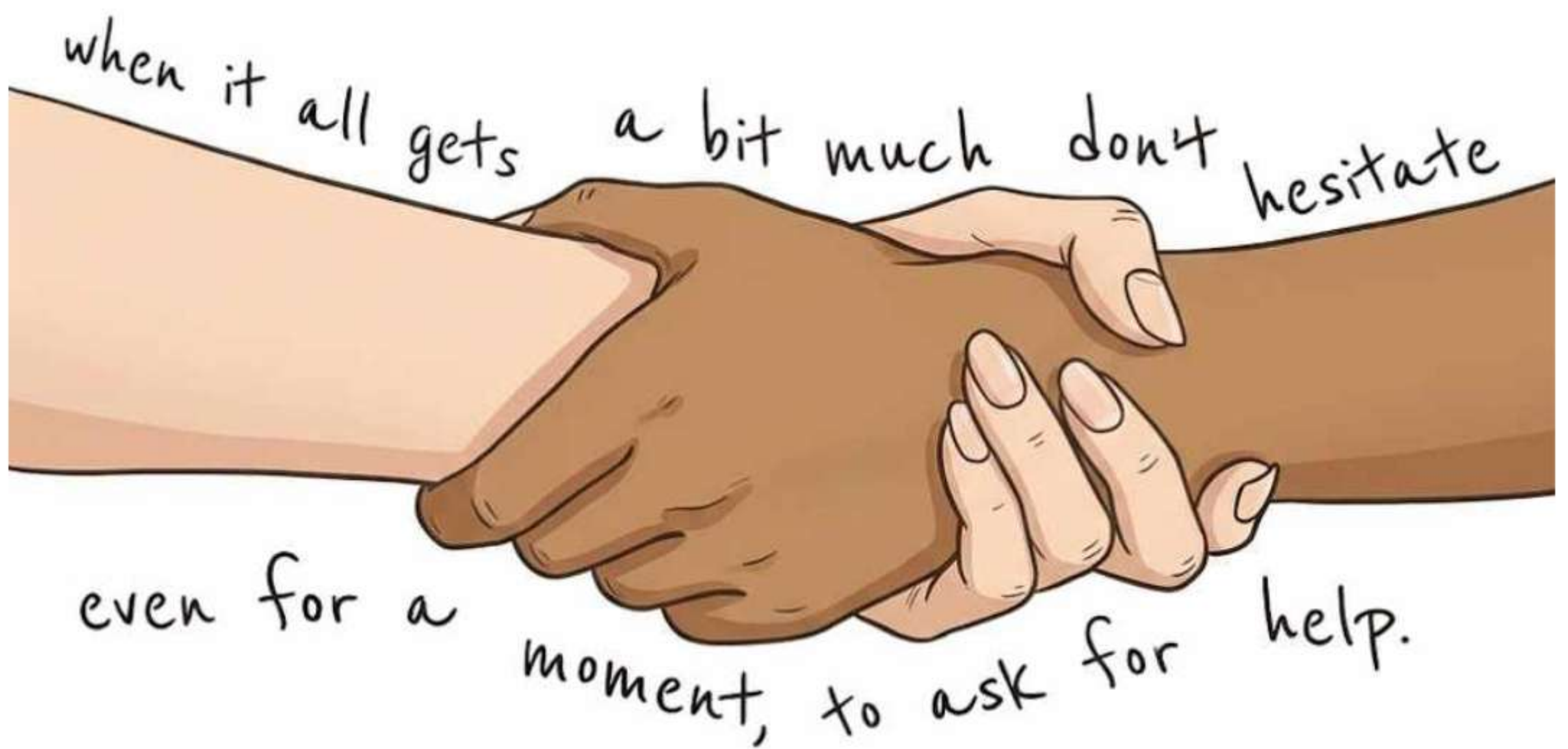


A guide to

OVERCOMING BARRIERS AND REACHING OUT FOR HELP



Developed as part of

ICMR's Multistate Implementation Research Study on Improving
Mental Well Being Among School and College Students





about

OVERCOMING BARRIERS AND REACHING OUT FOR HELP

We all face ups and downs in our everyday life: some days we feel like we are on top of the world and happy, while other times we may feel low and sad. Life can be challenging. Whether it is stress from school, relationship pressures, or just feeling low, you might sometimes feel stuck in your own thoughts.

Reaching out for help is not a sign of weakness: it is actually a powerful act of courage and self-care.

Everyone, even the strongest people you know, need support sometimes.

