SAFE

Building Psychological Safety for High Achievers
An Evidence-Informed Handbook for Parents of IIT Students

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Foreword

Getting into an IIT is a proud moment for any student and family. It is the result of years of hard work, discipline and sacrifice. However, admission to IIT also marks the beginning of a very different journey. A student who has always been among the best suddenly enters an environment surrounded by equally talented peers, while also learning to live independently and deal with expectations, relationships, failure and uncertainty about the future.

I have known Dr. Yamini Kannappan for nearly fifteen years. During this period, I have seen her work closely with students and young adults, going well beyond her role as a psychiatrist. She has been the architect behind several meaningful initiatives for the student community and has always strongly believed in prevention, early identification and timely intervention in mental health.

Our work with the students of IIT Madras through Project Kushi has reinforced this belief. High achievement does not necessarily protect a young person from psychological distress. Perfectionism, fear of failure, self-doubt, loneliness and the fear of disappointing parents can sometimes remain hidden behind an otherwise successful student.

I would also like to place on record our sincere thanks to Prof. V. Kamakoti, Director, IIT Madras, for giving us the access, freedom and encouragement to work closely with the student community and undertake these intervention programmes. His openness to such initiatives and support for student well-being have enabled us to understand the challenges faced by students and contribute in a meaningful way.

This is where the role of parents becomes extremely important. As children enter adulthood, parenting also has to change. Parents need to gradually move from controlling and protecting to trusting, guiding and being available when needed.

In *SAFE – Building Psychological Safety for High Achievers*, Dr. Yamini brings her clinical experience and her understanding of students and families into a simple and practical framework. Secure Base, Autonomy Support, Failure-Friendly Mindset and Early Recognition are concepts that every parent can relate to and practise.

At Kauvery Hospital, we strongly believe that student mental health requires both active intervention and preventive strategies. More importantly, support should begin much before a crisis. A young person should know that home remains a safe place — where success is celebrated, failure can be discussed and asking for help is never seen as weakness.

Although written for parents of IIT students, the message of this book is relevant to every parent raising a young adult in today's highly competitive environment. Our responsibility is not merely to help children achieve more, but to help them grow into resilient, confident and emotionally healthy adults.

I congratulate Dr. Yamini on this thoughtful initiative and sincerely hope that *SAFE* will help parents understand their children better, start conversations earlier and remain the secure support that every young person needs.

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Preface

Every year, thousands of families celebrate one of life's proudest moments—the day their child secures admission to an Indian Institute of Technology (IIT). It is a milestone built on years of hard work, sacrifice, and dreams shared by both parents and children.

As a psychiatrist, I have had the privilege of working closely with young people and their families during some of the most important transitions in their lives. Kauvery Hospital, Alwarpet, Chennai initiated Project Kushi, a mental health initiative at IIT Madras in the year 2023. Through my work in the Department of Behavioural Sciences and my involvement with Project Kushi, I gained invaluable experience and insights into the challenges faced by high achieving students which forms the foundation for this book.

Many of these students are exceptionally bright, resilient, and hardworking. Yet behind their achievements, I have often encountered self-doubt, perfectionism, loneliness, fear of failure, and, above all, a deep desire not to disappoint their parents. These conversations changed the way I viewed success. I realised that while institutions can provide education, opportunities, and support systems, one of the strongest protective factors in a student's life continues to be the family. Long after parents stop helping with homework, they continue to shape something far more important—the emotional environment in which their child learns, struggles, succeeds, and recovers.

This handbook was written with a simple purpose: to help parents understand the psychological journey of high-achieving young adults and to offer practical, evidence-informed ways of supporting them. The SAFE Framework presented in this book is not a new psychological theory. It brings together well-established research in attachment, motivation, resilience, developmental psychology, and mental health into a practical framework that parents can use in everyday life.

My hope is not to teach parents how to raise perfect children, but to help create homes where young people feel safe to be honest, safe to make mistakes, safe to ask for help, and safe to grow. If this handbook encourages even one meaningful conversation between a parent and a child, it will have achieved its purpose.

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Introduction

Parenting Beyond the Entrance Examination

Admission offer from an Indian Institute of Technology represents years of hard work, perseverance and sacrifice—not only by your child, but by your entire family. Behind that single moment lies a story of early mornings, late nights, coaching classes, examinations, encouragement, setbacks and unwavering hope.

For many parents, it feels like reaching the summit of a mountain.
In reality, it is the beginning of a new journey.
The challenges that helped your child enter IIT are not the same as the challenges they will face once they arrive there. The structured world of school gives way to an environment that demands independent thinking, emotional maturity and the ability to adapt to uncertainty. Students who were once among the highest achievers in their schools suddenly find themselves surrounded by equally talented peers. Success is no longer guaranteed by intelligence alone.

The college years are a period of extraordinary growth,but they also expose students to new academic, social and emotional pressures.

Research from developmental psychology, neuroscience and higher education consistently shows that late adolescence and emerging adulthood are among the most important phases for emotional development. During these years, young adults are shaping their identities, learning to manage relationships, making independent decisions and discovering who they are beyond examination scores and academic achievements.

Alongside these opportunities come significant pressures.
Academic competition, perfectionism, fear of failure, homesickness, loneliness, social comparison, relationship challenges and uncertainty about the future are common experiences. While many students navigate these successfully, others struggle quietly, often without their families recognising the early signs.

Parents frequently ask,
"Now that my child is in IIT, what is my role?"
The answer is that your role continues but the nature of your involvement changes as your child develops greater independence.
During childhood, parents protect.
During adolescence, parents guide. During emerging adulthood, parents become something equally important—a secure source of emotional strength.

Although your child may no longer need help packing a school bag or preparing for an examination, they continue to need reassurance, acceptance, perspective and the confidence that someone believes in them, especially when they begin doubting themselves.

As a psychiatrist working with students, young adults and families, I have witnessed a remarkable truth.

The students who thrive are not necessarily those with the highest intelligence.
Nor are they always those who have experienced the fewest setbacks.

More often, they are those who know they are loved without conditions, trusted to grow, supported when they fail and encouraged to seek help when they need it.

In other words, they experience psychological safety.
A family environment characterised by emotional security, acceptance, open communication and supportive relationships contributes meaningfully to psychological well-being.

This handbook is built around that central idea.

It introduces the SAFE Framework, an evidence-informed approach to parenting young adults during one of the most exciting and demanding periods of their lives.

S – Secure Base: Creating a relationship where your child always feels emotionally safe.

A – Autonomy Support: Encouraging independence while remaining a trusted guide.

F – A Failure-Friendly Mindset: Helping your child see setbacks as opportunities for growth rather than evidence of inadequacy.

E – Early Recognition: Recognising emotional distress early and responding with compassion and timely support.

It brings together established concepts from attachment theory, developmental psychology , neuroscience and observations drawn out of my clinical experience. Although the individual components of the SAFE Framework have research foundations, it as a combined intervention has not yet undergone independent empirical validation.

This book is not intended to make you a mental health professional.
It is intended to help you become something even more valuable.
A parent who knows how to listen.A parent who understands the psychological world of a young adult.
A parent who creates a home where honesty is welcomed, mistakes are accepted and help can be sought without shame.
Most importantly, this book is a reminder that your influence does not end when your child enters IIT.
In many ways, it becomes even more significant.
Years from now, your child may not remember every examination they wrote, every grade they received or every internship they completed.
But they are likely to remember something far more enduring.
How safe they felt with you.
If this handbook helps even one parent create a relationship in which a child feels understood rather than judged, supported rather than pressured and loved without conditions, it will have achieved its purpose.
Because the greatest achievement is not simply helping a child enter an IIT.
It is helping them leave those years as a resilient, compassionate and emotionally healthy human being.

Welcome to the next stage of your parenting journey.

Chapter 1

The Psychology of the IIT Journey
Understanding Your Child's New World

Clinical Perspectives from the IIT Mental Health Team

One of the earliest patterns we observe is a mismatch between parental expectations and students' lived experience of IIT. While many parents see IIT admission as the destination—a point where life becomes secure and success seems assured—students often experience it as the beginning of an intensely demanding academic and emotional journey. After years of being top performers in school, they suddenly find themselves surrounded by equally accomplished peers, making self-doubt and impostor feelings surprisingly common. During this transition, parents who recognise effort, emotional well-being and personal growth—not just academic outcomes—provide a powerful source of stability.

1.1 The Dream and the Reality

There are few moments in the life of an Indian family as emotionally charged as the day an IIT admission offer arrives.
For years, life has revolved around a single aspiration. School schedules are planned around coaching classes. Weekends disappear into mock examinations. Family vacations are postponed. Celebrations become shorter, study hours become longer, and countless everyday decisions are quietly shaped by one distant goal—the hope that one day, a son or daughter will earn a place in one of the Indian Institutes of Technology.

When that long-awaited moment finally arrives, it is far more than an academic achievement. It is a celebration of perseverance, discipline and sacrifice. Parents proudly share the news with relatives and friends. Neighbours congratulate the family. Social media fills with messages of admiration. For many families, an IIT admission represents not only educational success but also the fulfilment of years of shared dreams.

It is therefore understandable that parents experience an overwhelming sense of relief. The difficult years appear to be over. The destination has finally been reached.

Yet psychology tells us a different story.
The admission letter is not the end of the journey. It marks the beginning of an entirely new one.

Unlike the visible transition from school to college, another transition unfolds quietly beneath the surface. It cannot be measured by examination scores or academic ranks. It is a psychological transition—a profound reshaping of identity, relationships, independence and emotional development.

Every year, thousands of exceptionally talented students enter IITs. Almost every one of them was among the highest achievers in school. Many were celebrated as "the topper," "the

genius," or "the brightest student in the district." Academic success had become woven into their sense of self.

Then, almost overnight, the environment changes.
Within an IIT classroom, every student has a similar story. The labels that once distinguished them lose much of their meaning. For the first time, many discover that being exceptionally talented is no longer exceptional. They are now surrounded by peers who have demonstrated the same determination, intelligence and resilience.
This shift is not merely academic.
It is psychological.
Developmental psychologists have long recognised that major life transitions are periods during which individuals reconstruct their understanding of themselves. Entering university is one such transition. Entering an IIT, however, magnifies this experience because the intensity of academic expectations, intellectual competition and personal aspirations is unlike that encountered in most educational settings.
For parents, these changes may be surprising.
The child who once eagerly discussed every examination may now speak very little about academics. Phone calls may become shorter. Advice that was once welcomed may now be politely declined. Decisions about friendships, schedules, career interests and daily routines increasingly become their own.
Some parents wonder whether they are losing their child.
In reality, they are witnessing one of the most important developmental tasks of early adulthood.
Young people are gradually learning to become psychologically independent while remaining emotionally connected. Healthy independence should never be mistaken for emotional distance. In fact, the strongest parent-child relationships are often those that evolve—from one based on supervision to one based on trust, mutual respect and emotional security.
This distinction lies at the heart of this handbook.

Parents often ask what more they can do after their child has entered IIT. The answer is rarely found in solving academic problems or monitoring grades. Instead, it lies in creating a relationship that offers psychological safety—a relationship in which young adults feel accepted, understood and supported, especially during times of uncertainty.
Research consistently shows that parental warmth, emotional availability and autonomy-supportive parenting continue to influence psychological well-being well into early adulthood. Even when children live hundreds of kilometres away in hostels, parents remain one of the most powerful protective factors against stress, anxiety and emotional distress.

Your role has not diminished.
It has evolved.
You are no longer preparing your child to enter IIT.
You are helping your child grow into an adult who can flourish within it.
Throughout this book, we will explore the fascinating psychology that shapes the lives of high-achieving students. We will examine how the developing brain responds to success, competition and failure; why independence sometimes looks like withdrawal; why emotional safety predicts resilience better than constant advice; and how parents can continue to influence their children—not through control, but through connection.
The goal of this handbook is not to teach parents how to produce successful students.
Your child has already demonstrated remarkable academic ability.
Its purpose is something far more important.

It is to help families nurture emotionally healthy, resilient and psychologically secure young adults who can thrive not only during their years at IIT, but throughout the many decades that follow.
Because admission into IIT may open the door to extraordinary opportunities.
But it is psychological well-being that determines how fully those opportunities are realised.

Key Takeaway
"An IIT admission is not the end of your parenting journey—it is the beginning of your child's psychological journey into adulthood. Celebrate the achievement, but prepare for the transition."

1.2 From School Topper to One Among Equals

One of the most profound psychological changes experienced by IIT students rarely appears on a mark sheet.
It is the moment they realise that they are no longer exceptional.
For years, many students have been accustomed to standing out. They were the child whose report card was proudly displayed at home, the student teachers relied upon to answer difficult questions, the one classmates turned to for help before examinations. Academic excellence was not merely something they achieved; it gradually became part of who they believed they were.
Psychologists refer to this as identity built around competence. When a particular strength is consistently recognised and rewarded, it slowly becomes intertwined with a person's sense of self. "I score well" evolves into "I am the smart one." Success becomes more than an outcome—it becomes an identity.

This identity often serves students well through school. It fuels motivation, reinforces confidence and encourages persistence. However, identities that are built predominantly on achievement become vulnerable when the environment changes.
The transition to IIT represents precisely such a change.
Imagine a student who has spent twelve years being the fastest runner in school, only to discover that every athlete at the national championship runs just as fast—or even faster. The athlete has not become less talented. The standard of comparison has changed.
The same phenomenon occurs in IIT classrooms.
Almost every student was once the topper somewhere. Every classroom is filled with individuals who have excelled academically, often against extraordinary odds. For the first time, many students encounter an environment where brilliance is no longer unusual. It is expected.

This experience can be surprisingly disorienting.
A student who once answered every question with confidence may suddenly hesitate before speaking. Someone who consistently ranked first may now find themselves performing around the class average. Marks that would once have caused celebration may now feel disappointing simply because they no longer place the student at the top.
Importantly, this change does not indicate declining ability.
It reflects a psychological principle known as relative comparison.
Human beings rarely evaluate themselves in absolute terms. Instead, we instinctively compare ourselves with those around us. Social psychologist Leon Festinger described this tendency in his Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) , proposing that people understand their own abilities by comparing themselves with others. In highly competitive environments, these comparisons become almost unavoidable.

An IIT campus provides endless opportunities for comparison. One student may seem effortlessly brilliant in mathematics. Another appears to balance academics with entrepreneurship. A third publishes research papers during undergraduate training. Others excel in coding competitions, music, sports or leadership.
Surrounded by extraordinary peers, even highly capable students may begin to question their own abilities.

This is one reason why some students experience what psychologists call the Impostor Phenomenon. Despite objective evidence of achievement, they privately worry that they do not truly deserve their place. They may believe that their admission was due to luck, favourable examination questions or chance rather than genuine ability. Compliments are dismissed. Successes are attributed to external factors. Mistakes, however small, are interpreted as proof that they were "never good enough."
Ironically, impostor feelings are especially common among high achievers.
The more capable the student, the higher the standards they often set for themselves. Instead of celebrating accomplishments, they continually move the goalposts. Yesterday's success quickly becomes today's expectation.
Closely linked to impostor feelings is another familiar companion of high achievement—perfectionism.
Not all perfectionism is harmful. Striving for excellence, paying attention to detail and taking pride in one's work are valuable qualities. Healthy perfectionism encourages growth without threatening self-worth.

Unhealthy perfectionism, however, tells a very different story.
It whispers that anything less than perfection is failure.
A score of 90 is experienced not as success but as evidence that 10 marks were lost.
Constructive feedback becomes personal criticism. Minor setbacks are interpreted as permanent inadequacies. Instead of motivating performance, perfectionism begins to generate anxiety, procrastination and emotional exhaustion.
Over time, students may become increasingly reluctant to attempt unfamiliar activities because they fear not excelling immediately. Opportunities for learning are quietly abandoned in order to protect the image of being "good enough."
This is one of the paradoxes of exceptional achievement.
The very qualities that helped students reach IIT—discipline, determination and high standards—can, if left unchecked, become sources of psychological distress.
Fortunately, most students gradually adapt.
They begin to realise that excellence has many forms. Academic performance remains important, but it is no longer the sole measure of success. They discover classmates who inspire rather than threaten them. Collaboration slowly replaces comparison. Curiosity becomes more valuable than competition. They learn that growth is not about remaining the smartest person in the room; it is about continuing to learn when surrounded by people who challenge them.

