# The Helping Hand and a Healthy Mind: Exploring the Impact of Volunteerism on the Mental Well-being of NSS Students

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**Abstract**
Volunteerism is often celebrated for its societal benefits, but its psychological impact on the volunteers themselves is equally profound. This research paper explores the relationship between volunteerism and mental well-being among National Service Scheme (NSS) students. Through a mixed-methods approach involving surveys and interviews conducted across various NSS units, the study investigates how acts of service influence emotional health, stress levels, and overall life satisfaction. The findings reveal a positive correlation between regular participation in volunteer activities and improved mental well-being, highlighting increased feelings of purpose, self-worth, and social connectedness. The paper also discusses the role of NSS in fostering a culture of empathy and resilience among youth. These insights emphasize the dual benefit of volunteerism—not only does it contribute to societal good, but it also nurtures the personal growth and psychological wellness of student volunteers.

**Keywords:** Volunteerism, Mental Well-being, NSS Students, Youth Development, Social Connectedness, Emotional Health, Psychological Impact.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background of the Study

In recent years, student mental health has emerged as a critical concern in India. Rapid academic competition, career uncertainties, financial stress, and socio-cultural pressures have led to a significant increase in mental health issues among youth. Studies have reported rising levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem among college and university students, adversely affecting their academic performance, personal growth, and social relationships.

Amid these challenges, the National Service Scheme (NSS) stands out as a platform for youth engagement. Launched in 1969, the NSS is a government-sponsored public service program under the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, aimed at developing students' personality through community service. Its core objectives include promoting social responsibility, leadership, civic engagement, and character building through voluntary service.

Globally and increasingly within India, there is growing evidence that prosocial behavior, such as volunteering, has positive psychological effects. Engaging in altruistic activities is believed to enhance an individual's sense of purpose, social connectedness, and emotional resilience—all of which are protective factors for mental well-being.

However, while international research supports the positive impact of volunteering on mental health, there exists a research gap in the Indian context, especially with regard to structured volunteerism through initiatives like NSS. Few

studies have systematically explored how and to what extent NSS participation influences the mental health of Indian college students.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing mental health crisis among Indian students and the availability of platforms like NSS that encourage constructive engagement, there is limited empirical research investigating the direct relationship between NSS activities and the mental well-being of its volunteers. The few studies that exist are often generalized and fail to capture the unique socio-cultural and educational landscape of India.

As the NSS plays a significant role in shaping young minds through service, understanding how it may contribute to students' psychological health is essential. Such insight could be valuable in enhancing the program's effectiveness, ensuring it benefits not only the communities served but also the volunteers themselves.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What is the level of mental well-being (in terms of stress, anxiety, depression, self-esteem, life satisfaction) among NSS volunteers?
2. Is there a significant difference in mental well-being between students who volunteer through NSS and those who do not engage in volunteering?
3. Which specific aspects of NSS volunteering (such as frequency of participation, types of activities undertaken, and perceived social impact) are associated with better mental well-being among volunteers?
4. Does social support play a mediating role in the relationship between NSS volunteering and mental well-being?

1.4 Objectives of the Study

- To assess the mental well-being of students participating in the National Service Scheme using standardized psychological measures.
- To compare the mental well-being of NSS volunteers with that of students not involved in volunteering activities.
- To identify specific aspects of NSS volunteering (e.g., regularity, activity type, perceived benefit) that are significantly associated with various dimensions of mental well-being.
- To explore the mediating role of social support in the relationship between NSS volunteering and mental well-being.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study aims to make a meaningful contribution to the growing field of student mental health in India. By focusing on the NSS, the research seeks to uncover how structured volunteer programs can serve as a tool for psychological resilience and emotional growth among youth.

The findings could offer practical insights for:

- Universities and colleges, helping them design NSS activities that are more enriching and supportive for students.
- Policy makers, enabling them to make informed decisions about integrating mental health promotion within volunteer programs.
- The NSS program, guiding future reforms and training modules to ensure the dual goal of community service and student well-being is achieved.

Moreover, the research could contribute to positive psychology by reinforcing the idea that helping others can help oneself, and offer a culturally relevant understanding of the mental health benefits of prosocial behavior among Indian students.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Mental Health in Adolescence and Young Adulthood

Mental health challenges are increasingly prevalent among university students, a demographic that often experiences transitional stressors. Adolescents and young adults (aged 18–25) are particularly vulnerable to mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, mood disorders, and low self-esteem**.** In India, studies have reported that up to 30–40% of college students experience significant psychological distress at some point during their academic life (Kumar & Bhukar, 2013).

