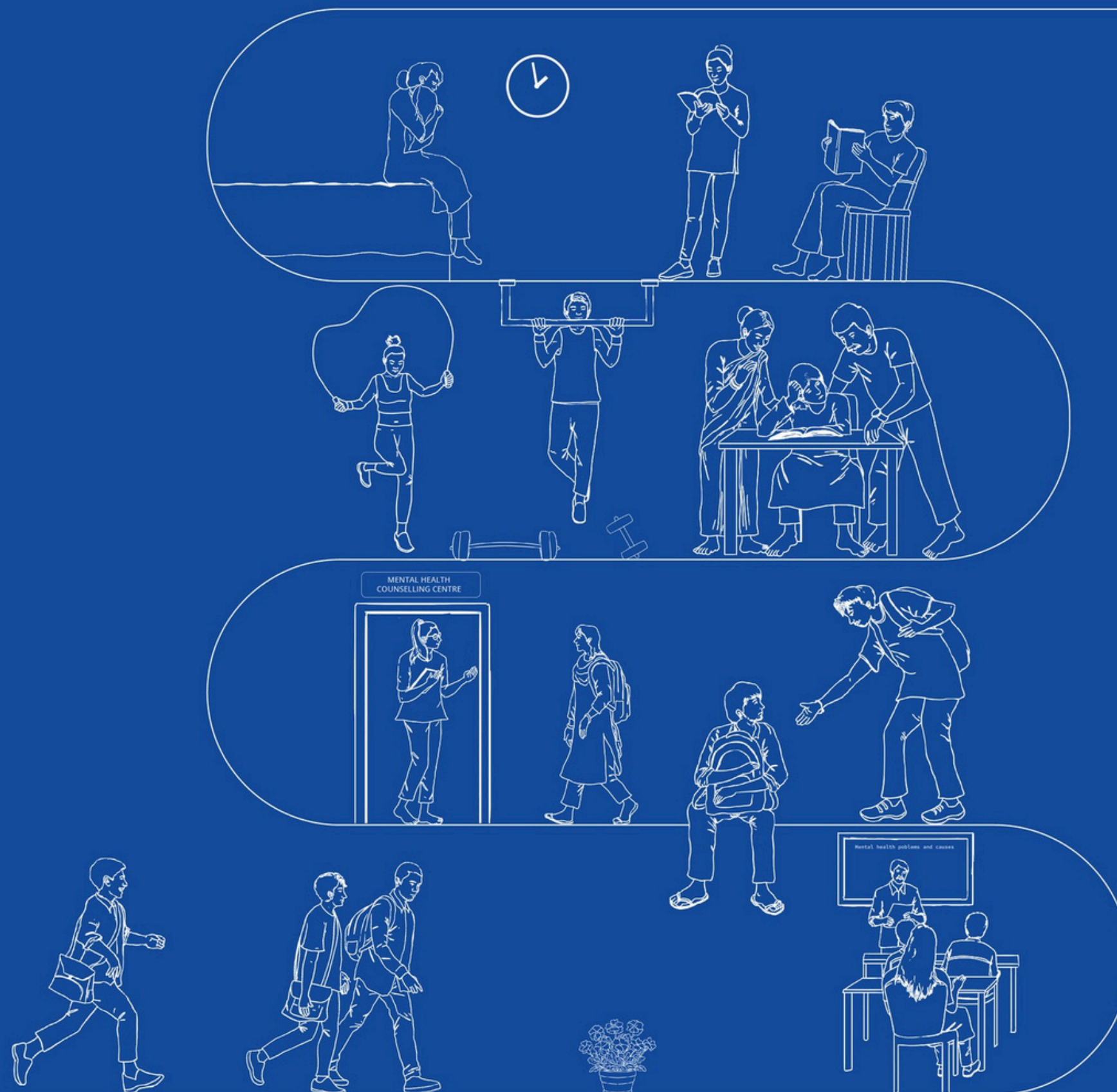
Correlating Loneliness, Insomnia and Stress in Indian College Students

A research report by

MPOWER
MIND MATTERS

ADITYA BIRLA EDUCATION TRUST

About
Mpower

Established in 2016, Mpower strives to work towards a stigma-free world where individuals with mental health concerns can lead meaningful and productive lives with respect and dignity.