Parents play a quiet but powerful role during this transition.
When children call home after receiving an unexpectedly low grade, they are often seeking something deeper than advice. They are asking, without saying it aloud, "Am I still enough?"
The response they receive can shape how they interpret failure.
Parents who focus exclusively on marks may unintentionally reinforce the belief that worth depends on performance. Parents who acknowledge disappointment while affirming the child's intrinsic value communicate a different message: Your achievements matter, but they do not define who you are.

Perhaps the greatest gift parents can offer during this stage is permission to be imperfect. To remind their child that learning sometimes involves confusion, mistakes and temporary setbacks. That being surrounded by exceptional peers is not evidence of inadequacy but a privilege that accelerates growth. And that true confidence is not built by always being the best, but by continuing to learn even when one is no longer the best in the room.
The journey from school topper to one among equals is not a story of losing identity.
It is the beginning of building a stronger one—an identity grounded not in comparison, but in character, resilience and a lifelong love of learning.

Key Takeaway
"When your child is no longer the highest scorer in the room, they have not become less capable. They have entered an environment where excellence is the norm. During this transition, your reassurance should focus not on performance, but on helping them remember that their worth extends far beyond their grades."

1.3 Emerging Adulthood

Parents often describe the first few months after their child joins IIT in remarkably similar ways.
"She hardly calls anymore."
"He wants to make every decision himself."
"She used to tell me everything. Now I have to ask."
"Sometimes he sounds very mature. At other times, he seems as confused as he was in school."
These observations are so common that they may appear to reflect changes in personality. In reality, they often reflect something far more fundamental—a predictable stage of human development.

For generations, psychologists described development as a relatively straightforward journey from childhood to adolescence and then to adulthood. However, towards the end of the twentieth century, developmental psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett observed that the years between approximately 18 and 25 did not fit neatly into either category (Arnett, 2000; Casey et al., 2008). Young people were legally adults, yet many were still exploring their identities, relationships, careers and values. They had left childhood behind but had not fully settled into adult roles.
Arnett proposed that this period should be recognised as a distinct developmental stage, which he called Emerging Adulthood.

His theory has since become one of the most influential frameworks for understanding young adults across the world.

It is important though to understand that the experience of emerging adulthood varies across cultural and socioeconomic contexts. In India, family interdependence, educational expectations and social responsibilities may shape this transition differently.

The college student represents this stage remarkably well.
They are expected to manage finances, organise their daily routine, navigate complex friendships, make academic choices, consider future careers and increasingly take responsibility for their own physical and emotional well-being. Yet, at the same time, they

continue to seek reassurance, make impulsive decisions, question themselves and occasionally depend upon their parents for guidance.
This apparent contradiction is not a sign of immaturity.
It is the hallmark of emerging adulthood.

Arnett described five characteristics that define this developmental period.
The first is identity exploration.
For perhaps the first time, young people begin asking questions that extend beyond examinations and careers.
Who am I?
What kind of work gives my life meaning?
What values matter to me?
What kind of relationships do I want?
Within an IIT campus, these questions become particularly significant. Students meet peers from different cultures, languages, religions and socioeconomic backgrounds. They encounter unfamiliar ideas, discover new interests and are exposed to opportunities that may never have existed in their hometowns. Their identity gradually expands beyond academic achievement to include personal values, friendships, leadership, creativity and purpose.
The second characteristic is instability.
Parents often worry when their child frequently changes interests, electives, research topics or career plans.
One semester, the student dreams of becoming a researcher. The next, they are fascinated by entrepreneurship. A few months later, they begin preparing for civil services or consider studying abroad.
Such changes can be unsettling for families that value certainty.
Developmental psychology, however, views them differently.
Exploration often requires experimentation. Trying different paths before making long-term commitments is not necessarily indecision; it is an important part of healthy psychological development.
The third characteristic is an increasing focus on the self.
This phrase is sometimes misunderstood.
It does not imply selfishness.
Rather, it reflects the opportunity young adults have to make independent decisions before assuming the responsibilities of long-term careers, marriage or parenthood. They learn to solve problems, regulate emotions, manage time, recover from mistakes and make choices without constant parental supervision.
This growing autonomy is essential.

Parents who immediately solve every problem may unknowingly delay the development of confidence that comes from solving problems independently.
The fourth characteristic is the feeling of being "in-between."
Ask many college students whether they consider themselves adults, and the answer is often uncertain.
They no longer see themselves as children, yet they may not feel fully adult either. They enjoy independence but still seek emotional reassurance from home. They make important life decisions but occasionally long for the security and predictability of childhood.
This ambiguity is entirely normal.
Emerging adulthood is a bridge rather than a destination.
Finally, Arnett described this period as the age of possibilities.

Young people generally possess greater optimism than at almost any other stage of life. They imagine multiple futures and believe that life can be shaped by their choices. This optimism encourages ambition, creativity and resilience. It is one of the reasons why these years often become a time of remarkable personal growth.
The psychology of emerging adulthood is also reflected within the brain itself.
Although physical growth is largely complete by the late teenage years, brain development continues through adolescence and into young adulthood, involving changes in several interconnected neural networks.
The prefrontal cortex, which contributes to planning, cognitive control and decision-making, undergoes prolonged structural and functional refinement (Johnson et al., 2009)
This does not mean that young adults are incapable of making good decisions.
Rather, it explains why their decision-making may occasionally appear inconsistent. A college student may brilliantly solve complex engineering problems yet struggle to maintain healthy sleep habits. They may analyse sophisticated algorithms while postponing routine tasks until the last minute. Intellectual ability and emotional self-regulation develop along related, but not identical, timelines.

Understanding this distinction helps parents interpret behaviour with greater compassion.
Instead of asking, "Why is my child behaving like this?", a more helpful question may be, "What developmental task is my child trying to accomplish?"
Viewed through this lens, many conflicts acquire a different meaning.
The disagreement about hostel choices may be an attempt to establish independence.
The changing career interests may represent healthy exploration rather than confusion.
The desire for privacy may reflect the development of personal identity rather than emotional withdrawal.
Parents do not need to eliminate these developmental challenges.
Their role is to provide a secure emotional foundation from which exploration can safely occur.
Research consistently demonstrates that young adults who experience warmth, acceptance and autonomy-supportive parenting develop greater confidence, resilience and psychological well-being. Independence flourishes best not in the absence of parents, but in the presence of parents who remain emotionally available while gradually allowing greater freedom.
Emerging adulthood is therefore not a period to fear.
It is one of the most extraordinary phases of human development—a time when identity is shaped, values are refined, relationships deepen and lifelong aspirations begin to take form.
The young person who entered IIT carrying a suitcase and an admission letter is not simply learning engineering, science or technology.
They are learning who they are becoming.
And although the journey increasingly belongs to them, parents continue to influence its direction—not by walking ahead, but by remaining a steady and reassuring presence whenever they are needed.

Key Takeaway
"The changes you see in your child are often signs of normal development rather than emotional distance. Emerging adulthood is a period of exploration, identity formation and growing independence. Your role is no longer to direct every step, but to remain a secure emotional base from which your child can confidently explore the world."

1.4 Identity, Independence and the Parent–Child Relationship

Few changes worry parents more than silence.
The child who once narrated every detail of the school day now replies with a brief "I'm fine." Phone calls become shorter. Messages are answered hours later. Decisions that were once discussed at the dinner table are made independently. Parents who have spent years being deeply involved in every aspect of their child's life often wonder whether something has changed in the relationship.

"Have I done something wrong?"

"Has my child stopped needing me?"

"Why doesn't my son or daughter tell me everything anymore?"
These questions arise in families across the world. More often than not, they are not signs of a weakening relationship but reflections of a developing one.
One of the central developmental tasks of emerging adulthood is the gradual formation of an independent identity. During childhood, parents naturally play the role of guide, protector and decision-maker. As children grow, however, healthy development requires a gradual shift. Young adults begin to ask not only "What do my parents expect of me?" but also "Who do I want to become?"
This process is known as identity formation.
It is a period during which young people begin to define their own beliefs, values, aspirations and relationships. Some of these choices will resemble those of their family, while others may differ. They may explore new interests, question old assumptions, form friendships with people from different backgrounds or discover career paths that had never previously crossed their minds.

For many IIT students, this process is accelerated.
An IIT campus brings together students from every region of India and increasingly from across the world. Within a single hostel corridor, students encounter different languages, cultures, political viewpoints, religions, lifestyles and ambitions. Conversations continue long after classrooms close. Friendships become laboratories for learning, disagreement and personal growth.

Exposure to such diversity naturally expands a young person's understanding of themselves.
As identity grows, independence follows.
Developmental psychologists distinguish independence from detachment. Independence refers to the growing ability to think, decide and act responsibly without constant guidance.
Detachment, on the other hand, involves emotional withdrawal and loss of connection.
Healthy young adults strive for the first, not the second.
Unfortunately, these two processes can appear remarkably similar from a parent's perspective.
When a student chooses electives without consulting home, prefers solving a problem independently or spends more time with friends than on the phone, parents may interpret these behaviours as signs of emotional distance. In reality, they often represent opportunities to develop confidence and self-efficacy.
Secure relationships are built not on constant communication, but on confidence that support will always be available when needed.
Attachment research has consistently shown that emotional security and independence are not opposing forces.
They strengthen one another.

Children who experience their parents as dependable and accepting generally feel safer exploring the world. Knowing that they have a secure emotional base allows them to take risks, solve problems and recover from setbacks with greater resilience. Independence flourishes most effectively when it grows from security rather than fear.
This explains why many IIT students may call home less frequently during routine weeks but immediately reach out during periods of stress or disappointment. The number of phone calls is a poor measure of emotional closeness. The more meaningful question is this:
When life becomes difficult, does your child know they can call you without fear of judgement?
There is another reason why communication often changes during this stage.
Young adults begin experimenting with emotional self-regulation. Instead of immediately sharing every disappointment, they may first attempt to solve problems themselves. They learn to negotiate conflicts with roommates, manage academic pressures, organise finances and cope with setbacks without seeking immediate parental intervention.
Although parents may perceive this as withdrawal, it often reflects growing confidence.
This does not mean that every change should be dismissed as "normal."
Persistent social withdrawal, marked changes in personality, prolonged sadness, hopelessness, significant academic decline, disturbed sleep, substance misuse or complete loss of communication warrant careful attention. Healthy independence preserves emotional connection even while increasing personal autonomy.

The challenge for parents, therefore, is not to prevent independence but to adapt alongside it.
The questions gradually change.
Instead of asking, "Have you finished your assignment?"
Parents begin asking, "How are you coping?"
Instead of offering immediate solutions, they first listen.
Instead of directing every decision, they help their child think through alternatives.
The relationship slowly evolves from instruction to collaboration.
Perhaps one of the greatest acts of parenting during the IIT years is learning to tolerate uncertainty.
Allowing a child to make decisions means accepting that some decisions may not be perfect.
Mistakes are no longer interruptions to development; they become part of development itself.
Every challenge successfully navigated strengthens confidence far more than a problem solved by someone else.

Parents often fear that giving freedom will weaken their influence.
The opposite is frequently true.
As children mature, influence increasingly depends not on authority but on trust. Young adults seek guidance from those who make them feel understood rather than controlled. When parents remain curious instead of critical, supportive instead of supervisory, they become trusted mentors whose opinions continue to matter long after childhood has ended.
Growing independence should never be mistaken for growing distance.
It is often the visible expression of an invisible psychological achievement—the gradual emergence of an adult who carries the family's values not because they were imposed, but because they have been thoughtfully chosen.

Key Takeaway
As your child becomes more independent, they are not necessarily moving away from you—they are moving towards themselves. Healthy development involves fewer instructions, more conversations; less supervision, more trust. Your goal is no longer to be the person who makes every decision, but to remain the person your child turns to when life becomes difficult. The

strongest parent–child relationships are not those that resist independence, but those that provide a secure foundation from which independence can grow.

1.5 Why Parents Still Matter

When children enter IIT, many parents quietly begin to withdraw.
Some do so intentionally."This is their life now."
"They must learn to manage on their own."
Others continue exactly as before—calling several times a day, checking every assignment, offering solutions to every difficulty and worrying over every disappointment.
Neither extreme is ideal.
The transition to college does not eliminate the need for parents. It transforms the nature of parenting.

The role shifts from directing to guiding, from supervising to supporting, from solving problems to strengthening the child's ability to solve them independently.
This transition is beautifully explained by one of the most influential theories in modern psychology—attachment theory.

Originally developed by British psychiatrist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby and later expanded by developmental psychologist Mary Ainsworth, attachment theory proposed a simple but profound idea: children thrive when they experience a relationship that is both emotionally secure and reliably available (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1988)
For many years, attachment was believed to be important primarily during infancy and childhood. We now know that it continues to influence emotional health throughout adolescence and well into adulthood.
Even highly independent young adults benefit from knowing that there is someone who believes in them, accepts them and will stand beside them during difficult moments.

Parents often imagine that emotional security means protecting children from failure.
Psychology suggests otherwise.
Emotional security comes from knowing that failure does not threaten the relationship.
An IIT student who receives disappointing grades may recover quickly if they believe their parents will respond with understanding rather than criticism. Another student with similar academic performance may experience overwhelming distress if they fear disappointing the people whose approval matters most.
It is not the setback alone that determines resilience.
It is the emotional environment surrounding the setback.

This is where the concept of psychological safety becomes deeply relevant.
Although psychological safety is often discussed in workplaces and organisations, its foundations are laid much earlier—within families.
A psychologically safe family is not one without disagreements or high expectations. Rather, it is one in which family members feel emotionally safe enough to express uncertainty, admit mistakes, ask for help and speak honestly without fear of humiliation or rejection.
Imagine two students who both fail an important examination.
One hesitates to call home because every conversation revolves around marks. They rehearse explanations before picking up the phone, anticipating disappointment and criticism.
The other calls immediately, knowing the first question will not be, "How many marks did you lose?" but, "How are you feeling?"

Both students have encountered the same academic challenge.
Only one feels psychologically safe.
Over time, these seemingly small differences shape resilience.
Students who feel emotionally secure are more likely to seek help early, recover from setbacks more effectively and maintain healthier emotional well-being. They do not avoid failure because they fear losing love; they confront failure because they know love is not conditional upon success.

Another important concept during these years is autonomy-supportive parenting.
Parents sometimes assume that supporting autonomy means stepping aside completely and allowing children to do whatever they wish.
It does not.
Autonomy-supportive parents continue to provide guidance, expectations and boundaries, but they also encourage independent thinking. They invite discussion rather than demand obedience. They explain the reasoning behind advice. They respect growing maturity while remaining available whenever support is needed (Ryan and Deci,2000)

Instead of saying,
"Do this because I told you to."
they are more likely to ask,
"Tell me how you arrived at this decision."
The difference appears subtle.
Psychologically, it is profound.
Young adults who are encouraged to think independently gradually develop confidence in their own judgement. They learn to make decisions not because someone else approves of them, but because they have thoughtfully evaluated alternatives and accepted responsibility for the consequences.
This confidence becomes one of the greatest protective factors during university life.
Parents should also remember that influence changes with age.
During childhood, influence often comes from authority.
During emerging adulthood, influence increasingly comes from trust.
Young adults rarely seek advice from those they fear.
They seek advice from those who listen without immediately judging, correcting or taking over.
Sometimes the most helpful parental response is not a solution but a question.
"What do you think would help?"
"What options have you considered?"
"How can I support you?"
Such conversations communicate respect.
They remind young adults that their opinions matter while reassuring them that they are not alone.

The irony of parenting is that the years during which children appear to need parents the least are often the years during which parental influence becomes the deepest.
Children may no longer need reminders to attend school or complete homework.
Instead, they need something less visible but far more enduring.
They need the quiet confidence that, whatever challenges they encounter, there is someone who believes in them even when they struggle to believe in themselves.
An IIT education will equip your child with knowledge, technical skills and intellectual discipline.
Your relationship with your child provides something no institution can offer.

It provides the emotional security from which courage grows, resilience develops and character is formed.

Long after examination scores have been forgotten, many young adults remember one simple truth.
Not whether their parents expected excellence.
But whether they felt loved when excellence seemed temporarily out of reach.

Key Takeaway
As children become adults, parents do not become less important—they become important in different ways. Your greatest contribution is no longer managing your child's life but creating a relationship in which they feel emotionally safe, respected and accepted. When young adults know they can return to their parents without fear of judgement, they develop the confidence to face the world with resilience, independence and hope.