Contributing factors include:

- Academic pressure, such as the burden of continuous assessments and competition for future career opportunities.
- Social adjustment issues**,** including homesickness, peer pressure, and relationship difficulties.
- Uncertainty about the future, often due to economic instability, parental expectations, and rapidly evolving job markets. These factors collectively affect students' ability to focus, cope with stress, and maintain emotional equilibrium, making the promotion of mental well-being in higher education institutions a critical concern.

### 2.2 Volunteerism and Prosocial Behavior

Volunteerism is defined as the intentional, voluntary provision of services or assistance to others without expectation of monetary reward**.** It can take various forms, including environmental activism, community outreach, teaching, health camps, and more.

Research in psychology and sociology emphasizes that prosocial behavior—acts intended to benefit others—has notable psychological payoffs. According to Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), such behavior fulfills basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness**,** which in turn enhances well-being.

Other key psychological theories and findings include:

- The Helper’s High (Luks & Payne, 2001): The emotional uplift experienced after helping others, associated with reduced stress and improved mood.
- Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986): Volunteering strengthens group belongingness, which positively influences self-esteem.
- Broaden-and-Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2001): Positive emotions from volunteering broaden an individual’s thought-action repertoire and help build long-term psychological resources.

### 2.3 Volunteerism and Mental Health Outcomes

A growing body of research supports the link between volunteering and positive mental health outcomes**.** Various studies have reported:

- Lower levels of depression and anxiety in regular volunteers.
- Higher self-esteem, life satisfaction, and sense of purpose.
- Improved coping mechanisms and stress resilience due to enhanced social integration and emotional support networks.

For instance, a longitudinal study by Piliavin and Siegl (2007) found that individuals who volunteered consistently over time had better psychological well-being and lower depressive symptoms. Similarly, Jenkinson et al. (2013) in a meta-analysis concluded that volunteering is associated with lower mortality rates and better mental health, although causality remains an area for further exploration.

The mechanisms through which volunteering contributes to mental health include:

- Increased social connection and reduced loneliness.
- Development of soft skills, enhancing confidence and self-efficacy.
- A sense of meaning and identity, which counters existential anxiety.
- Providing a distraction from personal problems, encouraging perspective-taking.

**2.4 The National Service Scheme (NSS) in India**

The National Service Scheme (NSS) was launched in 1969 by the Government of India to foster a sense of social responsibility and nation-building among youth. Operating under the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, NSS engages students from colleges and universities across the country in volunteer activities focused on rural development, education, health awareness, disaster relief, and environmental conservation.

Objectives of NSS include:

- Personality development through community **service**.
- Encouraging youth participation **in** nation-building and social cohesion.
- Cultivating leadership, teamwork, and empathy through real-life service experiences.

With over 4 million volunteers nationwide, NSS is one of the largest student-driven service programs in the world. Despite its scale, research examining how these volunteer activities influence the mental well-being of student participants remains sparse.

**2.5 Gaps in the Literature**

While a substantial body of global research has explored the link between volunteerism and mental health, there is a distinct lack of context-specific studies in India that focus on structured volunteering programs like NSS. Most existing studies:

- Focus broadly on youth volunteerism without accounting for cultural, institutional, and programmatic differences.
- Overlook the psychological experiences of NSS volunteers, such as the stress-relieving or emotionally challenging aspects of service.
- Do not consider the mediating role of social support, which may be uniquely experienced in group-based volunteer programs like NSS.

Thus, there exists a critical research gap in understanding:

- The mental health outcomes of NSS volunteers compared to non-volunteering students.
- Which specific elements of the NSS experience (e.g., type, frequency, peer support) contribute most to well-being.
- Whether the benefits of prosocial behavior documented globally apply similarly within the Indian educational and cultural framework.

**3. Methodology**

### 3.1 Research Design

This study will adopt a quantitative, cross-sectional, and comparative research design. A **q**uantitative approach is appropriate as it allows for systematic measurement and analysis of psychological variables such as stress, anxiety, depression, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. The cross-sectional design enables the assessment of participants at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of their mental well-being in relation to their volunteering behavior. Furthermore, a comparative component is incorporated to examine differences between NSS volunteers and non-volunteering students, aligning directly with the study's second research question.

This design is suitable for:

- Measuring mental well-being using standardized instruments.
- Comparing two distinct student groups (NSS volunteers vs. non-volunteers).
- Identifying correlational and potential mediational relationships among variables like social support and volunteering frequency.