Asking for help allows you to:

- Feel understood and less alone.
- Learn tools to handle your emotions.
- Improve your mental, emotional, and physical health.
- Discover new ways to cope and grow.



However, despite knowing these benefits, we can feel stuck and may be unable to reach out for help. This guide will help you explore the different reasons or barriers that might prevent you from seeking support, and we will also understand how to overcome them.

Common Barriers to Seeking Help



source:designincubation

“What if people think I am weak?”: The Stigma Trap

Stigma is the fear of being judged or labelled for seeking help. You may worry that others will see you differently, or that they will think you are being "dramatic" or "too sensitive" or "not strong enough". Stigma can come from society, media, family.. or sometimes, even from within us - our thoughts and beliefs.

However, you are not alone. Almost 1 in 7 teenagers experience a mental health condition globally. Many famous athletes, artists, and leaders speak openly about going to therapy and struggling with anxiety or depression. Feeling vulnerable is human; it is not a flaw, it is a signal that you need care.

To push back against stigma, challenge the belief that strength means silence. True strength is knowing when to reach out. You can talk back to the inner voice with kindness.

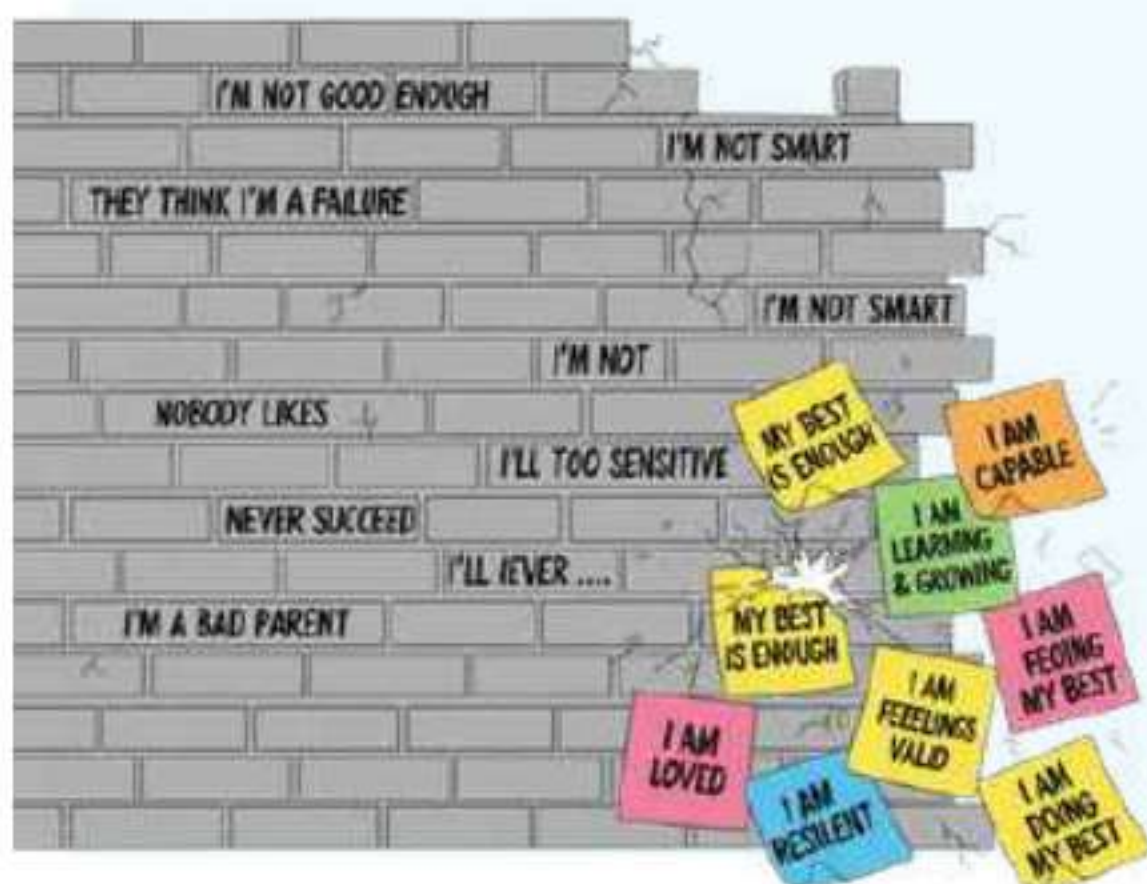
Stigma Smash Board

Draw a brick wall. On each brick, write a judgment or negative thought you fear others might have. Then, on sticky notes (or the other side of the page), write a powerful truth to smash each one.