Chapter 2

Why high achievers Struggle
Success and Vulnerability Can Coexist

Clinical Perspectives from the IIT Mental Health Team

Across our clinical practice, students repeatedly describe struggles that extend far beyond academics. Alongside demanding coursework, they navigate loneliness, adjustment to independent living, complex peer and mentor relationships, placement-related anxiety and uncertainty about the future. Recurring family-related themes include high parental expectations, limited emotional support, emotional invalidation, poor parent–child communication, achievement-based acceptance and stigma surrounding mental health. These observations remind us that while academic demands often trigger distress, family relationships profoundly influence how students cope with those challenges.

2.1 The High-Achiever's Paradox

Why Success Does Not Immunise Against Psychological Distress

One of the most enduring myths about success is that it protects people from emotional suffering. It is an understandable belief. After all, students who enter an Indian Institute of Technology have demonstrated extraordinary intelligence, discipline and perseverance. They have overcome one of the most competitive entrance examinations in the world. To many, they appear confident, resilient and emotionally equipped to handle whatever lies ahead.
Yet, as every mental health professional who has worked with high-achieving young adults soon discovers, academic excellence and psychological well-being are not the same thing.
In fact, they often travel along different paths.
A student may solve complex mathematical problems with remarkable ease while quietly struggling with loneliness. Another may excel in research yet be overwhelmed by anxiety before every examination. A third may appear cheerful, participate actively in campus life and continue to earn excellent grades, all while privately questioning whether they deserve to be at IIT at all.

These apparent contradictions surprise many parents.
"If my child has always been so capable, why are they struggling now?"
The answer lies in understanding that intelligence and emotional resilience are fundamentally different human capacities.
Intelligence enables us to analyse, reason, learn and solve problems. Emotional resilience enables us to cope with disappointment, uncertainty, loss, failure and change. Although these abilities often coexist, one does not automatically produce the other.
History offers many examples of brilliant scientists, artists, physicians and innovators who experienced depression, anxiety or burnout. Exceptional intellect does not make the human brain immune to emotional pain. It simply equips it to solve a different set of problems.
The transition to IIT introduces pressures that many students have never encountered before.
For years, success was measured by one clear objective—perform well in examinations and secure admission into a prestigious institution. Once that goal is achieved, however, the certainty that guided everyday life begins to disappear.

New questions emerge.
How do I compare with my peers?
Am I truly good enough?
What if I fail?
What career should I choose?
What if I disappoint everyone who believed in me?
Unlike entrance examinations, these questions have no answer key.
They demand emotional rather than intellectual skills.
Ironically, high achievers often place greater psychological demands on themselves than anyone else ever could.

The standards that once motivated excellence gradually become internalised. Success is no longer experienced as something to celebrate but as something to maintain. Every achievement raises the expectation for the next one. Satisfaction becomes brief, while self-criticism becomes increasingly familiar.
Psychologists sometimes refer to this phenomenon as the "achievement treadmill."
No matter how far students progress, they feel compelled to keep running.

A successful semester is quickly forgotten because another examination approaches. A research publication is followed by pressure to publish again. An internship leads to concerns about placements. A prestigious job offer raises new anxieties about future performance.
The destination keeps moving.
Over time, many students become reluctant to acknowledge emotional struggles.

There are several reasons for this.
First, they have spent much of their lives being recognised for competence. Asking for help may feel inconsistent with the image they have built over many years.
Second, they often compare themselves with equally successful peers and conclude that everyone else appears to be coping better.
Third, they worry that admitting distress may be interpreted as weakness or ingratitude.
"After everything I have achieved, what right do I have to feel this way?"
This silent question prevents many young adults from seeking support when they need it most.

The students who appear most capable from the outside are sometimes the least likely to reveal that they are struggling.
Parents can unintentionally reinforce this silence.
When conversations focus primarily on grades, internships, research opportunities or placements, children may conclude that these are the only aspects of their lives that matter. Emotional difficulties are quietly set aside because they seem insignificant compared to academic expectations.

Yet young adults do not need parents who assume they are always strong.They need parents who recognise that strength and vulnerability
often exist together.A student can be intellectually gifted and emotionally overwhelmed.
They can be grateful for the opportunity to study at IIT while simultaneously feeling lonely.
They can be successful and still experience self-doubt.
Recognising these contradictory experiences is perhaps the first step towards building a psychologically healthier culture for high achievers.
Success should never become a reason to dismiss suffering.
Nor should emotional struggles diminish the remarkable achievements that students have already accomplished.

The goal is not to produce young adults who never struggle.
It is to help them understand that seeking support during difficult times is a sign of wisdom, not weakness.
Perhaps the greatest misconception about resilience is that resilient people never feel overwhelmed.
In reality, resilience is not the absence of distress. It is the confidence that distress can be recognised, understood and overcome with the support of others.
That confidence often begins at home.

Key Takeaway
Academic excellence and emotional well-being are not the same. Intelligence helps young people solve complex problems, but it does not protect them from stress, anxiety, loneliness or self-doubt. The strongest high achievers are not those who never struggle, but those who know that asking for help is compatible with strength. As a parent, one of the most powerful messages you can give your child is this: "You never have to earn my support through success."

2.2 The Pursuit of Perfection

Perfectionism, the Impostor Phenomenon and the Fear of Failure
Most parents encourage their children to do their best.
There is nothing unhealthy about striving for excellence. Indeed, perseverance, discipline and commitment are among the qualities that help students reach institutions like the IITs. The desire to achieve can inspire remarkable growth, innovation and resilience.
The difficulty arises when excellence quietly transforms into perfection.
The difference is subtle but profound.
Excellence says, "I want to do well."

Perfectionism says, "I must never make a mistake."
Excellence allows room for learning.
Perfectionism allows no room for being human.
For many high-achieving students, perfectionism does not begin at IIT. It develops gradually over years of academic success. Praise from teachers, admiration from peers and pride within the family reinforce the belief that exceptional performance is expected. Over time, achievement becomes more than an accomplishment—it becomes the foundation of identity.
When self-worth becomes tied to performance, every examination carries a hidden question:
"If I don't succeed this time, who am I?"
This is why setbacks can feel disproportionately painful.

A grade that objectively reflects good performance may be experienced as failure simply because it falls short of impossibly high personal standards (Hewitt and Flett ,
,1991).Instead of celebrating what was achieved, the mind becomes preoccupied with what was missed
Perfectionism rarely produces lasting satisfaction.
Each success offers only temporary relief before another goal appears on the horizon. The finish line keeps moving, and the pursuit becomes endless.
Closely intertwined with perfectionism is another experience familiar to many IIT students—the Impostor Phenomenon.
Despite years of hard work and objective evidence of ability, some students privately believe they do not truly deserve their place. They attribute success to luck, favourable circumstances or

chance rather than competence. They worry that one day others will discover they are "not as intelligent as everyone thinks."
These thoughts are often invisible to others.

The student continues to perform well, participates in class and appears confident. Yet internally, every achievement is discounted and every mistake becomes evidence that the feared "truth" is finally being exposed.
Ironically, the more accomplished the individual, the more difficult it may become to accept success.
This is one reason the Impostor Phenomenon is so frequently seen among exceptionally capable people.
Parents are often surprised to hear that children who have secured admission into one of the world's most competitive institutions can still feel inadequate.
Yet these feelings are not irrational.

In an environment where nearly everyone has an extraordinary academic record, comparison becomes almost automatic. Instead of comparing themselves with the average student, young adults compare themselves with the most accomplished peers around them. The benchmark keeps rising, making confidence increasingly difficult to sustain.
Perhaps the deepest fear underlying both perfectionism and impostor feelings is the fear of failure.
Failure is no longer viewed as an event.

It becomes a verdict on personal worth.
Students may avoid asking questions because they fear appearing unintelligent. They postpone submitting assignments because they worry they are not good enough. Some hesitate to apply for internships or competitions unless they are certain of success. Others become trapped in endless preparation, believing that one more hour of work will eliminate every possibility of failure.
The fear of failure often prevents growth.
Learning requires experimentation.
Experimentation requires mistakes.
Mistakes require the willingness to tolerate temporary discomfort.
Without that willingness, curiosity gradually gives way to caution.

Instead of pursuing opportunities to learn, students begin pursuing opportunities where success feels guaranteed.
This is not how innovation happens.
Nor is it how confidence develops.
Real confidence is not built by avoiding failure.
It is built by discovering that failure can be survived.
Parents play a powerful role in shaping how children interpret mistakes.
When conversations after examinations focus exclusively on marks, children may conclude that outcomes matter more than effort, learning or well-being. Conversely, when parents respond to setbacks with curiosity rather than criticism, disappointment becomes an opportunity for reflection instead of shame.
Sometimes the most important question after a difficult experience is not, "Why did this happen?"
It is, "What did you learn about yourself?"
Young adults who understand that mistakes are part of growth become more willing to take healthy risks, seek feedback and embrace challenges beyond their comfort zone.

The goal of parenting is not to raise children who never fail.
It is to raise young adults who know that failure is a temporary experience—not a permanent identity.
For high achievers, this may be one of the most valuable lessons of all.

Key Takeaway
The pursuit of excellence helps young people grow; the pursuit of perfection often leaves them feeling that they are never enough. When achievement becomes the measure of self-worth, success brings only temporary relief and failure feels deeply personal. Parents can protect their children by praising effort, character and resilience as much as results, reminding them that mistakes are not evidence of inadequacy but an essential part of learning, growth and lasting success.

2.3 The Hidden Cost of Constant Performance

Burnout, Social Comparison and Placement Anxiety
For many students, gaining admission into an IIT feels like crossing the finish line after years of relentless effort.
Ironically, it is often the starting line.
The pace of life changes almost immediately. Academic deadlines replace entrance examinations. Competitive internships replace coaching tests. Research projects, coding competitions, hackathons, club activities, entrepreneurship, placements and postgraduate aspirations soon compete for attention. Every opportunity appears valuable, and every missed opportunity seems costly.
Unlike school, where success often followed a predictable path, IIT presents students with countless possibilities.
Alongside opportunity comes a quiet but persistent question:
"Am I doing enough?"
For many high achievers, this question gradually becomes a constant companion.
One of the most significant consequences of sustained pressure is burnout.
Burnout is often misunderstood as simple tiredness.
It is far more than that.

Psychologists describe burnout as a state of emotional, mental and physical exhaustion resulting from prolonged exposure to chronic stress. It is characterised by three features: overwhelming exhaustion, growing emotional detachment and a declining sense of accomplishment.

In educational settings, academic burnout refers to a pattern of sustained exhaustion associated with study demands, increasing cynicism or disengagement from academic work, and, in some models, reduced academic efficacy. Although it shares features with occupational burnout, student burnout should be understood within the specific context of educational demands and functioning (Schaufeli et al., 2002)

Students experiencing burnout often describe an unsettling contradiction.
They continue to work hard, yet they derive little satisfaction from their efforts. Activities that once generated excitement begin to feel mechanical. Motivation fades. Concentration becomes difficult. Even after rest, fatigue persists.
The mind continues to work.
The enthusiasm disappears.

Burnout develops gradually rather than suddenly.
It often begins with admirable qualities.
The student accepts one additional responsibility.
Then another.
A research project is added alongside coursework. Leadership roles are accepted. Internship preparation begins months in advance. Sleep is sacrificed because "there isn't enough time." Weekends disappear. Meals become irregular.
For a while, everything appears manageable.
Then the body begins to object.
Sleep becomes fragmented. Irritability increases. Minor setbacks feel overwhelming. The joy of learning slowly gives way to the obligation of performing.
High achievers frequently overlook these warning signs because they have become accustomed to pushing through discomfort.

Unfortunately, the brain cannot function at its best when recovery is consistently neglected.
Rest is not the opposite of productivity.
It is one of its biological foundations.
Another force that quietly contributes to emotional exhaustion is social comparison.
Human beings naturally compare themselves with others. Within an IIT, however, the opportunities for comparison are almost endless.
A classmate secures a prestigious internship abroad.
Another publishes research in an international journal.
Someone launches a successful start-up while still completing undergraduate studies.
A friend wins a national programming competition.
Another receives multiple placement offers.
Each achievement is genuinely admirable.
Yet the human brain rarely interprets comparison objectively.

Instead of appreciating another person's success, it often converts that success into evidence of one's own inadequacy.
The question shifts from "They are doing well" to "Why am I not doing equally well?"
The digital world magnifies this effect.
Professional networking platforms showcase job offers and internships.
Social media highlights awards, travel, achievements and celebrations.
Rarely does it display rejection letters, failed interviews, sleepless nights or moments of self-doubt.

Students begin comparing their private struggles with other people's carefully curated successes.
The comparison is inherently unfair.
Yet emotionally, it feels very real.
Perhaps nowhere is this more visible than during placement season.
Few periods generate as much anticipation—and anxiety—as campus placements.
For some students, placement represents financial security.
For others, it is validation after years of effort.
Many also feel a profound responsibility towards their families, who have invested emotionally and financially in their education.

As companies begin announcing offers, conversations across campus naturally revolve around salaries, job profiles and future plans.
Even students who are satisfied with their own achievements may find themselves wondering whether they could have done better.

Those who receive offers later than their peers often experience growing uncertainty.
Some begin questioning their abilities.
Others worry that they have somehow fallen behind.
Parents may unknowingly intensify this anxiety by asking well-intentioned questions.
"Have placements started?"
"What package are students getting this year?"
"Did your friends get selected?"
Although asked out of interest and concern, such conversations may reinforce the belief that worth is measured by comparison rather than personal growth.
It is important to remember that careers unfold over decades, not placement seasons.
The first job is a beginning, not a final verdict.
Many successful professionals eventually discover careers very different from those they imagined at twenty-one.
The purpose of an IIT education is not simply to secure employment.
It is to develop the knowledge, adaptability and problem-solving abilities required for lifelong learning.
Parents can become a powerful source of stability during these periods.
Instead of focusing solely on outcomes, they can remind their children of something easily forgotten in competitive environments—that health, integrity, meaningful relationships and emotional well-being remain essential measures of success.
A career built at the cost of psychological health is rarely sustainable.
Achievement is meaningful only when the individual who achieves it remains healthy enough to enjoy it.
The goal is therefore not to avoid ambition.
It is to pursue ambition without sacrificing well-being.
That balance is one of the greatest lessons young adults can learn—not only at IIT, but throughout life.

Key Takeaway
High achievement should inspire growth, not relentless self-sacrifice. Burnout, constant comparison and placement anxiety often arise when students begin to measure their worth by continuous performance. Parents can provide an invaluable counterbalance by reminding their children that success is a lifelong journey, not a competition with their peers. A healthy, resilient young adult will ultimately go much farther than an exhausted one.

2.4 Belonging Away from Home

Homesickness, Friendships and Emotional Relationships

For many IIT students, the greatest challenge is not the curriculum.
It is the distance.
For the first time in their lives, many young adults leave the familiarity of home and enter a completely new world. The sounds, routines and relationships that once provided comfort are replaced by unfamiliar faces, shared hostel rooms and the responsibility of managing everyday life independently.
The transition is exciting.
It can also be emotionally unsettling.

Parents often expect homesickness to disappear within a few weeks. In reality, it follows no timetable. Some students adjust almost immediately, while others continue to miss home months after joining college. Festivals, birthdays, family celebrations and even simple moments—a favourite meal, a familiar conversation or the comfort of one's own room—can evoke unexpected feelings of longing.
Homesickness is not a sign of immaturity.
It is evidence of attachment.
The stronger the emotional bonds at home, the more likely a young person is to experience a sense of loss when separated from them. Missing home does not mean that the student is unable to adapt. It simply means that they are learning to carry the emotional security of home into a new environment.

Most students gradually find that balance.
As they become familiar with campus life, new relationships begin to take shape.
Friendships occupy a unique place during the IIT years.
Developmental psychologists have long recognised that emerging adulthood is a period in which peers become powerful sources of emotional support. Friends become roommates, collaborators, confidants and, at times, an extended family. They celebrate successes together, share disappointments, prepare for examinations late into the night and offer comfort during moments of uncertainty.
For many students, some of the most meaningful conversations of their lives do not occur inside classrooms but in hostel corridors, canteens and campus walks after midnight.
These relationships contribute far more than companionship.
They foster empathy, communication, conflict resolution and emotional maturity—skills that are as important for life as academic knowledge.
Parents occasionally worry that friendships distract students from their studies.
More often, the opposite is true.
Students who experience a sense of belonging generally cope better with academic stress than those who feel socially isolated. Knowing that there are people to turn to during difficult times serves as an important protective factor against anxiety, depression and loneliness.
It is equally important to distinguish **solitude** from **loneliness**.