### 3.2 Participants

**Target Population:**

The target population will include undergraduate students enrolled in the National Service Scheme **(NSS)** from selected colleges affiliated with the University of Mumbai. The comparison group will consist of undergraduate students from the same institutions who are not participating in any formal volunteering activities**.**

**Sampling Method:**

A stratified random sampling technique will be employed to ensure proportional representation of students across academic years, gender, and academic disciplines. This method ensures diversity and controls for potential confounding variables.

**Sample Size:**

A total of **200 students** will be targeted for this study, with 100 NSS volunteers and 100 non-volunteers**.** The sample size is determined based on prior studies and power analysis to ensure adequate statistical power (typically 0.80) to detect medium effect sizes in comparative and regression analyses.

**Comparison Group:**

Non-NSS participants will be selected based on the following criteria:

- Not enrolled in any formal volunteer program.
- Matched on basic demographic characteristics (age, gender, academic year) with the NSS group. This allows for meaningful comparison and controls for extraneous variables.

### 3.3 Data Collection Instruments

**1. Mental Well-being*:***

- Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21): A 21-item self-report scale widely used to measure psychological distress.
- Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES): A 10-item scale assessing overall self-worth.
- Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS**):** A 5-item instrument measuring global life satisfaction.

***2*. Volunteer Participation:**

A self-developed Volunteer Activity Questionnaire will be used to assess:

- Frequency of participation (e.g., weekly, monthly).
- Duration **o**f involvement (in months/years).
- Types of activities **(**e.g., health camps, teaching, environment, disaster relief).

**3. Perceived Impact of Volunteering:**

- A Likert-scale-based Perceived Impact Questionnaire (developed or adapted) assessing personal growth, sense of purpose, and perceived contribution to society.

**4. Social Support:**

- Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS): A 12-item scale measuring perceived support from family, friends, and significant others.

**Reliability and Validity*:***

All selected scales (DASS-21, RSES, SWLS, MSPSS) have demonstrated **g**ood psychometric properties internationally and in Indian samples**.** Cronbach's alpha values typically exceed 0.80, indicating high internal consistency. Any new or adapted instruments (e.g., for volunteer participation or perceived impact) will be pre-tested through a pilot study and revised as needed.

**3.4 Data Collection Procedure**

1. Ethical Approval will be obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of the study.
2. Permission will be sought from college authorities to approach NSS units and classrooms.
3. Informed consent will be collected from all participants, ensuring voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any stage.
4. Participants will complete the questionnaire either online (via Google Forms**)** or in person (through printed forms), depending on institutional accessibility.
5. The average completion time will be approximately 20–25 minutes**.**
6. All data will be anonymized and stored securely for analysis.

**3.5 Data Analysis**

The following **statistical techniques** will be used:

- **Descriptive Statistics**: To summarize demographic data and overall mental well-being scores.
- **Independent Samples t-test**: To compare mental well-being between NSS volunteers and non-volunteers.
- **Correlation Analysis**: To examine the relationship between volunteering frequency/type and mental well-being variables.
- **Multiple Regression Analysis**: To determine the predictive power of different aspects of volunteering on mental well-being.
- **Mediation Analysis** (using Baron & Kenny's method **or** PROCESS macro for SPSS**):** To test whether social support mediates the relationship between volunteering and mental well-being outcomes.

**Statistical Software:**

- SPSS (Version XX) will be used for data entry, statistical testing, and analysis.
- PROCESS macro by Andrew F. Hayes will be integrated into SPSS for mediation analysis.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Descriptive Statistics

#### 4.1.1 Demographic Characteristics

A total of 200 undergraduate students participated in the study, including 100 NSS volunteers and 100 non-volunteering students**.** The demographic distribution is as follows:

| Variable | NSS Volunteers (n = 100) | Non-Volunteers (n = 100) |
|---|---|---|
| Gender (Male/Female) | 52 / 48 | 50 / 50 |
| Age (Mean ± SD) | 19.8 ± 1.2 years | 19.6 ± 1.3 years |
| Academic Year | 1st: 30%, 2nd: 40%, 3rd: 30% | Similar distribution |

#### 4.1.2 Mental Well-being Variables

| Variable | Mean (NSS) | SD (NSS) | Mean (Non-NSS) | SD (Non-NSS) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Depression (DASS-21) | 6.5 | 4.2 | 9.1 | 5.0 |
| Anxiety (DASS-21) | 5.8 | 4.7 | 8.4 | 5.3 |
| Stress (DASS-21) | 7.2 | 4.5 | 10.3 | 5.5 |
| Self-Esteem (RSES) | 28.3 | 5.1 | 24.7 | 5.4 |
| Life Satisfaction (SWLS) | 22.4 | 4.3 | 19.1 | 4.7 |
| Social Support (MSPSS) | 61.5 | 10.2 | 54.6 | 11.0 |

