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Children find a voice at mental wellness fest

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Calcutta: A school hosted a mental wellness fest to break the silence around mental health and encourage children to speak openly about their anxieties and fears.

The Newtown School organised the fest on October 31, with 12 schools participating in the daylong event held in collaboration with several mental health organisations.

"Off late, self-harm has become more common among teenagers than before. Children have anxieties and self-doubt and need a space to speak out so that their worries can be addressed. Much of it is triggered by peer acceptance or family conditions," said Satabdi Bhattacharjee, principal, The Newtown School.

Bhattacharjee said schools organise various kinds of fests but not one on mental wellness.

"If we have a mental health fest or a confluence, then children think it is alright to talk about their anxieties and fears. The underlying reason behind this was to make it like everything else and not think about mental health as something unusual. You discuss your dancing lessons or studies, and so you should discuss your mental health," said Bhattacharjee.

The mental health organisations set up stalls where children took part in games and activities designed to help them identify what triggered their anger and how they responded to different situations.

They were given situations like: How would one react if their friend who was supposed to call did not?

The options were: "I would be upset," I would text back", or I would overthink it."

In another game, called Habit Jenga, children had to stack tiles, each representing a habit.

These included sleeping more every day, drinking more water, keeping a journal and putting away their phones for 15 minutes every day.

"The idea was to ask them how they could incorporate these habits into their everyday routines," said Ria Das, senior school counsellor at The Newtown School. "The idea was then to ask them how they inculcate these habits in everyday routine," said Ria Das, senior school counsellor, The Newtown School.

The fest, called Serenity, was open to students from Nursery to Class XII.

"The kind of problems and anxieties children face keep changing as they grow up. In middle school, the worries are around friendships and the onset of parental pressure. Among older children, the anxieties centre on relationships, situations at home and careers," said Das.

Most schools have counsellors, and they encourage children to speak to them on their own.

Often, when counsellors find something disturbing, they inform the parents or a responsible adult at home by taking the child into confidence, said Bhattacharjee.

"The problem with this generation is they lack human connections in their world, and we want to build such connections that would give them space and freedom to speak and open up," she said.



Students participate in an activity at the fest at The Newtown School last month



Habit Jenga, a game at the fest



Children at play at the festival





Postcards, pens and a letter box (right) featured in an activity named 'Write a Letter to Your Future Self'. The exercise aimed to revive the art of handwritten letters, encouraging children to pause, reflect and practise mindfulness.