Many students enjoy spending time alone. Solitude allows reflection, creativity and emotional recovery.
Loneliness is different.
It is the distressing feeling of being emotionally disconnected even when surrounded by people.
A student may live in a busy hostel and still feel profoundly lonely.
This distinction matters because loneliness, rather than simply being alone, is associated with poorer mental health and reduced well-being.
Another aspect of development during these years is the emergence of romantic relationships.
For many parents, this topic evokes discomfort.
Some fear that relationships will interfere with academic performance. Others worry that emotional involvement may lead to disappointment or heartbreak.
Yet from a developmental perspective, forming close emotional relationships is a natural part of emerging adulthood.

Healthy relationships teach young adults how to communicate honestly, negotiate differences, respect boundaries, offer emotional support and experience intimacy with responsibility and mutual respect.
Like all meaningful relationships, they also carry the possibility of disappointment.

Breakups can be deeply painful, particularly when they occur alongside academic demands. A student coping with emotional loss may temporarily experience sadness, reduced concentration, disturbed sleep or loss of motivation. These reactions are often normal responses to grief rather than signs of mental illness.
During such times, parents need not minimise the experience by saying, *"Just focus on your studies."*
To a young adult, emotional pain is real.
Listening with empathy often helps far more than offering immediate advice.
At the same time, parents should remain attentive to changes that persist beyond the expected period of adjustment. Prolonged social withdrawal, persistent hopelessness, significant decline in functioning or expressions of self-harm require timely professional evaluation.
Most importantly, parents should remember that emotional growth is not separate from academic growth.

The young adult who learns to build healthy friendships, navigate disagreements, recover from disappointment and form meaningful relationships is also developing qualities that will sustain successful careers, marriages and families in the future.
An IIT education prepares students to solve complex technical problems.
Life asks them to solve human ones.
Both require learning.
Both require support.
And both are essential for becoming a well-rounded adult.

Key Takeaway
Belonging is not a luxury—it is a basic psychological need. Homesickness, friendships and romantic relationships are all part of healthy emotional development during emerging adulthood. Rather than viewing these experiences as distractions from success, parents can recognise them as opportunities through which young adults develop resilience, empathy and emotional maturity. A student who feels connected is often better equipped to cope with academic challenges than one who feels alone.

2.5 Thriving, Not Just Achieving

Helping High Achievers Build Psychological Resilience

Every parent hopes their child will succeed.
Few pause to ask a different question.
What kind of person will success shape them into?
For generations, achievement has been viewed as the ultimate measure of educational success. Good grades lead to good colleges, good colleges lead to good careers and good careers are expected to lead to fulfilling lives.
Reality is rarely so straightforward.
Many people achieve extraordinary professional success while quietly struggling with anxiety, loneliness or emotional exhaustion. Others encounter failures early in life, yet develop remarkable resilience, meaningful relationships and a deep sense of purpose.
The difference often lies not in intelligence or opportunity, but in psychological resilience.
Resilience is one of the most misunderstood concepts in psychology.
It does not mean remaining positive all the time.
It does not mean suppressing emotions or pretending that difficulties do not exist.

Nor does it mean that emotionally resilient people never experience sadness, anxiety or disappointment.

Resilience is the ability to recover, adapt and continue moving forward despite adversity (Masten , 2001)
Like a bamboo that bends during a storm without breaking, resilient individuals experience life's pressures while retaining the capacity to regain balance.
The encouraging news is that resilience is not an inborn personality trait possessed by only a fortunate few.
It develops through repeated life experiences.
Each challenge successfully navigated strengthens confidence.
Each disappointment that is understood rather than feared teaches the brain that setbacks are temporary.
Each supportive relationship becomes a source of emotional strength.
This has important implications for parents.

Many loving parents instinctively try to remove obstacles from their children's path. They intervene quickly when problems arise, offer immediate solutions and attempt to protect their children from disappointment.
While these responses arise from genuine care, they may unintentionally deprive young adults of opportunities to develop confidence in their own abilities.
Children become resilient not because life is free from difficulties, but because they gradually discover that they can overcome them.
This does not mean parents should step back completely.
It means changing the nature of support.
Instead of asking,
"How can I solve this problem for my child?"
parents might ask,
"How can I help my child solve this problem independently?"
Sometimes the greatest gift is not an answer.
It is confidence.
Confidence that says,
"I believe you can handle this, and if you need me, I will be here."
Another important ingredient of resilience is self-compassion.
High achievers often extend kindness to friends while reserving relentless criticism for themselves.
A student who comforts a struggling roommate may privately describe their own mistakes as unforgivable.
Research consistently shows that individuals who treat themselves with understanding after setbacks recover more quickly, remain motivated for longer and experience better psychological well-being than those who rely solely on harsh self-criticism.
Parents influence this process more than they realise.
Children often learn how to respond to failure by observing how their parents respond to theirs.

When parents acknowledge mistakes without shame, adapt to unexpected challenges and speak about themselves with kindness rather than harsh judgement, they quietly teach resilience through example.
Equally important is helping young adults broaden their definition of success.
An IIT degree is a remarkable achievement.It is not an identity.
Careers matter.So do integrity, compassion, curiosity, emotional health and meaningful relationships.

Long after students have forgotten examination scores and placement packages, these qualities will continue to shape the way they work, lead, love and live.
Perhaps the most valuable message parents can communicate is that they value the person their child is becoming as much as the accomplishments they achieve.
When love is experienced as unconditional rather than performance-dependent, young adults become more willing to take healthy risks, admit mistakes and seek help when necessary.
Ironically, this emotional security often enables greater achievement rather than less.
Throughout this chapter, we have seen that success and vulnerability can exist together.
High achievers may struggle with perfectionism, self-doubt, burnout, loneliness and uncertainty.
None of these experiences diminish their potential.
They simply remind us that exceptional students remain, above all else, human beings.
The goal of parenting, therefore, is not to raise children who never struggle.
It is to raise young adults who know that struggle is a normal part of growth, that help is available when needed and that their worth has never depended solely upon their achievements.
That understanding becomes the foundation of lifelong psychological well-being.

Key Takeaway
The greatest achievement is not gaining admission into an IIT—it is developing the resilience to build a meaningful, healthy and fulfilling life thereafter. As a parent, your most enduring gift is not the removal of every obstacle, but the confidence, security and unconditional acceptance that enable your child to face those obstacles with courage. When children know they are valued for who they are—not only for what they achieve—they learn not merely to succeed, but to thrive.

Chapter 3

The SAFE Framework
Building psychological safety at home

Clinical Perspectives from the IIT Mental Health Team

One message has emerged consistently from counselling conversations: emotional safety begins when parents listen before they advise. Students repeatedly describe feeling most supported when parents resist the urge to interrupt, lecture or immediately solve the problem. They value being asked, "How are you coping?" before being asked about grades, ranks or placements. These recurring observations form the foundation of the SAFE framework presented in this book.

3.1 Why Psychological Safety Matters

The Foundation of Emotional Well-being
Every parent wants their child to feel safe.
From the day a child is born, parents instinctively protect them from harm. They fasten seat belts, hold tiny hands while crossing the road, ensure vaccinations are completed, worry when fever develops and lose sleep when illness strikes. Physical safety comes naturally to parents because its dangers are visible.

Psychological safety is different.
It cannot be seen on an X-ray or measured with a thermometer. It reveals itself in quieter ways—in the confidence to speak honestly, the courage to admit mistakes and the assurance that love will not disappear when life becomes difficult.
For young adults, psychological safety answers a simple but deeply important question:

"Can I be myself with the people who matter most to me?"

Can I admit that I am struggling?

Can I say I failed an examination?

Can I tell my parents that I am anxious, lonely or confused?

Can I disagree without fearing rejection?

Can I ask for help without feeling ashamed?

The answers to these questions shape far more than family relationships.
They influence emotional resilience, help-seeking behaviour and mental well-being.
Many parents assume that psychological safety means shielding children from disappointment or making life easier for them.
It does not.

Children do not become psychologically safe because they never experience failure.
They become psychologically safe because they know that failure does not threaten their place within the family.
A psychologically safe home is not one where expectations are absent.
Nor is it one where mistakes have no consequences.

It is a home where achievement is celebrated but never confused with worth.
Where disagreement is permitted without damaging relationships.
Where difficult conversations are welcomed rather than avoided.
Where children know they can bring home both success and disappointment and receive the same unconditional acceptance.
This distinction is particularly important for high-achieving families.
Many IIT students grow up in homes that value discipline, hard work and excellence. These are admirable qualities that often contribute to academic success.
Yet when conversations become dominated by marks, ranks, internships and placements, an unintended message may emerge.
"My achievements are what matter most."
Few parents consciously communicate this belief.
Nevertheless, children are remarkably sensitive to what receives attention.
If every phone call begins with questions about grades and ends before asking how the student is coping emotionally, children may gradually conclude that performance is safer to discuss than feelings.
Over time, they become experts at sharing achievements while hiding struggles.
This silence is rarely deliberate.
It develops quietly, often with the best of intentions on both sides.

Parents wish to encourage success.
Children wish to protect their parents from worry.
Unfortunately, silence also delays support.
A student who believes they will be understood is far more likely to seek help during the early stages of emotional distress than one who fears disappointment or judgement.
This is one of the reasons mental health professionals consider supportive family relationships as a protective factor for mental health.
Supportive families cannot prevent every challenge.
They can, however, ensure that challenges are faced together rather than alone.
Psychological safety is also closely linked to resilience.
Contrary to popular belief, resilient young adults are not those who experience fewer setbacks.
They are those who recover more effectively because they possess secure relationships that help them regain perspective, confidence and hope.
Knowing that someone believes in you changes the way the brain interprets adversity.
Failure becomes a problem to solve rather than a verdict on personal worth.
Rejection becomes temporary rather than permanent.
Uncertainty becomes manageable rather than overwhelming.
Perhaps this is why parents continue to matter so profoundly, even after children leave home.

Distance changes the frequency of conversations.
It does not diminish their emotional significance.
A single reassuring phone call can restore confidence after a disappointing examination.
A parent's calm response to failure can reduce shame more effectively than hours of reassurance from others.
The emotional climate created within a family continues to influence young adults long after they have become capable of living independently.
Throughout the previous chapters, we have explored the unique psychological challenges faced by high-achieving students.

We have seen that intelligence does not necessarily protect against emotional distress, that perfectionism and burnout often accompany success, and that belonging and supportive relationships remain fundamental human needs.
The question now becomes:
How can parents intentionally create an environment that protects psychological well-being while still encouraging excellence?
The answer lies in a simple framework that forms the heart of this handbook.
The SAFE Framework.

It is built upon four principles that developmental psychology, neuroscience and clinical experience consistently identify as powerful protective factors for young adults.
A Secure Base that provides unconditional emotional connection.
Autonomy Support that encourages independence without withdrawal.

A Failure-Friendly Mindset that transforms mistakes into opportunities for growth.
And Early Recognition of emotional distress before it develops into crisis.
Together, these four principles create something every young adult needs but few can build alone.
A psychologically safe home.

Key Takeaway
Psychological safety is the invisible foundation upon which resilience, confidence and emotional well-being are built. It does not protect young adults from life's challenges; it gives them the confidence to face those challenges without fearing the loss of love, acceptance or support. Long after children leave home, parents remain their strongest source of psychological safety—not because they solve every problem, but because they provide a secure place to return to when life becomes difficult

3.2 S – Secure Base

The Quiet Strength Behind Independence

One of the greatest misconceptions about parenting is that children become independent by gradually needing their parents less.
Developmental psychology suggests something quite different.
Children become independent because they know they can always return to their parents.
This simple idea forms the heart of what psychologists call a secure base.

Imagine a toddler in a park.
The child runs towards a new slide, pauses, turns around to look for a familiar face and, on seeing a parent nearby, confidently continues exploring. The child is not held back by the parent's presence. Quite the opposite—the parent's presence makes exploration possible.
Although the setting changes with age, the psychology remains remarkably similar.
An eighteen-year-old entering IIT may no longer look back before walking into a classroom, but they still carry an invisible emotional map. They continue to ask themselves, often unconsciously:
"If I struggle, who will stand by me?"
"If I fail, will I still be accepted?"
"If I am overwhelmed, is there someone I can call?"

The answers to these questions profoundly influence emotional well-being.
A secure base is not defined by proximity.

A student living a thousand kilometres away from home can still feel emotionally secure if they know their parents are available, accepting and trustworthy. Conversely, emotional insecurity can exist even within the same household if a child feels unable to express vulnerability without fear of criticism or disappointment.
Security is emotional before it is physical.
Parents often believe their most important role is to provide answers.
Yet as children become young adults, they often need something else first.
They need someone who listens.
Listening is one of the most underestimated forms of emotional support.
When a student calls home after a difficult examination, they may not immediately need advice on improving their study techniques. They may first need the reassurance that disappointment can be shared without judgement.
The difference between these two responses is subtle.
"Why didn't you prepare better?"
and
"That sounds disappointing. Tell me what happened."
The first seeks an explanation.
The second creates connection.

Young adults are far more likely to seek guidance from parents who first seek to understand.
Being a secure base also means accepting emotions without immediately trying to remove them.
Parents naturally want to make their children feel better.
When a son expresses anxiety or a daughter speaks about loneliness, the instinct is to reassure.
"Don't worry."
"Everything will be fine."
"Think positively."
Although well-intentioned, such responses can sometimes unintentionally minimise the child's emotional experience.
A more helpful response begins with acknowledgement.

"I can understand why you feel that way."
"That sounds really difficult."
"I'm glad you told me."
Feeling understood does not eliminate emotional pain.
But it reduces the loneliness that often accompanies it.
Another important feature of a secure base is predictability.
Children feel emotionally safe when they know how their parents are likely to respond, particularly during moments of failure.
If every setback is met with anger, disappointment or comparison with others, children gradually learn to hide mistakes.
If setbacks are met with calm curiosity and support, they learn something equally important:
"I don't have to face difficult moments alone."
Parents sometimes worry that unconditional acceptance may reduce motivation.
Research and clinical experience consistently suggest the opposite.

Young adults who feel secure are often more willing to attempt difficult tasks because they know that failure will not threaten the relationship that matters most.
Security encourages courage.

Conditional acceptance encourages caution.
Perhaps this explains why some of the most resilient young adults are not those who have experienced the least failure, but those who have always known that failure would never cost them their parents' love.
Being a secure base does not require perfect parenting.
Every family experiences disagreements, misunderstandings and moments of frustration.
What matters is not the absence of conflict but the willingness to repair it.
Parents who apologise when they overreact, who revisit difficult conversations with openness and who remain emotionally available even after disagreements teach an invaluable lesson—that relationships can withstand mistakes and emerge stronger.
This lesson becomes especially important during the IIT years.

As young adults navigate academic pressures, changing identities, new friendships and uncertainty about the future, they may not seek daily advice.
But they continue to seek emotional certainty.
The certainty that somewhere in the world there is a place where they do not have to prove themselves.
A place where they are valued not for their grades, internships or placement packages, but simply because they are loved.
That place is home.
And that is the enduring gift of a secure base.

Key Takeaway
A secure base is not about keeping your child close—it is about ensuring they never feel alone. Young adults become more independent, confident and resilient when they know there is someone who will listen without judgement, support without controlling and accept them without conditions. The greatest strength parents can offer is not constant direction, but the quiet assurance: "Whatever happens, you can always come home—to us."

3.3 A – Autonomy Support

Helping Young Adults Grow Through Trust Rather Than Control

When children are young, good parenting often means providing direction. Parents decide what they eat, when they sleep, which school they attend and how they spend their time. Children depend upon adults because they simply do not possess the maturity or experience to make many important decisions independently.
As children enter adolescence and young adulthood, however, the task of parenting begins to change.
The goal is no longer to raise an obedient child.
The goal is to raise a thoughtful, responsible and independent adult.
This transition can be surprisingly difficult for both parents and children.

Many parents wonder,"If I stop guiding my child, won't they make mistakes?"
The answer is almost certainly yes.
They will.
The more important question is this:
How else will they learn to make decisions?

One of the central tasks of emerging adulthood is developing the ability to think independently. Young adults begin making choices about academics, friendships, finances, careers, relationships and the kind of life they wish to build. These decisions cannot be outsourced indefinitely to parents. At some point, they must become the child's own.
This is where autonomy support becomes one of the most powerful parenting practices.