Mpower – a unit of the Aditya Birla Education Trust, under the leadership of its Founder & Chairperson – Mrs. Neerja Birla, is a leading voice in mental health advocacy which has transformed countless lives through innovative youth centric programs and unwavering commitment to mental well-being.

Foreword

Dr. Shekhar Seshadri
Advisor, SAMVAD,
Former Senior Professor and Former Head
Dept. of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry
Former Dean, Behavioral Sciences Division
Former Director, NIMHANS

Dr. Indu Shahani
President & Chancellor,
ATLAS SkillTech University
Sheriff of Mumbai (2008-09)
Principal, HR College of Commerce
& Economics (2000-16)

I attended an academic event recently where the chief guest in his inaugural address said many things, including how it is difficult to conceive of youth contributing to nation development if they are lonely, stressed and sleepless. While there are flagship programs dedicated to the well-being of youth, there is also the stark reality of the enormous service gap that exists. The pernicious triangulation of loneliness, academic stress and sleeplessness has recently urged the attention of all stakeholders due to the problem of suicidality in coaching centres. Imagine the predicament of 18-years-old's from different parts of the country, carrying with them the tyranny of expectations, living unsupervised in unfamiliar spaces. Imagine their loneliness, stress and long sleepless hours of toil. Some of the notes 'left behind' are heartbreaking.

This research report on Correlational and predictive research examining the relationships between stress, loneliness, and insomnia among college students is brought to us at a timely juncture in the imperative to address youth mental health. This is an online study and focuses on the relationship between loneliness, academic stress and insomnia. While acknowledging that youth experience stress in many other contexts, the idea is that support programs are critical to assist college going youth in mitigating academic stress which in combination with loneliness and insomnia can have compounded deleterious effects. This report serves as a reminder of our obligation to strengthen the domain of student/college mental health.

It gives me immense pleasure as an educator, to introduce this research paper to you. My thoughts align with the insights shared in the Research Report – Mpower Young India, which identifies a key opportunity to reshape the mental health at colleges & universities in the secondary education system in India. With over three decades of experience in this field, I am a passionate advocate of youth development and wellbeing. As an Educator, I have witnessed closely the mental health challenges facing our youth today. This research paper addresses the complex relationship between stress, loneliness, and sleep disruptions that today's college students navigate, and the findings, provide a compassionate lens into the lived experiences of our youth, taking into account sociodemographic factors.

By revealing the nuanced interconnections, this study and its recommendations serve as a crucial roadmap for educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals. It underscores the urgent need for a holistic approach with empathetic support systems that recognise the multifaceted nature of student well-being.

India, a
Young
Country

10-24 years

10-19 years

33%

21%
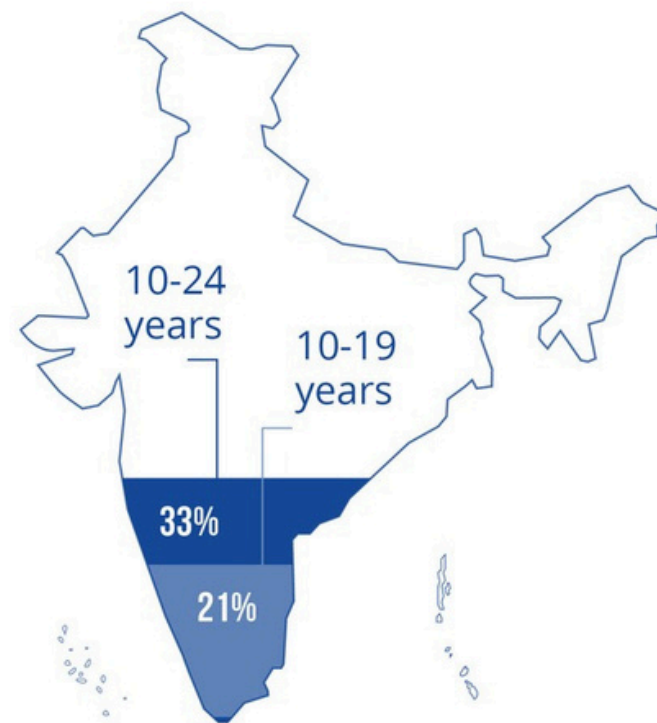
India's population remains young, with more than one-fourth aged under 15 years and only less than an eighth over 60.