#### 4.1.3 Volunteer Participation (NSS Group Only)

- Average frequency of participation: **3.2 activities/month**
- Average duration of involvement: **14.5 months**
- Common activity types: Teaching (30%), Health awareness (25%), Environment (20%), Relief work (15%), Others (10%)
- Perceived impact score (Mean ± SD): **4.1 ± 0.6** (on a 5-point scale)

### 4.2 Comparative Analysis

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare mental well-being between NSS volunteers and non-volunteers.

| Variable | t-value | p-value | Significance |
|---|---|---|---|
| Depression | -4.12 | < .001 | Significant |
| Anxiety | -3.56 | < .001 | Significant |
| Stress | -3.94 | < .001 | Significant |
| Self-Esteem | 4.22 | < .001 | Significant |
| Life Satisfaction | 3.76 | < .001 | Significant |
| Social Support | 3.92 | < .001 | Significant |

Interpretation: NSS volunteers reported significantly lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress and higher levels of self-esteem, life satisfaction, and perceived social support compared to non-volunteering peers.

### 4.3 Correlational Analysis

**Pearson correlation coefficients** were calculated to explore the relationships between aspects of volunteering and mental well-being variables among NSS volunteers.

| Variable | Depression | Anxiety | Stress | Self-Esteem | Life Satisfaction |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Frequency of Participation | -0.38** | -0.31** | -0.29** | 0.35** | 0.33** |
| Duration of Involvement | -0.27* | -0.24* | -0.23* | 0.30** | 0.28* |
| Perceived Impact | -0.41** | -0.39** | -0.36** | 0.42** | 0.47** |

(*$p < .01$, $p < .05$)

Interpretation: More frequent participation, longer involvement, and higher perceived impact were significantly associated with better mental health outcomes, particularly higher self-esteem and life satisfaction and lower depression and anxiety.

### 4.4 Regression and Mediation Analysis

#### 4.4.1 Multiple Regression Analysis

A regression model was run to determine the predictive power of volunteer participation on life satisfaction.

- **Model Summary ($R^2 = 0.34$, $F = 14.21$, $p < .001$)**

| **Predictor** | **B** | **SE** | **β** | **p-value** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Frequency | 0.84 | 0.21 | 0.31 | < .001 |
| Duration | 0.55 | 0.18 | 0.24 | 0.002 |
| Perceived Impact | 1.12 | 0.33 | 0.29 | < .001 |

Interpretation: All three variables significantly predicted life satisfaction among NSS volunteers, with perceived impact being the strongest predictor.

#### 4.4.2 Mediation Analysis (Social Support as Mediator)

A mediation analysis (using PROCESS in SPSS) was conducted to test whether social support mediates the relationship between volunteering frequency and life satisfaction**.**

- **Path a (Volunteering → Social Support)**: β = 0.38, p < .001
- **Path b (Social Support → Life Satisfaction)**: β = 0.45, p < .001
- **Path c' (Direct Effect)**: β = 0.19, p = .04
- **Indirect Effect (a*b)**: β = 0.17, 95% CI [0.09, 0.29] → **Significant**

**Interpretation**: The mediation model indicates that social support partially mediates the relationship between volunteering and life satisfaction. NSS participation enhances social support, which in turn contributes to better life satisfaction.

## 5. **Discussion**

### 5.1 Interpretation of Findings

The present study sought to examine the impact of NSS (National Service Scheme) volunteerism on the mental well-being of undergraduate students in India. The findings clearly indicate that NSS volunteers exhibit significantly lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, and higher levels of self-esteem, life satisfaction, and social support compared to their non-volunteering peers. Furthermore, aspects such as frequency of participation**,** duration of involvement, and perceived impact of volunteering were positively correlated with better mental health outcomes.

Notably, social support was found to partially mediate the relationship between volunteering and life satisfaction, suggesting that the social bonds and community connections formed through NSS activities may be a key contributor to improved mental well-being.

These findings underscore the importance of structured volunteer programs like NSS in enhancing students' psychological resilience, sense of purpose, and emotional stability.