Autonomy is often misunderstood.
Some believe it means allowing children to do whatever they want.
Others assume it means parents should step back completely and avoid offering opinions.
Neither interpretation is correct.
Autonomy is not the absence of guidance.
It is the presence of respect.
Autonomy-supportive parents continue to guide, advise and set expectations, but they recognise that their role has changed. Instead of controlling decisions, they help young adults learn how to make decisions.
The conversation shifts from instruction to collaboration.
Instead of saying,
"Take this elective."
they ask,
"What interests you about these options?"
Instead of insisting,
"You should apply only for this company,"
they ask,
"What kind of work do you think will help you grow?"
These conversations may take longer.
They also teach something much more valuable than obedience.
They teach judgement.
Parents sometimes worry that giving children greater freedom will reduce discipline.
Interestingly, psychological research consistently suggests the opposite.
Young adults are more likely to take responsibility for decisions they have actively participated in making than for decisions imposed upon them by others.
Ownership creates commitment.
Control often creates compliance—but only while the authority remains present.
The IIT years provide countless opportunities to practise autonomy.
A student must decide how to organise study schedules, balance academics with extracurricular activities, choose research opportunities, manage finances, resolve conflicts with roommates and prepare for future careers.
Parents cannot be present for every decision.
Nor should they be.
Their task is to prepare the decision-maker rather than make every decision.
Of course, autonomy does not eliminate the possibility of mistakes.

Young adults occasionally choose poorly.
They miss deadlines.
They trust the wrong people.
They overcommit.
They underestimate challenges.
For parents, watching these mistakes unfold can be painful.
The instinct to intervene is entirely natural.
Yet every time parents immediately rescue children from the consequences of ordinary mistakes, they also remove an opportunity for learning.

This does not mean allowing serious harm.
Rather, it means recognising the difference between protecting children from danger and protecting them from growth.

Experience remains one of life's greatest teachers.
Perhaps the most powerful expression of autonomy support is confidence.
Confidence that says,
"I believe you are capable of thinking this through."
"I trust your judgement."
"Even if your decision doesn't work out as planned, we will learn from it together."
Such messages strengthen something that every young adult needs—the belief that they are competent enough to navigate an increasingly complex world.
Ironically, children who feel trusted often seek more advice from their parents than those who feel controlled.
Advice offered without pressure is easier to accept than advice accompanied by criticism.
Influence earned through trust lasts far longer than influence maintained through authority.
Autonomy support also changes the way parents respond when children make decisions different from their own expectations.
Disagreement no longer becomes a battle for control.
Instead, it becomes an opportunity for dialogue.

Parents may still express concerns, offer perspectives and share wisdom gained through experience.
But they also recognise that adulthood requires children to make choices they can genuinely call their own.
Ultimately, the purpose of parenting is not to create dependence.
Nor is it to achieve early independence.
It is to nurture confident interdependence—young adults who can think for themselves while remaining emotionally connected to those who love them.
When parents trust children with responsibility, they send a powerful message.
"I believe not only in your success, but also in your ability to find your way."
That belief often becomes the foundation upon which confidence is built.

Key Takeaway
Autonomy support is not about giving young adults complete freedom or withdrawing parental guidance. It is about replacing control with trust, commands with conversations and dependence with confidence. Parents who encourage independent thinking while remaining emotionally available raise young adults who are not only capable of making decisions, but also confident enough to take responsibility for them.

3.4 F – A Failure-Friendly Mindset

Helping Children Learn Without Fear

Few words carry as much emotional weight in an Indian family as the word failure.
From an early age, children are taught to avoid mistakes, work harder than everyone else and strive for success. These are valuable lessons. They foster discipline, perseverance and ambition—qualities that often help students achieve extraordinary academic success.
Yet somewhere along the journey, an unfortunate message can quietly take root.

"Failure is something to be feared."
For many high-achieving students, failure is no longer seen as a temporary setback.
It becomes a measure of self-worth.
A disappointing examination score, an unsuccessful internship interview or a rejected research proposal is experienced not simply as an event, but as evidence of personal inadequacy.
This is why seemingly small setbacks sometimes evoke disproportionately intense emotional reactions.
The distress is rarely about the marks alone.

It is about what the marks are believed to mean.
"Have I disappointed my parents?"
"Am I no longer good enough?"
"What if everyone discovers that I am not as capable as they thought?"
Parents naturally want their children to succeed.
However, the way parents respond to setbacks often has a greater influence on emotional development than the setback itself.
Consider two students who perform poorly in an examination.
One returns home expecting criticism, comparison and disappointment. Before speaking, the student has already begun preparing explanations and apologies.
The other expects questions of a different kind.

"I know this must be difficult."
"Tell me what happened."
"What do you think you learned from this experience?"
Neither family ignores the disappointing result.
The difference lies in what happens next.
One conversation produces shame.
The other promotes reflection.
A failure-friendly mindset does not mean lowering standards or celebrating poor performance.
It means creating an environment where mistakes become opportunities for learning rather than reasons for humiliation.
Children who are not afraid of making mistakes ask more questions.
They explore unfamiliar ideas.
They take intellectual risks.
They attempt difficult projects.
In contrast, children who fear failure often become preoccupied with protecting their image of success.
They choose safer goals.
They avoid situations in which they might struggle.
Some postpone important tasks because beginning means risking imperfection.
Others work relentlessly, believing that anything less than perfection is unacceptable.
Ironically, the fear of failure often becomes a greater obstacle to success than failure itself.
Progress in science, technology, medicine and every other field has always depended on experimentation.

Every experiment carries the possibility of failure.
Every innovation emerges from repeated attempts that did not succeed.
Failure is therefore not the opposite of learning.
It is one of its essential ingredients.
The same is true of life.

Young adults gradually develop wisdom by making decisions, reflecting on the outcomes and trying again.
Parents who immediately rescue children from every disappointment may unknowingly deprive them of this process.
Support is important.
Rescuing is different.
One strengthens confidence.
The other may unintentionally weaken it.

Perhaps the most powerful question parents can ask after a setback is not,"Why did you fail?" but,"What has this experience taught you?"
That single question shifts attention away from blame and towards growth.
It communicates confidence in the child's ability to recover.
Language matters.
Simple changes in conversation can transform the emotional meaning of failure.
Instead of saying,
"You should have done better,"
parents might say,
"I know you are disappointed. Let's think about what you can do differently next time."
Instead of asking,
"How many marks did you lose?"
they might ask,"How are you feeling?"
Such responses do not reduce expectations.
They increase emotional safety.
Children remain motivated not because they fear disappointing their parents, but because they know mistakes will not diminish their parents' respect or affection.
This distinction is fundamental.
Fear may produce short-term performance.
Psychological safety produces lifelong resilience.
Ultimately, every parent faces a choice.
To raise children who become experts at avoiding failure.
Or to raise young adults who become confident enough to learn from it.
The latter are more likely to innovate, lead and adapt in a world where uncertainty is inevitable.
Because success is rarely built upon a life without mistakes.
It is built upon the courage to keep moving forward after them.

Key Takeaway
A failure-friendly mindset does not lower expectations—it changes the meaning of failure. When parents respond to setbacks with empathy, curiosity and confidence rather than shame or criticism, children learn that mistakes are part of growth, not evidence of inadequacy. Young adults who are not afraid to fail become the ones most willing to learn, adapt and ultimately succeed.

3.5 E – Early Recognition

Recognising Distress Before It Becomes a Crisis

Parents often ask a question that carries both love and anxiety.
"How will I know if my child is struggling?"
There is no single answer.
Young adults rarely announce emotional distress in clear, unmistakable words. Few call home and say, "I think I'm becoming depressed," or "I'm developing an anxiety disorder." More often, emotional difficulties reveal themselves gradually, through subtle changes in behaviour, communication and daily functioning.
The challenge for parents is not to become detectives searching for hidden problems.
It is to remain attentive to meaningful changes.
Every young adult experiences stress.
Examinations create anxiety. Placement season brings uncertainty. Friendships occasionally become complicated. Missing home during festivals is natural. Feeling disappointed after failure is part of life.

These experiences, by themselves, are not signs of mental illness.
They are part of being human.
The concern arises when distress becomes persistent, begins interfering with daily life or represents a noticeable change from the person's usual behaviour.
Parents know their children better than anyone else.
They recognise the difference between a naturally quiet child and one who has suddenly become withdrawn. They notice when an enthusiastic student begins losing interest in activities they once enjoyed. They hear changes in tone, energy and conversation that others may overlook.

Sometimes the earliest warning sign is not what a child says.
It is what they stop saying.
Phone calls become unusually brief.
Messages remain unanswered for days.
Conversations become mechanical.
The warmth that once characterised the relationship seems to fade.
At other times, changes appear in everyday routines.
Sleep becomes irregular.
Appetite changes noticeably.
Personal care is neglected.
Concentration declines.
The student who once approached challenges with enthusiasm now seems persistently exhausted or indifferent.
Academic performance may also change.

While an occasional poor examination result is common, a sustained decline in motivation, repeated absenteeism, inability to complete routine responsibilities or sudden disengagement from studies deserves careful attention.
Emotional changes are equally important.
Persistent sadness, irritability, excessive anxiety, hopelessness, feelings of worthlessness or overwhelming guilt should never be dismissed as "just stress." Similarly, expressions such as "Nothing matters anymore," "Everyone would be better off without me," or "I can't do this anymore" should always be taken seriously, regardless of whether they appear casual or indirect.

Recognising these signs does not mean assuming the worst.
Nor does it mean immediately diagnosing a mental illness.
It simply means opening a conversation.

Many parents hesitate because they fear asking about emotional well-being will make matters worse.
Research consistently shows the opposite.
Compassionate conversations about emotional distress do not create problems that were not already present.
Instead, they often provide relief by giving young adults permission to speak openly about experiences they may have been carrying alone.
Sometimes a simple question is enough.
"You've seemed quieter than usual lately. I've been thinking about you. How have you really been?"
Equally important is listening without rushing to reassure, correct or solve the problem.
Being heard is often the first step towards healing.
Parents should also remember that they are not expected to manage every psychological difficulty alone.
Just as they would seek medical attention for persistent physical symptoms, they should feel comfortable seeking professional help when emotional difficulties persist, worsen or interfere significantly with daily functioning.
Consulting a mental health professional is not an admission of failure.
It is an act of responsible parenting.

Early recognition is one of the most powerful protective factors in mental health.
Many serious psychological difficulties begin with mild, often overlooked symptoms. When recognised early, support can be offered before distress becomes overwhelming, relationships become strained or academic functioning deteriorates.
The goal is not to become anxious about every change in mood.
The goal is to remain emotionally present.
To notice.
To ask.
To listen.
And when necessary, to reach out for help.
Throughout this chapter, we have explored the four pillars of the SAFE Framework—creating a Secure Base, supporting Autonomy, developing a Failure-Friendly Mindset and practising Early Recognition.
Together, these principles do not guarantee a life free from adversity.
No parenting approach can.
What they do provide is something far more valuable.
They create a family environment in which young adults know they can succeed without pressure to be perfect, struggle without fear of rejection and seek help without shame.
That is the essence of psychological safety.
And it may be one of the greatest gifts a parent can offer.

Key Takeaway
Parents do not need to recognise every diagnosis—they need to recognise when their child is no longer themselves. Notice changes, begin conversations early and never hesitate to seek professional help when concerns persist. The earlier emotional distress is recognised, the greater the opportunity to provide timely support, prevent unnecessary suffering and strengthen recovery.

Chapter4

S — Secure Base
Love Me Even When I Fail

Clinical Perspectives from the IIT Mental Health Team

One of the most common fears expressed during counselling is not fear of failure itself, but fear of disappointing parents. Many students delay sharing poor grades, failed interviews or emotional struggles because they anticipate criticism, comparison or causing distress at home. They feel safest when parents clearly communicate that love, acceptance and belonging are independent of academic performance. A secure emotional base allows young adults to seek support before difficulties become crises.

4.1 The Safe Harbour

Why Every High Achiever Needs a Secure Base

Student Story
Arjun had always been the child everyone admired.
He had excelled in school, cleared one of the country's most competitive entrance examinations and joined an IIT. His parents spoke of him with quiet pride, and rightly so. He was disciplined, responsible and deeply committed to his goals.
During his first semester, however, things did not go as planned.
The academic pace was unlike anything he had experienced before. Surrounded by equally brilliant classmates, he struggled to keep up with one particularly demanding course. When the semester results were announced, his grades were far below what he had expected.
For three days, he said nothing.
He called home as usual, spoke about the weather, hostel food and campus activities, but never mentioned the results.

His parents sensed that something was different.
His voice lacked its usual enthusiasm. Conversations became shorter. Yet every time they asked how college was going, his response was the same.
"Everything is fine."
Finally, after several days, he sent a brief message to his father.
"I didn't do well this semester. I didn't know how to tell you because I felt I had let you down."
His father read the message several times before replying.
He resisted the temptation to ask about grades.
He resisted the urge to offer advice.
Instead, he wrote,
"You have never needed to earn our love through your marks. We are proud of the person you are, not just the grades you receive. Tell us what happened. We'll think through it together."
Years later, Arjun would say that he remembered very little about that disappointing semester.
But he remembered that message.
Not because it changed his grades.
Because it changed what failure meant.
Every young adult carries an invisible question into adulthood.
"If I fail, will I still be accepted?"

The answer to that question is shaped long before the first college examination.
It is built through thousands of everyday interactions between parents and children.
Psychologists describe this enduring source of emotional security as a secure base.
The concept was introduced by British psychiatrist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby, whose pioneering work transformed our understanding of child development. Bowlby observed that children who experienced consistent love, comfort and emotional availability from their caregivers developed greater confidence to explore the world around them.
At first glance, this idea appears relevant only to infancy.
It is not.
As children grow, the form of attachment changes, but its importance does not.
A toddler explores a playground while occasionally looking back to ensure a parent is nearby.
An IIT student explores a new city, a demanding academic environment and an uncertain future while carrying an equally important, though invisible, reassurance:
"If I need my parents, they will be there."
The secure base is no longer physical.
It becomes psychological.
This explains one of the most interesting paradoxes in human development.
Children do not become independent because they stop depending on their parents.
They become independent because they know they can depend on their parents when it truly matters.
Security creates courage.

Young adults who feel emotionally secure are more willing to attempt difficult tasks, make independent decisions, recover from setbacks and seek help when they need it. They are not fearless.
They are simply less afraid of facing challenges alone.
Parents sometimes assume that their importance diminishes once children leave home.

In reality, the nature of their influence changes.
During childhood, parents provide protection.
During emerging adulthood, they provide perspective.
They become the calm voice after disappointment, the reassuring conversation before difficult decisions and the unwavering presence that reminds young adults that one setback does not define an entire future.
A secure base is not created by solving every problem.
Nor is it created by removing every obstacle.
It is created by being emotionally available.
By listening before advising.
By understanding before judging.

By communicating, again and again, that a child's value never depends solely on achievement.
Perhaps this is why many successful adults rarely remember the details of every examination they wrote or every award they received.
What they remember is how they felt when they failed.
They remember who stood beside them.
They remember who believed in them when they found it difficult to believe in themselves.
Long after grades have faded into memory, that feeling of emotional security continues to shape confidence, resilience and the willingness to face life's inevitable uncertainties.
A secure base is therefore not a luxury.
It is one of the greatest psychological gifts parents can offer their children.

Key Takeaway
A secure base is the quiet confidence that tells a young adult, "Whatever happens, I have a place where I am accepted, understood and loved." Children become courageous not because they never fail, but because they know that failure will never cost them the love and support of the people who matter most.

4.2 When Success Feels Conditional

The Hidden Fear of Disappointing Parents

Every parent wants their child to succeed.
There is nothing wrong with celebrating achievement. Success reflects years of hard work, perseverance and commitment. Parents naturally feel proud when their children accomplish something meaningful, and children, in turn, enjoy making their parents proud.
The difficulty begins when children quietly arrive at a different conclusion.
"My parents love me more when I succeed."
Few parents ever say these words aloud.
Yet many children gradually come to believe them.
This belief is rarely created by a single conversation. Instead, it develops over years of small experiences. The excitement surrounding good report cards, the disappointment after poor marks, frequent discussions about academic performance, comparisons with other students, or praise that focuses exclusively on achievement can unintentionally send a powerful message.
"Success makes me worthy of attention."
Over time, achievement ceases to be something children do.