Example:

Stigma: “People will think I am crazy”

Truth: “Struggling with emotions is human, not crazy” or “Millions of people go to therapy; it means they care about themselves.”



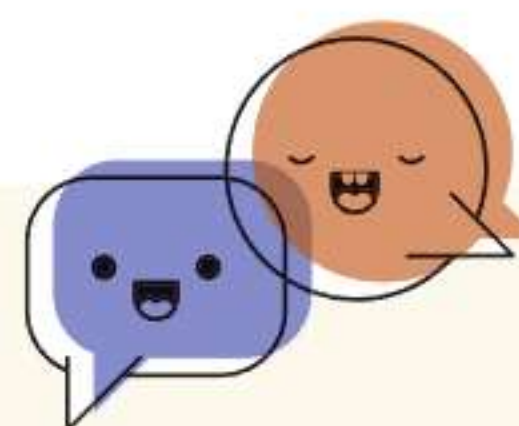
“I should be able to handle this myself”: Minimising My Own Strengths

You might think, “Others have it worse,” or “I am just overreacting.” Comparing your pain to others or brushing it off can stop you from getting the support you deserve.

Everyone’s pain is valid. There is no competition in suffering. Mental health is not about how “bad” your problems are, it is about how you are feeling and coping. Let us try to understand it this way: If your best friend felt how you feel, would you tell them to “just deal with it”?

You are allowed to get help even if you are functioning on the outside. Mental health support is not only for “rock bottom” moments.

Let’s Flip the Script



Complete this sentence:

“I keep telling myself I should _____. But the truth is, it is okay to _____.”

Do this 3 times. Example:

“I keep telling myself I should just be stronger. But the truth is, it is okay to feel overwhelmed and ask for help.”

“I did not even know I could get help”: Lack of Awareness

Many students are unaware of where to go or what help looks like or how the process works. You might think therapy is only for adults or that it is only for people with “serious problems”. Help is not just therapy; it can be in the form of a teacher, mentor, parent, peer, or helpline.

In order to reach out for help, it is important to know that most schools have counselors or mental health programs. There are free helplines and online chat support. Even journaling or talking to a trusted teacher or coach can be a form of support.

What Might Help:

- Ask a trusted adult what resources are available in your school or community.
- Remember: there is no “right” way to ask for help: start where you are.

Create Your Help Map



Draw a map of your world (school, home, online, friends). Mark safe people and spaces. Add question marks where you want to explore more support.

“What if I open up and get hurt again?”: Bad Past Experiences

You might have reached out before and been dismissed, ignored, or hurt. A counselor might not have listened well. A friend might have shared something private. These experiences leave a mark, and it is natural to think: “Why bother again?”

But here is the fact: One bad experience does not mean every experience will be the same. Just like trying one food you dislike does not mean you will hate “all” food, trying one kind of help that fails does not mean all support will fail.

It is okay to be cautious. But it is also okay to try again, in a new way, with new people, new expectations, or at a new pace.

Think back to a time when you sought help and it did not go well. On one side of a page, write:

- What happened?
- How did it make you feel?
- What did you learn?



On the other side of the page, imagine a different ending:

- What would have made that moment better?
- What kind of support would have helped?
- What is one thing you would want to be different next time?



This exercise can help you spot what you need now, based on what did not work before.

The Trust Timeline



Sketch a timeline. Mark moments when opening up went wrong. Then, mark small positive moments where someone showed kindness. This helps you see that not every experience will be the same.

“What if I cannot afford it?”: Money and Accessibility

Therapy and mental health resources can feel out of reach. You might not want to burden your parents financially or may not have financial support from individuals you are dependent on. But help does not always cost money, many schools, NGOs, and online platforms offer free support. India has helplines like iCall and AASRA. Globally, there are free chat apps, email counselors, and teen-specific platforms. Even talking to a teacher or journaling can be helpful starting points.

My Free Toolkit



List 5-7 ways to care for your mental health that do not cost money, like taking a walk, breathing exercises, calling a friend, journaling, meditating, drawing your emotions, or using a support app.



“I do not want to feel so exposed”: Fear of Vulnerability

Talking about emotions can feel like standing in front of the world with no armor. You may fear being misunderstood, pitied, or even laughed at. But vulnerability is where connection begins. The people who matter will respect your honesty, not judge it. Most importantly, you get to choose how much you share and with whom.

Try This:

- Practice “safe vulnerability”—start small, with someone you trust.
- Remember: Boundaries and openness can exist together.