Over half the population (50%+) is below 30 years

Adolescents (10-19 years) makes up ~21% of India's population

Adolescents + University students (10-24 years) makes up ~33% of India's population

- WHO Report

up by 2million students

2,400

institutions established (2021-2022)

Significant expansion in education sector

2,400 new institutions established in 2021-22

43.3 million students enrolled for higher education, up by 5% (~2 million) in a year

Literacy rate at an all-time high at 90%+ among Indian youth.

Coupled with the prevalence of social media and internet penetration, this has created a digitally savvy population

- AISHE 2021-22 report
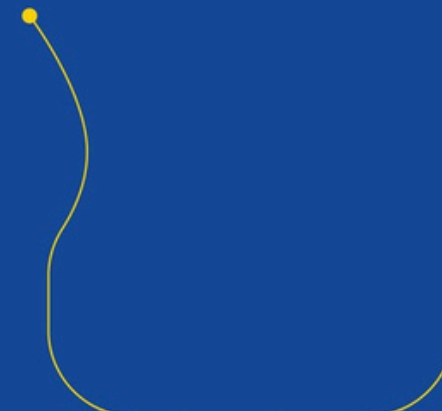**GoI Data Point**

45%

of adolescent burdens stem from mental health problems

Mental health problems account for 45% of the burden and dysfunctionalities in the adolescent population
(Kieling, C. et al.; Gore, F. M. et al.)

Mental Health
of Youth in India

Youth are vulnerable to a range of mental health risks

Adolescents are more vulnerable to recurrent anxiety, depression, mood disorders, and cognitive and behavioral issues as they grow up
(Rajkumar, E., Julia, G., Sri Lakshmi K., N.V. et al)

15-20% of Indian students experience significant mental health challenges

The National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS) reports that 15-20% of Indian students experience significant mental health challenges, including anxiety disorders, depression, and substance abuse.

Alarmingly, only

2%

of affected students seek professional help, highlighting a vast treatment gap

Loneliness	Stress	Insomnia	Depression	Addiction

Academic pressure emerges as a primary stressor, with the Indian Journal of Psychiatry (2017) finding that 38.4% of college students experience moderate to severe academic stress. This correlates with concerning outcomes:

8.7%
of students report having contemplated suicide

50%
of students with mental health issues experience academic performance decline
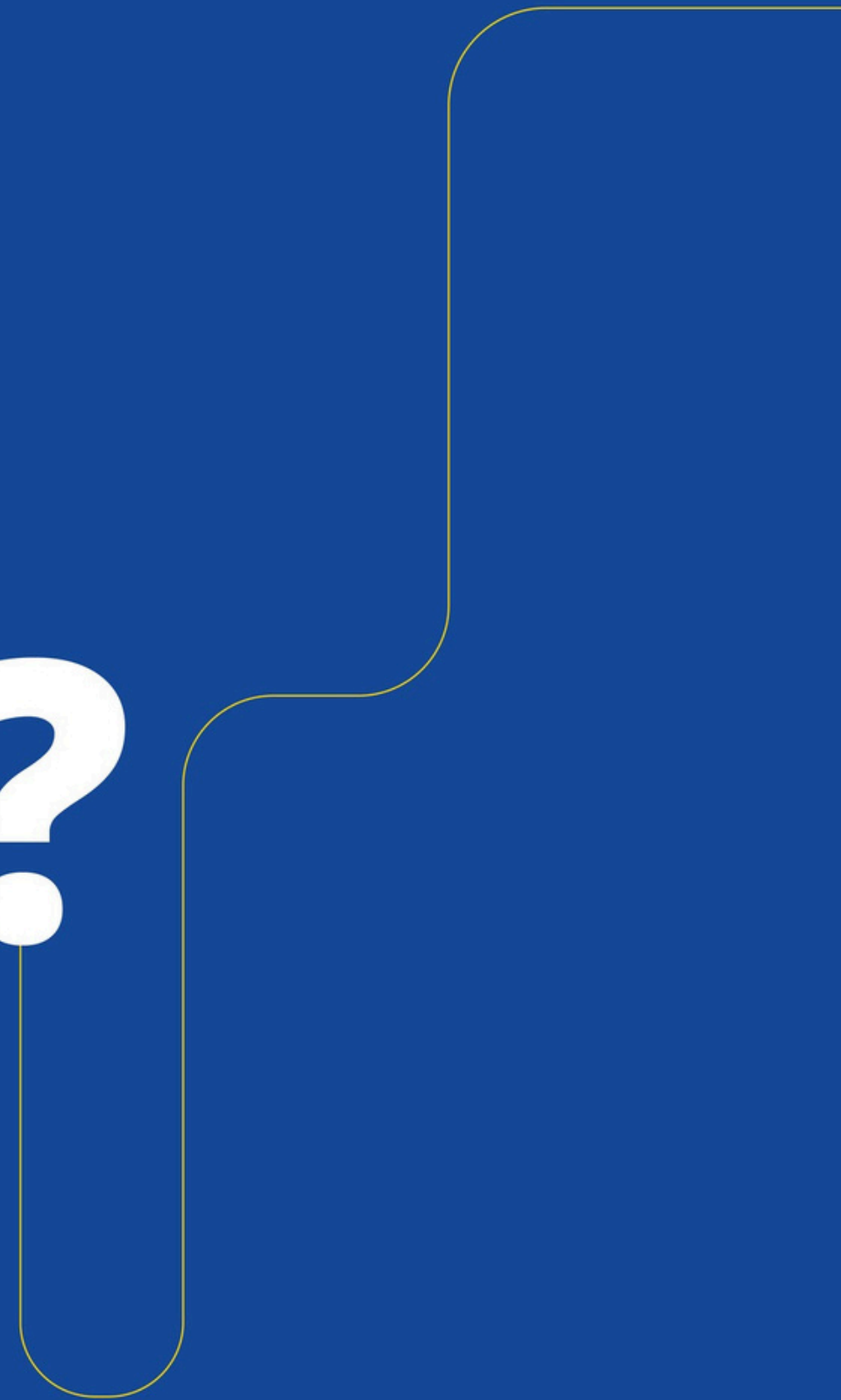
30.8%
report significant social isolation

31%
suffer from morning fatigue due to sleep disorders

Why is this topic

Important?

This study makes a novel contribution by incorporating lonelineness as a key variable and exploring interrelationships with both stress and sleep disturbances, in the context of varying social demographic characteristics of college students.

- The transition from high school to college is a crucial event in late adolescence

- It's a stage of structural changes (e.g. hormonal changes, neuroplasticity) and social changes (relationships, moving away from home) - Reference: Wang et al., 2023 study

- Higher education exposes students to more stressful situations, such as more difficult coursework, difficult projects and work assignments, and living in dorms

- These changes impact roles, routines and relationships and assumptions (Diel et al., 2018)

The Purpose of the study

Investigate the **relationship between loneliness, sleep and stress in late adolescence to arrive at solutions** in the form of recommendations for different stakeholders in the ecosystem impacting adolescents.