It becomes who they are.
Psychologists distinguish between conditional acceptance and unconditional acceptance.
Conditional acceptance occurs when children perceive that approval, affection or emotional closeness depends upon meeting certain expectations. The expectations may involve academic performance, behaviour or other accomplishments.
Unconditional acceptance conveys a very different message.
"There are behaviours I may not agree with, decisions I may question and performances that may disappoint me. But none of these will reduce my love, respect or commitment to you."
This distinction is profound.
Children who experience unconditional acceptance are generally more willing to acknowledge mistakes because they know that honesty will not threaten the relationship.
Those who fear conditional acceptance often learn to hide.
Not because they wish to deceive.
Because they wish to protect the relationship.
This explains why many high-achieving students delay telling their parents about disappointing grades, failed interviews or personal struggles.
The silence is not always about fear of criticism.
More often, it reflects the fear of causing disappointment.
For many students, disappointing themselves is painful.
Disappointing their parents feels unbearable.
Parents often underestimate the emotional influence they continue to have during the college years.

An encouraging message before an examination can remain in a student's mind throughout the day. Equally, a disappointed tone of voice after a setback may linger long after the conversation has ended.

Words matter.
Tone matters.
Facial expressions matter.
Sometimes even silence matters.
Children become remarkably skilled at reading these signals.
This does not mean that parents should stop having expectations.
Healthy expectations communicate confidence in a child's abilities.

The challenge is ensuring that expectations never become conditions for love.
One helpful way to think about this is to separate the person from the performance.
Performance can be evaluated.
Character should be affirmed.
Parents can say,
"I know you are capable of preparing differently next time."
without saying,
"You have let us down."
One statement addresses behaviour.
The other threatens identity.
Young adults who understand that mistakes do not diminish their worth recover more quickly from setbacks. They remain willing to take on challenges because failure is experienced as feedback rather than rejection.

In contrast, when love appears closely linked to achievement, children often become cautious rather than courageous. They choose safer goals, avoid unfamiliar opportunities and hesitate to admit difficulties, fearing that failure will alter the way they are viewed by those they love most.
Parents usually set high expectations because they believe in their children.
Children sometimes experience those same expectations as pressure because they fear losing that belief.
Bridging this gap requires one simple but powerful message, repeated throughout the years.
"Nothing you achieve will make us love you more.
Nothing you fail to achieve will make us love you less."
These words do not reduce ambition.
They strengthen it.
For children who know they are loved unconditionally are free to pursue excellence without carrying the burden of proving that they deserve to be loved.
That is the quiet strength of a secure base.

Conversation Corner
Instead of saying:
"How could this happen?"
"You should have worked harder."
"What will people think?"
Try saying:
"I know this is disappointing for you."
"Let's understand what happened together."
"One result cannot define who you are."
"We believe in you, and we'll work through this together."

Parent Action Box
This week, tell your child something that has nothing to do with academics.
For example:

"I admire your kindness."
"I'm proud of the way you care for your friends."
"I love talking to you."
"Thank you for always thinking about the family."
When appreciation extends beyond achievement, children gradually understand that their value extends beyond performance.

Key Takeaway
Children flourish when they know that success earns celebration but never love. High expectations and unconditional acceptance are not opposites—they are complementary. Parents can encourage excellence while making one truth unmistakably clear: your worth in this family has never depended on your grades, your rank or your achievements. You are loved first, and everything else comes after.

4.3 Why Students Hide Their Struggles

When Silence Feels Safer Than Speaking

One of the most painful experiences for parents is discovering that their child has been struggling for weeks or even months without saying a word.
The grades had fallen.

The anxiety had been growing.
Sleep had become irregular.
The student had been feeling overwhelmed.
Yet every phone call home ended with the same reassuring sentence.
"Everything is fine."
Parents are often left asking,
"Why didn't you tell us?"
The answer is rarely simple.
And it is almost never because the child does not love or trust their parents.
More often, silence is an act of protection.
Young adults protect themselves from criticism.
They protect their parents from worry.
And sometimes, they protect the image of being the "strong one" that they have carried for many years.

Many IIT students have spent their entire lives being known for one thing—their ability to cope.
Teachers admired their discipline.
Friends sought their help.
Relatives described them as brilliant.
Parents proudly spoke about their achievements.
Over time, competence became their identity.
When difficulties arise, admitting vulnerability can feel like betraying that identity.
"People expect me to handle this."
"I shouldn't be struggling."
"If I tell them, they'll think I've changed."
These thoughts often remain unspoken.
But they influence behaviour.
There is another reason students remain silent.

They do not want to disappoint the people who have sacrificed so much for them.
Many young adults are deeply aware of the effort their families invested in helping them reach IIT. They remember the years of coaching, the financial sacrifices, the encouragement and the unwavering belief their parents placed in them.
When they struggle, guilt often accompanies the distress.
Instead of thinking,
"I need help,"
they think,
"I shouldn't make my parents worry."
Ironically, the desire to protect parents often prevents parents from providing the support their children need most.
Silence, however, rarely makes emotional distress disappear.
Feelings that remain unspoken often become heavier with time.
A disappointing examination result becomes persistent self-doubt.
Temporary stress develops into exhaustion.
Loneliness deepens.
What might have been resolved through an early conversation gradually becomes more difficult to address.
This is why emotionally safe families are so important.
Children speak openly when they believe they will be understood before they are evaluated.
Consider two possible responses to the same conversation.
A student says,
"I failed my mid-semester examination."
One parent immediately asks,
"What happened? How many marks did the others get?"
Another responds,
"That must have been very difficult. Tell me what you've been going through."
The first response seeks information.
The second invites honesty.
Neither ignores the problem.
Only one makes it emotionally easier to continue the conversation.
Parents sometimes believe that asking frequent questions is the best way to stay connected.
In reality, connection depends less on the number of questions and more on the quality of listening.
Young adults are remarkably perceptive.
They quickly recognise whether parents are listening to understand or listening to judge.
Sometimes what children need most is not advice.
It is permission to speak without interruption.
Without immediate solutions.
Without comparisons.
Without lectures.
Simply being heard often reduces emotional distress.

Parents should also remember that not every conversation has to begin with academics.
Questions such as,
"What made you smile this week?"
"Who's become a good friend?"
"What's been the most interesting part of your semester?"
or
"How have you been feeling lately?"
communicate that the child matters more than their performance.

Over time, these conversations create a relationship in which difficult topics feel easier to discuss.
Trust is built long before it is tested.
When children know they can safely share small disappointments, they are far more likely to share larger ones.
The goal is not to know everything happening in your child's life.
The goal is to ensure that when life becomes overwhelming, your child knows exactly where to turn.
Because the opposite of silence is not constant communication.
It is emotional safety.

Conversation Corner
Child: "I didn't do well this semester."
Instead of saying:
"How could this happen?"
"Didn't I tell you to study harder?"
"This isn't like you."
Try saying:
"Thank you for telling me."
"I can imagine this wasn't easy to share."
"I'm more interested in understanding what you've been experiencing than in the marks themselves."
"We'll think about the next steps together."
Sometimes the first response determines whether there will be a second conversation.

Parent Action Box
Try practising the 80:20 Rule during your next phone call.
Spend 80% of the conversation listening and 20% speaking.
Resist the urge to interrupt, solve or advise immediately.
When your child finishes speaking, pause before responding.
Often, the most supportive words are simply,
"Tell me more."

Key Takeaway
Students rarely hide their struggles because they do not trust their parents. More often, they hide them because they fear causing disappointment or being misunderstood. Trust grows when children know they can bring both success and failure into the conversation without fear of judgement. A home that welcomes honesty becomes the safest place to seek help when it is needed most.

4.4 Building Trust Before It Is Needed

The Everyday Conversations That Strengthen Emotional Safety

Trust is often tested during moments of crisis.
It is built long before those moments arrive.
Parents sometimes imagine that trust develops through grand gestures—offering wise advice during difficult times or making significant sacrifices when children need them most.

In reality, trust grows quietly.
It is built through hundreds of ordinary conversations, everyday interactions and small moments of emotional connection that gradually teach a child one simple lesson:
"I can talk to my parents about anything."
This lesson is not taught in a single conversation.
It is learned over years.
Every time a parent listens without interrupting, trust grows.
Every time a child admits a mistake and is met with understanding rather than humiliation, trust deepens.
Every time feelings are acknowledged instead of dismissed, emotional safety becomes stronger.
Parents naturally want to help.
When children describe a problem, the immediate instinct is to offer a solution.
"Here's what you should do."
"Don't worry."
"This isn't such a big issue."
Although offered with love, advice given too quickly sometimes ends the conversation before the child has truly felt heard.
Young adults often seek something different before they seek solutions.
They want someone to understand their experience.
Listening is therefore not a passive activity.
It is an active expression of love.
It requires setting aside assumptions, resisting the urge to interrupt and becoming genuinely curious about another person's perspective.

One of the simplest but most powerful questions a parent can ask is,
"Help me understand what this has been like for you."
That question communicates respect.
It tells young adults that their thoughts and emotions deserve attention.
Equally important is learning to tolerate silence.
Parents sometimes become uncomfortable when conversations pause.
They quickly fill the silence with advice, reassurance or additional questions.
Yet silence often gives young adults the space to gather their thoughts and speak more honestly.
Some of the most meaningful conversations begin after a few quiet moments.
Trust is also strengthened when parents respond consistently.
Children should not have to predict whether today's mistake will be met with calm understanding or intense criticism.
Consistency creates emotional security.
Even when parents disagree with a decision, they can separate the behaviour from the relationship.
"I don't agree with this choice."
is very different from,
"I'm disappointed in you."

One addresses an action.
The other feels like a judgement of the person.
Another powerful way to build trust is to show curiosity about everyday life rather than only academic performance.
Instead of beginning every phone call with,
"How are your studies?"parents might occasionally ask,
"What made you laugh this week?"
"Who are you spending time with these days?"
"What's something new you've learned outside the classroom?"
Such questions communicate genuine interest in the person rather than the performer.
Children remember these conversations.
Not because the questions were extraordinary.
But because they felt seen.
Parents should also recognise that trust grows when children witness vulnerability in adults.
A parent who admits,
"I made a mistake at work today."
or
"I didn't handle that situation as well as I could have."
teaches an important lesson.
Being imperfect does not diminish dignity.
Mistakes can be acknowledged without shame.
This creates permission for children to do the same.
Perhaps the most overlooked ingredient of trust is repair.
Every family experiences disagreements.
Words are spoken in frustration.
Misunderstandings occur.
No parent responds perfectly every time.
Fortunately, perfection is not required.
Repair is.
A sincere apology.

A conversation revisited after emotions have settled.
A willingness to say,
"I think I misunderstood you yesterday."
These moments often strengthen relationships more than the absence of conflict ever could.
Children who experience repair learn that relationships are resilient.
They discover that love can survive disagreement.
As young adults move further into independent lives, they will increasingly choose whom they confide in.
They will seek out people who make them feel safe enough to be honest.
Parents cannot demand that place in their children's lives.
They earn it.
One conversation at a time.
One thoughtful response at a time.
One ordinary day at a time.
That is how trust is built.
Long before it is ever needed.

Conversation Corner
Instead of asking:
"Did you study today?"

"What was your test score?"
"Have placements started?"
Try asking:
"How has this week been for you?"
"What's been the most challenging part of your semester?"
"What's something you're looking forward to?"
"Is there anything on your mind that you'd like to talk about?"
Questions that invite conversation often reveal much more than questions that seek information.

Parent Action Box
The Five-Minute Connection
During your next call with your child,
spend the first five minutes talking about anything except academics.
Ask about their friends.
Their meals.
Their interests.
Their experiences.
Their thoughts.
When children realise that they matter more than their performance, conversations become deeper, trust grows stronger and emotional safety quietly takes root.

Key Takeaway
Trust is not built during crises—it is built in everyday conversations. Parents who listen with curiosity, respond with consistency and repair relationships after misunderstandings create an emotional environment in which children feel safe to share both their successes and their struggles. The strongest relationships are not those without conflict, but those in which honesty is always welcomed and connection is always restored.

4.5 Becoming Your Child's Secure Base

The Greatest Gift You Will Ever Give

As parents, we often wonder what our children will remember years from now.
Will they remember the advice we gave before examinations?
Will they remember the schools we chose, the coaching classes we arranged or the countless reminders to work hard?
Perhaps they will.
But when adults reflect on their childhood and early adulthood, they rarely begin with achievements.
They remember how they felt.
They remember whether home was a place of comfort or criticism.
Whether mistakes could be admitted without fear.
Whether success was celebrated but failure was also embraced with compassion.
Whether they felt understood.
These memories quietly become the emotional blueprint they carry into the rest of their lives.
A secure base is not created through a single conversation or a grand parenting strategy.
It is built gradually through everyday moments.

A reassuring message before an examination.

A calm response after disappointing results.
A phone call that begins with, "How are you doing?" rather than, "How did you perform?"
A willingness to listen before offering advice.
A hug after failure.
An apology after misunderstanding.
A simple reminder that love has never depended upon achievement.
These moments may appear ordinary.
Psychologically, they are extraordinary.
They teach young adults that relationships can withstand disappointment.
They teach them that asking for help is not a sign of weakness.
They teach them that their value as a human being remains constant, even when circumstances change.
The world your child is entering will not always be kind.
There will be competition, rejection, uncertainty and unexpected setbacks.
There will also be success, friendships, opportunities and moments of great joy.
You cannot protect your child from every disappointment.
Nor should you try.
What you can do is ensure that, whatever life brings, your child never has to question one thing.
"My parents are on my side."
That certainty becomes a source of remarkable strength.
Young adults who feel emotionally secure approach challenges differently.
They are more willing to attempt difficult tasks because they are not paralysed by the fear of failure.
They recover more quickly after setbacks because they know one disappointment does not define them.
They are more likely to seek help when overwhelmed because they trust that vulnerability will be met with understanding rather than judgement.
This is the enduring influence of a secure base.
It is not measured by the number of phone calls or the frequency of advice.
It is measured by the confidence with which a child faces the world, knowing that there is always a place where they are accepted exactly as they are.
As children become adults, parenting becomes less about directing lives and more about strengthening relationships.

Your child will make decisions without consulting you.
They will develop opinions that differ from yours.
They will experience successes you could never have imagined and disappointments you wish you could prevent.
Through all these changes, your most important role remains unchanged.
To be the person who believes in them when they doubt themselves.
To be the voice that reminds them of their strengths when they see only their weaknesses.
To be the place they return to—not because they have nowhere else to go, but because they know they will always be welcomed.
Long after your child has forgotten examination scores, placement packages and academic rankings, they are likely to remember something far more enduring.
How safe they felt with you.
And that may become one of the greatest protective factors in their entire life.

Reflection Exercise
Take a few moments to reflect on the following questions.

If my child experiences a major setback tomorrow, would their first instinct be to tell me—or to hide it from me?
During our recent conversations, have I spoken more about performance than about well-being?
What words or actions from me help my child feel accepted, even during difficult times?
Is there one small change I can make this week that will help my child experience home as a place of emotional safety?
Parenting is not about being perfect.
It is about being consistently present, emotionally available and willing to grow alongside your child.

Key Takeaway
Children outgrow their dependence on parents, but they never outgrow their need for emotional security. A secure base is not a place—it is a relationship. When young adults know they are loved without conditions, heard without judgement and supported without losing their independence, they develop the confidence to face the world with resilience. Your greatest legacy will not be the success you helped your child achieve, but the security you gave them to become who they were meant to be.

Chapter 5

A – Autonomy Support
Helping Young Adults Stand on Their Own

Clinical Perspectives from the IIT Mental Health Team

Many students describe wanting parents to recognize that they are entering adulthood. They value guidance but also need the autonomy, time, and space to make decisions, solve problems, and regulate themselves. Parents sometimes interpret a student's growing independence or temporary withdrawal as emotional distance when it is often a normal part of developing autonomy. The families that adapt best are those that remain emotionally available while gradually transferring responsibility to the young adult.

5.1 The Art of Letting Go

Growing Up Requires Holding On Differently

The day parents send their child to IIT is filled with mixed emotions.
There is pride in what has been achieved.
There is excitement about the future.
And beneath it all, there is a quiet awareness that something has changed forever.
For nearly two decades, parents have been deeply involved in almost every aspect of their child's life. They have packed school bags, reminded them about examinations, celebrated achievements, comforted disappointments and made countless decisions on their behalf. Their presence has been woven into the rhythm of everyday life.
Then, almost overnight, the rhythm changes.
A hostel room replaces the family home.
Friends become daily companions.
Parents become voices on the telephone.
For many mothers and fathers, this transition is more challenging than they expected.
Not because they doubt their child's ability.
But because they are learning a new way of being a parent.
Every stage of childhood asks parents to let go in some way.
The toddler who insists on feeding himself.
The school-going child who wants to walk into the classroom alone.
The teenager who prefers spending time with friends.
Each stage involves a little more independence and a little less parental control.
The IIT years represent another important step in that journey.
Yet "letting go" is often misunderstood.
It does not mean becoming emotionally distant.
It does not mean withdrawing support.
Nor does it mean pretending that children no longer need their parents.
It means recognising that the relationship itself is changing.
Parents are no longer raising children.
They are beginning to relate to emerging adults.
The questions change.
Instead of asking,
"Have you finished your homework?"

parents begin asking,
"How are you managing your workload?"
Instead of deciding,
"This is what you should do,"
they ask,
"What are you thinking?"
The focus gradually shifts from managing behaviour to developing judgement.
This transition requires trust.
Trust can feel uncomfortable.