My Mask, My Truth

Fold a page in half. On the front, draw a mask and write what you usually show the world. Inside, write what you wish you could say or express if you felt safe.

This can be a step toward sharing more with someone trusted.



Steps to Overcome Barriers

Now that we have explored the walls that can make seeking help feel difficult, let us focus on how to build doors through them: ways to move forward with courage, clarity, and care. Each step below is a gentle nudge toward empowerment, self-awareness, and healing.

① Shift Your Mindset: Help is Strength, Not Weakness

Many of us grow up believing that strength means keeping everything inside, solving our problems alone. But that idea is outdated and unkind. True strength is self-respect and feeling at peace, and part of that is recognizing when you need support.



Let us reframe the stigma:

“Seeking help does not mean I am giving up. It means I am choosing to grow”.

“Asking for help means I value myself enough to heal”.

List 3 people you admire. What qualities make them strong? Now ask yourself: Would you judge them for seeking help; or admire their honesty and courage?

② Explore Different Forms of Support

Support does not only mean therapy. Help comes in many forms, and you have the right to choose what feels safe and useful for you right now.

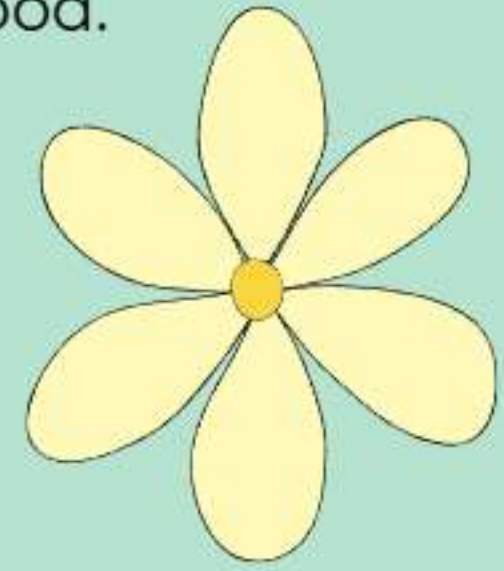


Circle one form of support from the list that you have not tried yet. What is stopping you? What would it take to try it in a small way?

Design Your Ideal Support Space

Imagine a space where you feel completely safe and understood.

- What colors and sounds are there?
- Who is in the room; or is it just you?
- What rules make the space feel respectful and calm?



Draw or write about this space. Then think: What parts of this space can I create in real life?

3 Take Small Steps: Journaling, Self-Care, Check-Ins

You do not have to rush and open up your whole heart all at once. Healing is not a race nor an examination. Start with small, doable steps that create emotional safety.

Keep a private journal of your thoughts and moods.

Share one emotion with a friend: "I have been feeling ___ lately."

Take a mental health pause; even 10 minutes away from your phone counts.

Practice saying, "I need support with..." in front of the mirror.

Journal Prompt: The "5-Minute Feel" Log

Each day (or even once a week), write the following in a notebook or digital journal:

- One word to describe how you feel
- One thing you are proud of today
- One thing you wish you could tell someone
- One need you would like to honor today (rest, expression, comfort...)
- One tiny act of care you will try (e.g., a stretch, music, texting a friend)

Over time, these pages become evidence of your growth.

4 Build a Supportive Environment

The people around us shape how safe we feel to express ourselves. It is not about having a perfect group, it is about nurturing connections that nourish your mental well-being. Surround yourself with people who lift you up. This includes letting go of what drains you and showing up as a supportive friend too, because community is healing.

How to create emotional safety:

- Choose friendships where kindness is mutual
- Set boundaries: It is okay to say “I need space” or “That hurt me.”
- Practice active listening: be the kind of support you would want
- Create group rituals (study circles, gratitude check-ins, meme-sharing nights)



Let Us Reflect:

What does a “supportive person” mean to you? Write down 3 qualities you would love in a listener. Then ask yourself: how can I model those same qualities in return?

The Kindness Web

1. Write your name in the center of a page.
2. Around it, write names of 4–6 people who uplift you.
3. Next to each name, write:
 - One kind thing they have done for you
 - One kind thing you can do for them
 - One way you can deepen the connection (talk, text, gratitude note)
 - Bonus: Add new names over time as your web of support grows.



No matter how big or small your struggle feels, you deserve support. This guide is not about forcing you to speak up before you are ready. It is about helping you understand that when you are ready, you have every right to be heard, respected, and helped. You are allowed to take up space with your truth.

You never have to walk the path alone.



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