Method & Sampling

Procedure

- Data was collected over a two-month period using secure online forms

- 34 Colleges across India participated

- Ethical considerations followed and abided by - anonymity, confidentiality, option to withdraw

A convenience sampling approach was used to recruit participants from colleges

Students Participated in study across India

2000

Inclusion Criteria

18+

Adults aged 18 years and above

Current enrollment in full-time or part-time academic programs

Undergraduate or postgraduate student status

English language proficiency sufficient for survey completion

Exclusion Criteria

Diagnosed mental health or neurological conditions

Current enrollment in pre-college education

<18

Age below 18 years

Scales
used for the **Study**

1 De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale: Measures emotional and social loneliness.

Higher scores indicate greater loneliness

2 Insomnia Severity Index (ISI): Assesses the severity of insomnia.

Higher scores reflect more severe sleep disturbances

3 College Student Stress Scale: Evaluates stress levels specific to the academic environment.

Higher scores indicate elevated stress

Our Findings

1 Sleep and Distress

47% ♀

47% have mild to moderate difficulty falling asleep, with females (78.5%) being far more affected than males

9% ♀

About 9% report severe sleep difficulties, but even in this category, 69% are female

2 Social Isolation and Emotional Well-being

41%

41% feel their social circle is too limited, a major sign of social dissatisfaction

31%

31% experience a general sense of emptiness, suggesting deeper emotional concerns

26%

26% frequently miss having people around, reinforcing feelings of isolation

3 Anxiety and Personal Struggles

38% ♀

38% frequently feel anxious about academics, with 82% of them being female, showing academic stress as a major issue

32%

32% frequently question their ability to achieve personal goals, reflecting high levels of self-doubt
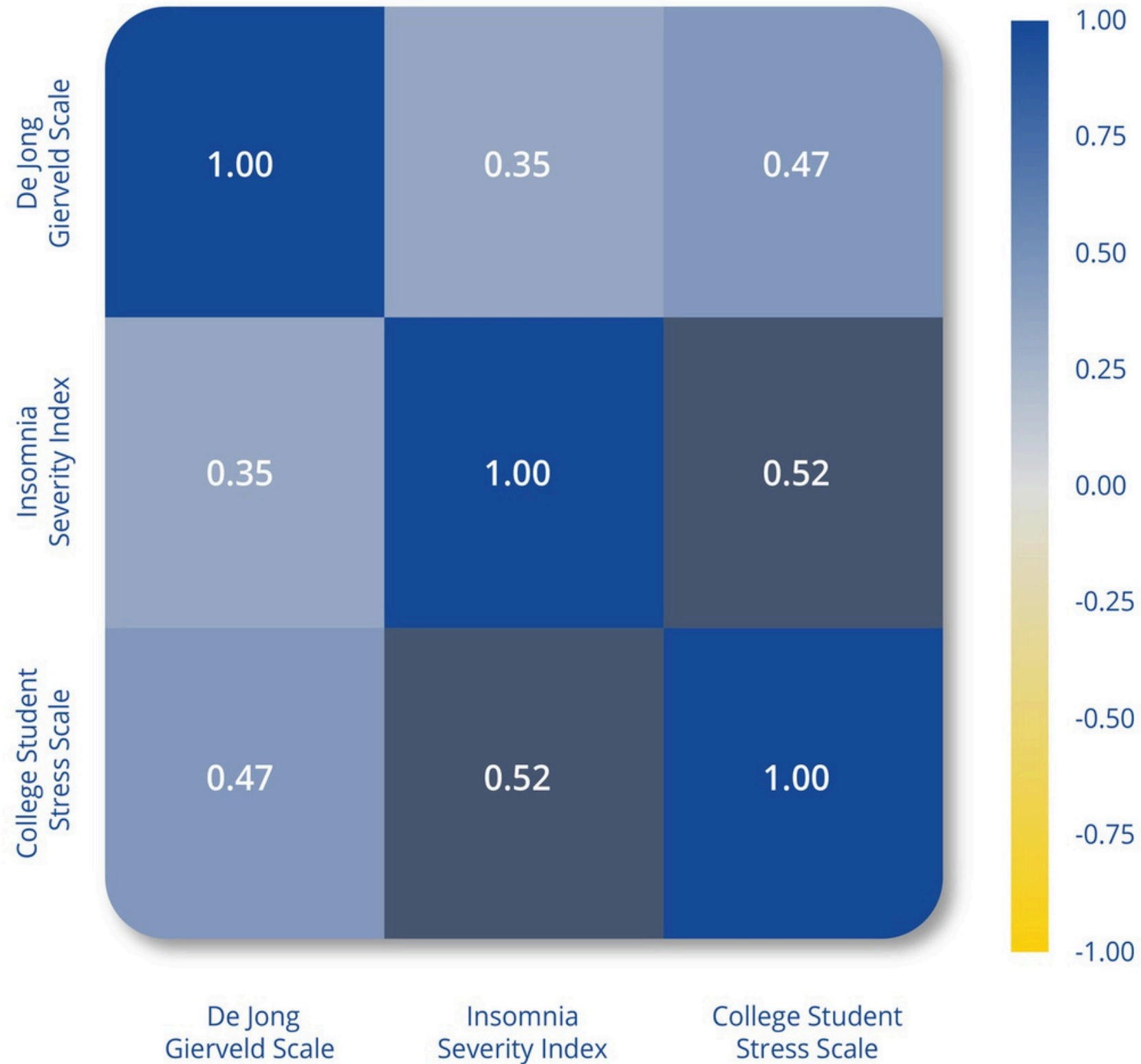
23%