Parents know that young adults will occasionally make decisions they would not have chosen themselves. They may stay up too late, underestimate deadlines, overspend, trust the wrong people or take longer than expected to solve a problem.
Watching this unfold is not easy.
The natural instinct is to intervene.
Sometimes intervention is necessary.
Often, however, experience is the better teacher.
Psychologists describe this process as the development of self-efficacy—the belief that one is capable of handling life's challenges. Self-efficacy cannot be developed through instruction alone. It grows through experience, particularly through solving problems independently and recovering from mistakes.

Every challenge successfully navigated becomes evidence.
"I managed that."
"I can handle difficult situations."
"I am becoming capable."
Parents contribute to this confidence not by removing every obstacle but by resisting the temptation to remove every obstacle.
There is an important difference between protection and overprotection.
Protection keeps children safe from genuine harm.
Overprotection keeps them safe from ordinary life.
One builds confidence.
The other can unintentionally create dependence.
The goal is not independence at any cost.
Human beings are not meant to live in isolation.
Healthy development leads to something richer than independence.
It leads to interdependence.
Interdependent young adults think for themselves, make responsible decisions and manage their own lives, yet continue to value the wisdom, love and support of their families.
They do not rely on parents for every answer.
Neither do they feel they must face every challenge alone.
This is perhaps the healthiest expression of adulthood.
Parents who understand this transition discover something surprising.
As control decreases, influence often grows.

Young adults are far more likely to seek guidance from parents who respect their growing independence than from parents who insist on directing every decision.
Advice offered through trust is easier to receive than advice delivered through authority.
The relationship becomes less hierarchical and more collaborative.
Parents remain deeply important—not because they make decisions for their children, but because they become trusted guides in a world that is becoming increasingly complex.

Perhaps that is the true meaning of letting go.
Not loosening the bond.
But loosening the grip.
The bond remains.
In many families, it becomes stronger than ever.

Key Takeaway
Letting go does not mean becoming less important. It means changing from a manager of your child's life to a trusted guide in your child's journey. The goal of parenting during the IIT years is not to create dependence or complete independence, but confident interdependence—young adults who can stand on their own while always knowing they have a family that stands beside them.

5.2 From Control to Coaching

Guiding Without Taking Over

Most parents become effective managers long before they become effective coaches.
During childhood, management is essential. Parents organise daily routines, monitor homework, remind children about examinations, decide bedtimes and intervene whenever problems arise. Children need structure because they are still developing the ability to regulate themselves.
This approach works well when children are young.
It becomes less effective as they become young adults.
An IIT student is expected to make decisions every day—choosing courses, managing time, balancing academics with extracurricular activities, handling finances, resolving conflicts with friends and making career choices. These are not decisions that parents can make from a distance.
More importantly, they are not decisions that parents should make.
The purpose of parenting is not simply to help children make good decisions today.
It is to help them become adults who can make good decisions for the rest of their lives.
This requires a shift in the parent's role.
From manager to mentor.
From director to coach.
The difference is subtle, but profound.
A manager focuses on control.
A coach focuses on growth.
A manager gives answers.
A coach asks questions.
A manager measures success by immediate outcomes.
A coach is equally interested in the thinking that leads to those outcomes.
Imagine that your child is uncertain about accepting an internship.
The managerial response might sound like this:
"Take the internship. It's the better company."
The coaching response sounds different.
"What attracts you to each option?"
"What matters most to you at this stage of your career?"
"What concerns you about your decision?"
Notice what has changed.
The parent has not withdrawn.
The parent remains fully engaged.
But instead of making the decision, they are helping the young adult learn how to think through the decision.

This distinction matters because confidence grows through ownership.
Young adults are far more likely to take responsibility for decisions they have made themselves than for decisions made on their behalf.
Even when the outcome is not ideal, they learn something invaluable.
They learn judgement.(Ryan et al. 2016)
One of the greatest challenges for parents is resisting the urge to rescue.
When children struggle, every instinct tells parents to intervene.
A difficult roommate.
A disappointing grade.
A disagreement with a professor.
A failed interview.
Parents naturally want to solve the problem.
Yet solving every problem carries an unintended consequence.
It quietly communicates,
"You cannot handle this without me."
In contrast, coaching communicates something very different.
"I believe you can work through this. Let's think about it together."
That single shift transforms the conversation.
Young adults do not need parents who always provide solutions.
They need parents who strengthen their confidence to discover solutions.
Of course, coaching does not mean remaining silent.
Parents possess years of wisdom and experience that can be enormously valuable.
The difference lies in when and how that wisdom is shared.
Advice is often most effective after listening.
Not before.
A helpful pattern is to begin with curiosity.
"Tell me what happened."
"How are you thinking about this?"
"What options have you considered?"
Only then should parents ask,
"Would you like to hear what I think?"
This simple question respects autonomy.

It transforms advice from something imposed into something invited.
Young adults are remarkably receptive when they feel respected.
Another important aspect of coaching is allowing natural consequences to become teachers.
Not every mistake requires parental intervention.
Missing a deadline, underestimating the time needed for an assignment or making an imperfect decision often provides lessons that no lecture can match.
Experience is a powerful educator.
Parents who allow children to experience ordinary consequences are not neglecting them.
They are preparing them for adulthood.
There will, of course, be situations where parents must step in.
When safety is threatened, when emotional distress becomes overwhelming or when serious consequences are likely, guidance should become more direct.
The art of coaching lies in recognising the difference between moments that require protection and moments that require growth.
Perhaps the greatest compliment a parent can receive is not,
"You always solved my problems."
It is,
"You helped me believe I could solve them myself."

That confidence becomes one of the most enduring gifts a parent can give.

Key Takeaway
As children become young adults,
parents become most effective when they coach rather than control. By listening first, asking thoughtful questions and encouraging independent problem-solving, parents help their children develop judgement, confidence and responsibility. The aim is not to make every decision for your child, but to help your child become someone who can make wise decisions independently.

5.3 Learning to Make Decisions

Why Good Judgement Is More Valuable Than Good Advice

One of the greatest gifts parents can give their children is not the right answer.
It is the ability to find the right answer for themselves.
Life at IIT is filled with decisions.
Some appear small—which elective should I choose? Should I join this club? Is it worth applying for this internship?
Others carry greater significance—which career should I pursue? Should I prepare for higher studies or placements? Should I start a company with my friends? How do I balance ambition with well-being?
Unlike school examinations, these decisions do not come with model answers.
They require judgement.
Judgement is not something that suddenly appears at the age of eighteen.
It develops gradually through experience.
Every decision, whether successful or unsuccessful, teaches something about thinking, planning and accepting responsibility. Over time, these experiences shape maturity.
Parents naturally want to protect their children from making poor decisions.
After all, experience has taught them what can go wrong.
But there is an important distinction between preventing harm and preventing learning.
When parents make every important decision, children may make fewer mistakes.
Unfortunately, they also have fewer opportunities to develop judgement.
The ability to make wise decisions cannot be borrowed.
It must be built.
This is why allowing young adults to make age-appropriate decisions is so important.
The first independent budget.
The first disagreement with a roommate.
The first disappointing interview.
The first difficult career choice.
Each experience strengthens an essential psychological belief:
"I can think through problems and find my way."
Psychologists call this self-efficacy—the confidence that one can successfully manage life's challenges.
Self-efficacy is one of the predictors of resilience.
People who believe they can cope are more likely to approach problems, persist through difficulties and recover after setbacks.
Those who constantly depend on others to make decisions often doubt their own abilities when faced with uncertainty.
Confidence, therefore, is not built through praise alone.
It is built through experience.

Parents can nurture this confidence by changing the kinds of conversations they have with their children.
Instead of asking,
"Have you decided?"
they might ask,
"What factors are you considering?"
Instead of saying,
"I don't think that's a good idea,"
they might ask,
"What do you think could be the advantages and disadvantages of that choice?"
Questions like these encourage reflection rather than obedience.
They teach children how to think rather than what to think.
Of course, every decision carries the possibility of error.
That is not a flaw in the process.
It is part of the process.
Some of life's most valuable lessons emerge from decisions that did not work out as expected.
The student who joins too many activities learns the importance of balance.
The one who performs poorly after poor time management learns the value of planning.
The internship that proves disappointing often provides greater clarity about future career choices than the one that goes perfectly.
Experience becomes wisdom only when young adults are allowed to reflect upon it.
Parents can facilitate this reflection without becoming critical.
After a decision has been made, instead of asking,
"Why didn't you listen to me?"
they might ask,
"Looking back, what would you do differently next time?"
This simple question encourages insight rather than defensiveness.
It keeps the focus on learning instead of blame.
It is equally important to remember that wise decisions are not always perfect decisions.

Sometimes two reasonable options exist, each with its own advantages and disadvantages.
Mature decision-making involves accepting uncertainty rather than waiting for absolute certainty.
Young adults who understand this become more comfortable making thoughtful choices without fearing that every decision must be flawless.
Perhaps this is one of the greatest transitions of parenting.
Children once depended upon parents for answers.
Young adults increasingly depend upon parents for perspective.
Perspective broadens thinking.
It does not replace it.
Ultimately, the purpose of parenting is not to create children who always make the same decisions their parents would have made.
It is to raise adults who possess the judgement, confidence and integrity to make thoughtful decisions that reflect their own values.
That is the true measure of maturity.

Key Takeaway
Parents prepare children for life not by giving them every answer, but by helping them develop good judgement. Each independent decision—even those that lead to mistakes—is an opportunity to build confidence, wisdom and resilience. The goal is not to raise children who

always make perfect choices, but adults who can think carefully, learn continuously and take responsibility for the choices they make.

5.4 Freedom, Boundaries and Responsibility

Finding the Balance Between Trust and Guidance

Every parent eventually faces a difficult question.
"How much freedom should I give my child?"
There is no single answer.
Too little freedom can leave young adults feeling controlled and unprepared for adult life. Too much freedom, without guidance or accountability, can leave them feeling unsupported and overwhelmed.
Healthy parenting lies somewhere in between.
Freedom is often misunderstood.
Some equate it with the absence of rules.
Others see it as the absence of parental involvement.
In reality, freedom is most meaningful when it is accompanied by responsibility.
These two cannot be separated.

An IIT student has the freedom to decide how to spend time, manage money, organise studies and build relationships. At the same time, those choices carry consequences. Freedom without responsibility becomes impulsiveness. Responsibility without freedom becomes control.
The challenge for parents is not deciding whether children should have freedom.
It is helping them learn how to use it wisely.
This requires boundaries.
Unfortunately, the word boundary is often misunderstood.
Many people think boundaries are restrictions.
Psychologically, boundaries are guides.
They define expectations while still respecting autonomy.
Healthy boundaries answer an important question:
"What does responsible adulthood look like?"
For example, parents may no longer decide when their child goes to bed, but they can discuss the importance of sleep and its impact on health and academic performance.
They may not choose their child's friends, but they can talk openly about healthy relationships, mutual respect and recognising unhealthy influences.
They cannot monitor every online activity, yet they can encourage responsible digital behaviour and thoughtful use of social media.
Boundaries become conversations rather than commands.
This change is important because young adults are more likely to accept expectations they understand than rules imposed without explanation.
Another area that often requires adjustment is privacy.
Many parents struggle when children begin keeping parts of their lives to themselves.
The instinct is to ask more questions.
To seek more information.
To remain closely involved.
Yet privacy is a normal part of becoming an adult.
Privacy should not automatically be interpreted as secrecy.
Healthy young adults develop personal thoughts, friendships and experiences that they may choose to share gradually rather than immediately.

Respecting appropriate privacy communicates trust.
At the same time, trust does not mean complete disengagement.
Parents continue to show interest.
They remain emotionally available.
They ask questions with curiosity rather than suspicion.
They create an atmosphere in which children choose to share rather than feel compelled to report.
Perhaps the most important balance is between availability and intrusion.
Young adults need to know that support is always accessible.
They also need the confidence that parents believe they can manage ordinary challenges independently.
This balance allows them to develop responsibility without feeling abandoned.
There will inevitably be occasions when children make choices that parents disagree with.
These moments test the relationship.
The immediate impulse may be to insist, persuade or even argue.
Sometimes this is necessary when safety is at risk.
More often, however, respectful dialogue is far more effective than prolonged conflict.
Young adults learn not only from the advice parents give but also from the way disagreements are handled.
When parents remain calm, respectful and open to discussion, they teach emotional maturity by example.
The goal is not to eliminate differences of opinion.
It is to preserve connection despite those differences.
Ultimately, freedom is not the destination.
Responsible freedom is.
Young adults who understand that every choice carries responsibility become better prepared for life beyond IIT.
They learn that independence is not simply the right to make decisions.
It is also the willingness to accept the consequences of those decisions.
Parents contribute to this growth by offering guidance without control, boundaries without rigidity and trust without withdrawal.
That balance creates confident adults who know they are free to make their own choices—and responsible enough to live with them.

Key Takeaway
Freedom and responsibility grow together. Parents best prepare young adults for life by replacing rigid control with thoughtful boundaries, respecting privacy while remaining emotionally available and trusting them with increasing responsibility. The goal is not unrestricted freedom, but the wisdom to use freedom responsibly.

5.5 Raising Confident Adults

When Parents Trust, Children Grow

Every parent begins the journey hoping to raise a successful child.
Over time, many discover that success is only part of the story.
The greater challenge is raising a confident adult.
Confidence is often misunderstood.
It is not loudness.
It is not arrogance.
It is not believing that one will always succeed.

True confidence is quieter.
It is the belief that whatever life brings, "I can find a way through it."
This belief does not develop overnight.
Nor is it built by constant praise.

It grows slowly, through experiences of being trusted, making decisions, learning from mistakes and knowing that one is supported even when things do not go according to plan.
Throughout this chapter, we have explored how autonomy-supportive parenting helps young adults develop this confidence. Parents gradually shift from directing to guiding, from solving problems to strengthening problem-solving skills and from protecting children from every difficulty to preparing them for life's inevitable challenges.
This transition is not always easy.
Parents often worry,
"What if my child makes the wrong decision?"
The truth is that every adult, regardless of intelligence or experience, occasionally makes poor decisions.
The goal of parenting is not to prevent every mistake.
It is to ensure that children develop the wisdom to recover from mistakes, learn from them and make better decisions in the future.
Confidence grows every time a young adult realises,
"I handled that."
It may be resolving a disagreement with a roommate.
Managing finances for the first time.
Recovering after a disappointing examination.
Navigating a difficult friendship.
Making an important career decision.
Each challenge successfully faced becomes evidence that they are capable.
This confidence is far more durable than confidence based solely on praise or achievement.
It is confidence earned through experience.
Parents contribute to this process in another important way.
They model how adults respond to uncertainty.
Children continue to observe their parents long after childhood has ended.
They notice how parents handle setbacks, disagreements, unexpected changes and stressful situations.
Parents who remain calm under pressure, admit mistakes, apologise when necessary and adapt to changing circumstances quietly teach emotional maturity.
Children learn resilience not only from what parents say, but from how parents live.
Perhaps the greatest sign that parenting is evolving successfully is not that children need their parents less.
It is that they choose to keep their parents close.
The phone calls may become less frequent than during school.
Decisions may increasingly be made independently.
Yet the relationship remains strong because it is built on trust rather than dependence.
Young adults who feel respected continue to seek advice.
Not because they are unable to decide.
But because they value the wisdom of people who have always believed in them.
This is the lasting reward of autonomy-supportive parenting.
Parents do not lose their place in their children's lives.
They earn a different one.
They become trusted mentors.
Trusted confidants.

Trusted companions in adulthood.
Looking back, children rarely remember every instruction their parents gave.
They remember how those instructions made them feel.
Did they leave conversations feeling capable or inadequate?
Trusted or controlled?
Respected or judged?
These emotional memories shape the relationship for years to come.
As children become adults, one truth becomes increasingly clear.
Parents cannot walk every step of the journey for them.
But they can give them something even more valuable.
The confidence to walk the journey themselves.
That is the true purpose of autonomy.
Not separation.
But strength.
Not distance.
But trust.
Not losing the parent-child relationship.
But allowing it to mature into one of the most meaningful relationships of adult life.