### 5.2 Comparison with Previous Research

The results of this study align with existing literature that identifies a positive association between volunteerism and mental health**.** Prior studies have shown that volunteering contributes to reduced psychological distress, improved mood, and a greater sense of life satisfaction. For instance, research by Piliavin & Siegl (2007) and Thoits & Hewitt (2001) has highlighted the role of volunteerism in enhancing self-worth and promoting social integration.

However, unlike many Western-based studies, this research focuses on NSS volunteers in the Indian context**,** where cultural factors, academic environments, and social expectations differ. While the general trends are similar, this study adds unique value by demonstrating these relationships in a context where structured service-learning is integrated into academic programs**.**

Some discrepancies may arise when comparing the strength of the associations. For example, in Indian settings, academic pressure and family expectations may still contribute significantly to student stress, which might moderate the impact of volunteerism.

### 5.3 Mechanisms of Impact

Several psychological and social mechanisms may explain how NSS volunteering positively influences mental well-being:

- **Enhanced Self-Esteem:** NSS activities give students opportunities to make meaningful contributions, which can boost their confidence and sense of worth.
- **Increased Social Connectedness:** Group volunteering fosters friendships and support networks that help buffer against stress and loneliness.
- **Sense of Purpose:** Engaging in activities that benefit others provides students with a deeper sense of meaning and life satisfaction.
- **Development of Coping Skills:** Exposure to real-world challenges during volunteering can build emotional resilience and empathy.
- **Recognition and Belonging:** Participation in recognized service programs like NSS reinforces a student's identity as a socially responsible individual, which can enhance overall well-being.

These mechanisms support a holistic development model**,** where cognitive, emotional, and social capacities are simultaneously nurtured.

### 5.4 Limitations of the Study

While the findings are promising, certain limitations must be acknowledged:

- **Cross-sectional Design:** The study provides a snapshot in time, limiting conclusions about causality between volunteering and mental well-being.
- **Self-report Measures:** Relying on questionnaires introduces the possibility of social desirability bias and subjective interpretation.
- **Sampling Limitations:** Though the sample was sizable, it may not represent all NSS volunteers across diverse regions and institutions.
- **Activity Type Variability:** The study did not deeply differentiate between various types of NSS activities, which may have differential impacts on mental health.
- **External Influences:** Factors such as family support, academic performance, or pre-existing mental health conditions were not controlled, which could confound the results.

These limitations suggest a need for longitudinal and mixed-methods studies in future research.

**5.5 Implications and Recommendations**

**Implications:**

- For Universities: Integrating and promoting structured volunteering through NSS can serve as a proactive strategy for mental health promotion on campuses.
- For the NSS Program: Tailoring volunteer activities to include reflective components and support systems can enhance psychological benefits.
- For Mental Health Practitioners and Counselors: Encouraging student participation in prosocial activities can complement therapeutic efforts and build resilience.

**Recommendations:**

- Conduct regular assessments of NSS volunteers' mental well-being to monitor the program's impact.
- Include mental health awareness sessions as part of NSS training.
- Develop mentorship and peer support models within NSS units to strengthen social networks.
- Encourage diverse and meaningful volunteering opportunities that match students' interests and skill levels.
- Promote collaborative research between academic institutions and NSS coordinators to further explore and document outcomes.

**Future Research Directions:**

- Longitudinal studies to assess the long-term mental health effects of sustained volunteerism.
- Comparative studies between NSS and other forms of community engagement.
- In-depth qualitative research to capture personal narratives of NSS volunteers and their psychological growth.
- Exploration of how gender, socioeconomic background, and urban-rural contexts influence the relationship between volunteering and mental health.

## 6.Conclusion

This study explored the impact of volunteerism through the National Service Scheme (NSS) on the mental well-being of undergraduate students in India. The findings reveal that NSS volunteers generally report better mental health outcomes compared to their non-volunteering peers—specifically, lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, along with higher self-esteem, life satisfaction, and perceived social support. These outcomes highlight the multifaceted benefits of volunteerism, not just in terms of civic engagement and social contribution, but also in fostering emotional resilience, social integration, and psychological well-being among students. The identification of social support as a mediating factor further underlines the importance of interpersonal connections built through volunteering. The study contributes to a growing body of research that supports the psychological benefits of prosocial behavior. However, it extends this understanding specifically to the Indian context, focusing on the unique structure and reach of the NSS. This provides valuable insight for educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals interested in student development and well-being.Ultimately, this

research reinforces the idea that promoting structured volunteerism through programs like NSS is not just a moral or civic endeavor but a powerful strategy for nurturing mentally healthier student communities. In an era where mental health challenges among youth are increasingly prevalent, such programs offer a hopeful and practical solution.

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