23% feel frequently overwhelmed by life difficulties, highlighting the emotional burden many carry

The Interplay of Lonelines Sleep Stress

Correlation Heatmap

Loneliness and Sleep Troubles

Students who felt lonelier had more difficulty sleeping (35% correlation).

Loneliness and Stress

Lonelier students experienced higher stress (47% correlation).
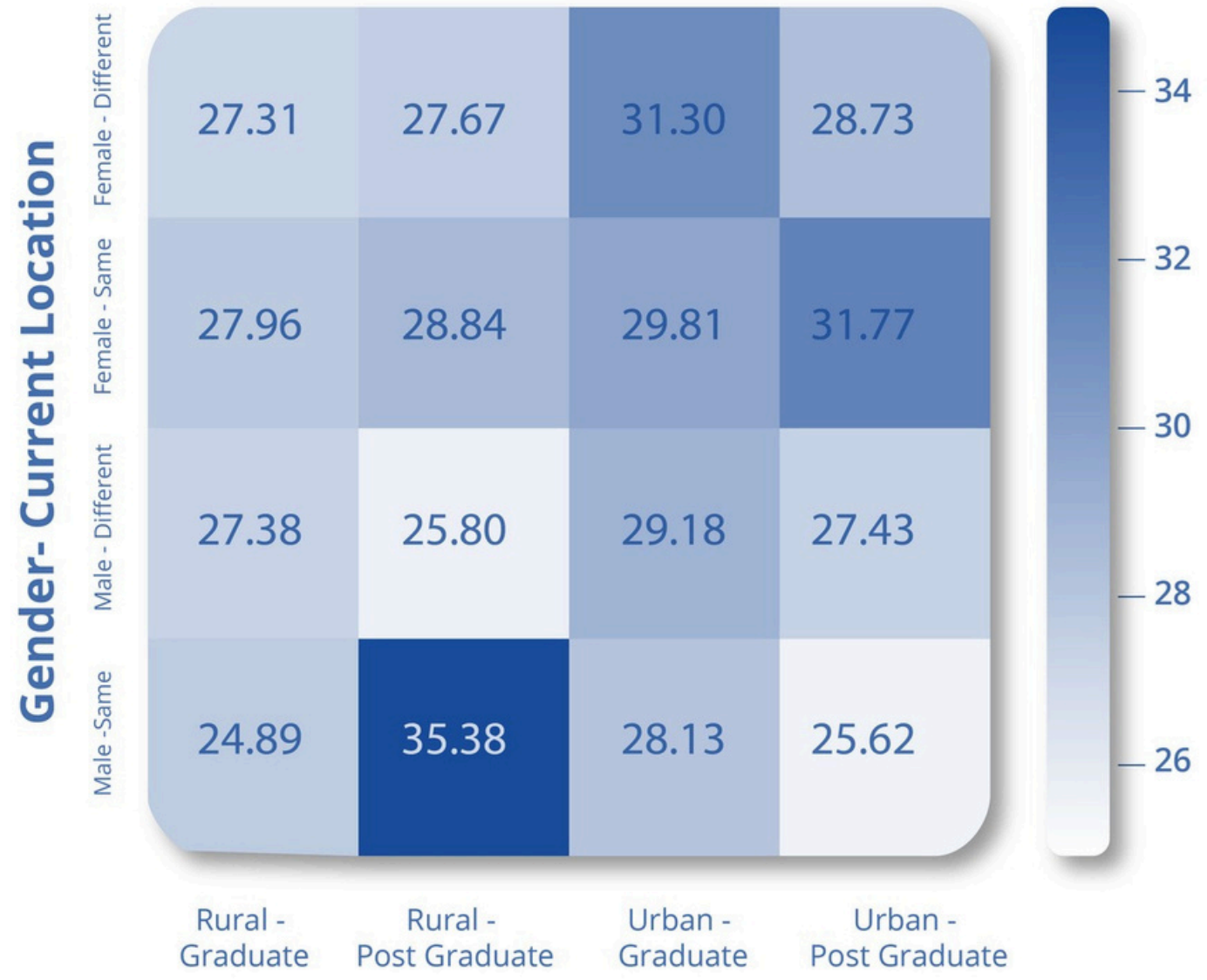
Sleep Troubles and Stress

The strongest correlation (52%) was observed between sleep difficulties and increased stress among students.

Group
ComparisÖn Analysis.

Mean **College Student**
Stress Scale Across Groups

Gender- Current Location

	Rural - Graduate	Rural - Post Graduate	Urban - Graduate	Urban - Post Graduate
Female - Different	27.31	27.67	31.30	28.73
Female - Same	27.96	28.84	29.81	31.77
Male - Different	27.38	25.80	29.18	27.43
Male - Same	24.89	35.38	28.13	25.62

Residence - Education Complete

📈 **Highest Stress Groups:**

35.4
♂ (SCORE)
Male postgraduate students from rural home towns

31.8
♀ (SCORE)
Female postgraduate students in urban areas

31.3
♀ (SCORE)
Female undergraduate students studying away from urban homes

📉 **Lowest Stress Groups:**

24.9
♂ (SCORE)
Male undergraduate students from rural hometowns

25.6
♂ (SCORE)
Male postgraduate students inurban areas

25.8
♂ (SCORE)
Male postgraduate students from rural areas studying away

Way

Forward

Recommendations

Policy Framework

Mandate mental health curriculum across educational institutions

Build mental health professional network & services
(in line with NYP 2021)

Include mental health services coverage in student insurance

Institutional Framework

Integrate the mandated mental health curriculum and ensure frequent revisions

Establish mandatory counselling cells and referral pathways

Create mental health first responder system and devise crisis intervention plans

Wellbeing Program Framework

Establish Holistic 'Campus Wellness Programs', covering both Physical & Mental wellbeing

Develop peer support systems

Create parental awareness programs and regular learning workshops

Budget and Resources

Ensure dedicated mental health budget at central, state and institutional levels

Create wellness infrastructure fund

Emergency mental health fund

☐ Preventive   ☐ Curative

Acknowledgement

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