Key Takeaway
The ultimate goal of parenting is not to raise successful children, but confident, responsible and emotionally secure adults. When parents trust young adults, respect their growing independence and remain available without taking over, they help them develop the confidence to face life's challenges with courage. The greatest measure of successful parenting is not that children always need their parents, but that they always know they can turn to them.

Chapter 6

F – A Failure-Friendly Mindset
Turning Setbacks into Strength

Clinical Perspectives from the IIT Mental Health Team

During periods of setback, students consistently describe needing emotional reassurance before practical advice. They benefit most when parents are able to sit with their disappointment, acknowledge their feelings and help them view failure as part of learning rather than as a reflection of their worth. They also repeatedly express how damaging comparisons with relatives, friends or classmates can be. Recognising effort, perseverance and recovery often matters more than focusing solely on outcomes.

6.1 Redefining Failure

Why Setbacks Are Essential for Growth

Few experiences are as emotionally painful for a high-achieving student as failure.
Not because failure is uncommon.
But because it is unfamiliar.
Many IIT students have spent years succeeding. They were among the highest performers in school, excelled in competitive examinations and were repeatedly recognised for their hard work and ability. Success gradually became part of their identity.
Then, one day, they encounter a setback.
Perhaps they fail an examination.
Perhaps they are rejected for an internship.
Perhaps they do not secure the research opportunity they had hoped for.
Perhaps they watch friends receive placement offers while they continue waiting.
Objectively, these are disappointments.
Psychologically, they can feel much larger.
For many students, failure is interpreted not as something that happened, but as something they have become.

"I failed" quietly becomes "I am a failure."
This shift—from seeing failure as an event to seeing it as an identity—is one of the greatest psychological risks faced by high achievers.
The reality is very different.
Failure is an experience.
It is never an identity.
Every meaningful achievement carries with it the possibility of disappointment. Every scientist has conducted experiments that did not work. Every entrepreneur has invested time and effort into ideas that failed. Every researcher has faced rejection. Every successful professional has encountered moments when things did not go according to plan.
Progress has never depended on avoiding failure.
It has depended on learning from it.
Yet our educational system often celebrates success while remaining silent about the setbacks that precede it.

Parents proudly display medals and certificates.
Very few display rejection letters.
As a result, children may grow up believing that successful people rarely fail.
They do not see the unseen years of persistence, revision and resilience that make success possible.
One of the greatest gifts parents can offer is helping children develop a healthier understanding of failure.
Failure does not erase previous achievements.
It does not predict future success.
Nor does it determine a person's worth.
It simply provides information.
It tells us that something did not work as expected.
Nothing more.
Nothing less.
This way of thinking transforms setbacks.

Instead of asking,
"Why did I fail?"
young adults begin asking,
"What can this experience teach me?"
That question changes everything.
It replaces shame with curiosity.
Blame with learning.
Hopelessness with possibility.
This does not mean pretending that failure is pleasant.
Disappointment hurts.
Rejection hurts.
Loss hurts.
Parents need not minimise these emotions by saying,
"It's not a big deal."
To the young person experiencing it, it is a very big deal.
Acknowledging disappointment is not the same as encouraging despair.
Parents can say,
"I know how much this mattered to you."
"It's okay to feel disappointed."
"Let's give ourselves a little time before deciding what comes next."
These simple responses communicate empathy while gently directing attention towards recovery.
Children also learn how to interpret failure by watching their parents.
Parents who openly acknowledge their own mistakes, adapt when plans change and speak about setbacks without shame teach resilience more effectively than any lecture ever could.
They demonstrate that competent adults are not people who never fail.
They are people who know how to recover.
Perhaps this is the most important lesson of all.
The opposite of failure is not success.
The opposite of failure is refusing to try.
Young adults who fear failure often begin avoiding opportunities that stretch them.
They apply only for positions they are certain they will obtain.
They avoid asking questions for fear of appearing uninformed.
They remain within the safety of what they already know.
Growth quietly stops.

In contrast, young adults who understand that failure is part of learning become more willing to take meaningful risks.
They attempt difficult projects.
They explore unfamiliar ideas.
They accept challenges that may not always end in success.
Ironically, these are often the very individuals who accomplish the most over time.
Because they understand that every setback is not the end of the journey.
It is simply another step within it.
As parents, we cannot remove disappointment from our children's lives.
Nor should we.
What we can do is help them interpret disappointment in a way that strengthens rather than diminishes them.
When children learn that failure is a teacher rather than a judge, they stop fearing it.
And when they stop fearing failure, they become free to pursue excellence with
courage rather than anxiety.

Key Takeaway
Failure is an event, not an identity. Every setback offers an opportunity to learn, adapt and grow. Parents who respond to disappointment with empathy, perspective and hope help their children understand that success is not defined by never failing, but by having the courage to learn, recover and begin again.

6.2 When Expectations Become Pressure

Helping Without Overwhelming

Every parent has expectations.
In many ways, expectations are an expression of hope.
They reflect a parent's belief in a child's abilities and potential. They communicate confidence, encourage effort and inspire young people to aim higher than they might otherwise have imagined.
Healthy expectations can be a powerful source of motivation.
The difficulty arises when hope is experienced as pressure.
The difference does not lie in how ambitious the expectations are.
It lies in how they are communicated and how they are interpreted.
Many parents tell their children,
"We know you can do this."
Children sometimes hear,
"You must not disappoint us."
Parents say,
"We want the best for you."
Children hear,
"Only the best is good enough."
The gap between intention and interpretation can be surprisingly wide.
High-achieving students are particularly vulnerable to this misunderstanding.
Many have spent years trying not only to achieve success, but also to justify the sacrifices their families made on their behalf. They remember the coaching classes, the long hours of study, the financial commitments and the emotional investment of parents who believed in them without hesitation.
Gratitude gradually becomes responsibility.

Responsibility sometimes becomes pressure.
Without anyone saying so explicitly, children begin carrying an invisible burden.
"I cannot let my parents down."
Unlike pressure imposed by others, this pressure often comes from within.
Psychologists refer to this as internalised pressure.
It is no longer necessary for parents to remind children to study or work hard. The expectations have become part of the child's own internal dialogue.
This explains why many IIT students continue working long after exhaustion has set in.
They are not merely trying to succeed.
They are trying to avoid the painful feeling of falling short.
Parents are often surprised to discover that their children place far greater demands upon themselves than anyone else ever has.
This is why reassurance from parents remains so important.
Sometimes children need to hear that their parents value effort, integrity and well-being as much as outcomes.
One of the simplest ways to reduce unhealthy pressure is to shift the focus of conversations.
Instead of asking,
"What was your result?"
parents might ask,
"How do you feel about the effort you put in?"
Instead of saying,
"You should have scored higher,"
they might ask,
"What did you learn from this experience?"
Such questions communicate that growth matters as much as performance.
Another source of pressure comes from comparison.
Questions such as,
"How did your friends perform?"
"Who got the highest package?"
or
"Has everyone else already been placed?"
are usually asked out of curiosity.
Yet they can unintentionally reinforce the belief that success is meaningful only when measured against others.
The healthiest form of achievement is not competing with classmates.
It is becoming a little better than one was yesterday.
Parents also need to recognise that ambition and acceptance can coexist.
Supporting a child's aspirations does not require making love or approval dependent upon outcomes.
It is entirely possible to encourage excellence while making one message unmistakably clear:
"Whatever happens, we are with you."
That sentence has remarkable psychological power.
It transforms expectations from a burden into a source of encouragement.
Children work hard because they are inspired, not because they are afraid.
Perhaps the most important question parents can ask themselves is not,
"Do I have expectations?"
Every parent does.
The better question is,
"When my child falls short of those expectations, what do they experience from me first—pressure or support?"

The answer to that question often determines whether children approach future challenges with confidence or with fear.
High expectations build achievement.
Unconditional support builds resilience.
Young adults need both.
When these are held in balance, expectations become a ladder that helps children climb rather than a weight they carry on their shoulders.

Key Takeaway
Expectations become harmful not because they are high, but because they are experienced as conditions for acceptance. Parents can inspire excellence while protecting emotional well-being by communicating one consistent message: "We believe in your potential, but our love and support will never depend on your performance." When encouragement replaces pressure, children strive for success with confidence instead of fear.

6.3 The Language of Resilience

What Parents Say After Failure Matters

Parents often remember the day their child succeeded.
Children often remember what their parents said when they failed.
A disappointing examination result.
A rejected internship application.
An unsuccessful placement interview.
A missed opportunity.
These moments are emotionally significant not only because of the outcome, but because they shape the story young adults tell themselves.
"I'm not good enough."
"I always disappoint people."
"Maybe I don't belong here."
Or,
"This hurts, but I can recover."
"I can learn from this."
"One setback doesn't define me."
Parents may not realise it, but the words they choose in these moments often influence which of these stories takes root.
When children experience failure, their brains are already processing disappointment, self-doubt and uncertainty. In those moments, they are usually less interested in advice than in emotional reassurance.
Before children are ready to solve the problem, they need to know that the relationship is safe.
Many parents respond immediately with practical questions.
"What happened?"
"Did you prepare enough?"
"What will you do now?"
These are reasonable questions.
The difficulty is their timing.
When asked too early, they may be experienced as an evaluation rather than support.
The first response after failure need not be profound.
Often, the simplest words are the most powerful.

"I'm sorry this happened."
"I know how much this meant to you."
"Thank you for telling me."
"I'm here with you."
These statements do not minimise disappointment.
They acknowledge it.
Only after emotions have settled does the mind become ready to think clearly.
That is when parents can gently shift the conversation from emotion to reflection.
Instead of asking,
"Why did you fail?"
consider asking,
"What do you think made this difficult?"
Instead of saying,
"You should have..."
try,
"What would you like to do differently next time?"
One invites defensiveness.
The other encourages insight.
The goal is not to analyse failure immediately.
It is to help children learn from it without feeling defined by it.
There is another habit that deserves careful attention.
Comparison.
Parents sometimes say,
"Your friend managed to get through."
"Your cousin faced the same exam and did well."
Such statements are usually intended to motivate.
Instead, they often produce shame.
Children stop focusing on improvement and begin focusing on inadequacy.
The comparison they need is not with someone else's journey.
It is with their own.
"What have you learned since the last time?"
"How have you grown?"
These questions encourage progress rather than competition.
Parents should also resist the temptation to rescue children from every uncomfortable emotion.
Sadness after disappointment is normal.
So is frustration.
So is temporary self-doubt.
The role of parents is not to remove these emotions immediately but to help children move through them safely.
Sometimes sitting quietly beside a disappointed child communicates more than a lengthy speech.
Presence is often more healing than persuasion.
There is another message worth repeating throughout the years.
"One result can influence your future, but it can never define your future."
Young adults who hear this consistently begin to develop a more balanced view of success and failure.
They understand that a setback may change a plan, but it does not diminish their potential.
Ultimately, resilience is built one conversation at a time.
Every setback presents parents with an opportunity to teach something that no textbook can.
That mistakes are survivable.
That disappointment is temporary.
That hope can coexist with hardship.

And that love remains constant, regardless of the outcome.
Long after the details of an examination have faded from memory, children often remember one thing clearly.
How their parents made them feel.

Key Takeaway
The first conversation after failure is often more important than the failure itself. When parents respond with empathy before advice, curiosity before criticism and
hope before judgement, children learn that setbacks are moments for growth rather than sources of shame. The language of resilience reminds young adults that while failure is part of life, it never has the final word.

6.4 Helping Children Recover After Setbacks

From Self-Criticism to Self-Compassion

Failure does not end when the examination is over.
Nor does it end when the rejection email arrives.
For many young adults, the most difficult battle begins afterwards.
It takes place not in the classroom or the interview room, but within their own minds.
High-achieving students are often their own harshest critics.
They replay conversations repeatedly.
They analyse every mistake.
They imagine how things could have been different.
They question their abilities.
Some even begin to question their future.
The disappointment they experienced from the outside gradually becomes self-criticism on the inside.
"I should have worked harder."
"I'm not good enough."
"I always let people down."
"Maybe I don't deserve to be here."
These thoughts can be far more damaging than the setback itself.
Parents naturally want to help.
Yet the first instinct is often to encourage children to "move on."
"Forget about it."
"Don't think about it anymore."
"Focus on the next opportunity."
Although well intentioned, recovery rarely happens by ignoring emotions.
Before young adults can move forward, they first need permission to acknowledge what they have lost.
Every setback involves a sense of loss.
The loss of an opportunity.
The loss of an expectation.
Sometimes, the loss of confidence.
These losses deserve to be recognised.
Not magnified.
Not dismissed.
Simply acknowledged.
Once disappointment is accepted, recovery can begin.

Parents play an important role in helping children move from self-criticism to self-compassion.
Self-compassion is often misunderstood.
It is not making excuses.
It is not lowering standards.
It is not telling children that effort no longer matters.
Self-compassion means responding to one's own mistakes with the same kindness one would naturally extend to a close friend(Neff,2003)
Imagine your child comes home after a disappointing interview.
Would you say,
"You're hopeless. You'll never succeed."
Of course not.
Yet many young adults say exactly these words to themselves.
Parents can gently interrupt this pattern.
Instead of reinforcing harsh self-judgement, they can encourage balanced reflection.
"One interview cannot define your abilities."
"This experience is painful, but it is also temporary."
"Let's think about what this experience can teach you."
These conversations help children develop a healthier relationship with themselves.
Recovery also requires perspective.

When disappointment fills the mind, it becomes difficult to see the larger picture.
Parents often provide this perspective.
Not by minimising the setback, but by reminding children that life is much bigger than a single examination, internship or placement season.
Many successful professionals look back and recognise that some of the greatest disappointments of their youth eventually redirected them towards unexpected opportunities.
At the time, however, they could not see that possibility.
Parents become the keepers of hope until children are able to rediscover hope for themselves.
There is another important lesson to teach.
Recovery is not immediate.
Some children need a few hours.
Others need several days.
A few may require weeks before they regain confidence.
Healing follows its own pace.
Parents should resist the temptation to rush the process.
What matters is not how quickly children recover.
It is that they continue moving forward.
Sometimes that movement is very small.
Completing one assignment.
Attending one class.
Preparing for one interview.
Small steps gradually restore confidence because each step provides evidence that progress remains possible.
Parents can celebrate these efforts just as they celebrate outcomes.
Not every setback requires professional help.
However, if disappointment remains intense for weeks, is accompanied by persistent hopelessness, withdrawal, marked changes in sleep or appetite, loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities or thoughts of self-harm, parents should encourage a professional mental health assessment without hesitation.
Seeking help is not a sign that resilience has failed.
It is part of resilience.

Ultimately, every young adult will experience disappointment.
The question is not whether failure will occur.
The question is what happens afterwards.
Children who learn to treat themselves with compassion rather than condemnation become more willing to try again.
They discover that setbacks may slow the journey.
They do not have to end it.

Key Takeaway
Recovery begins when children stop judging themselves and start understanding themselves. Parents can foster resilience by validating disappointment, encouraging self-compassion and gently restoring hope. A setback may interrupt the journey, but it never determines the destination. The courage to begin again is often the greatest lesson failure can teach.

6.5 Raising Courage Instead of Perfection

The Freedom to Try, Fail and Grow

As parents, we often ask ourselves an important question.
"What do I want my child to become?"
The answers usually include words like successful, responsible, kind, independent and happy.
Rarely do we answer,
"I want my child to become courageous."
Yet courage may be the quality that makes all the others possible.
Every meaningful achievement requires courage.
The courage to attempt something difficult.
The courage to ask a question.
The courage to admit, "I don't know."
The courage to begin again after disappointment.
Without courage, talent remains unused.
Potential remains unrealised.
Dreams remain unattempted.

Unfortunately, perfectionism often becomes the greatest enemy of courage.
Children who believe they must succeed every time gradually become afraid of situations where success is uncertain. They choose familiar paths instead of challenging ones. They remain within their comfort zones because the possibility of failure feels too threatening.
Their goal quietly changes.
Instead of trying to learn, they begin trying not to fail.
Growth slows.
Not because they lack ability.
Because fear has become stronger than curiosity.
Parents have the remarkable opportunity to shape a different mindset.
A mindset that values courage over perfection.
This begins with changing what we celebrate.
Achievement deserves recognition.
So does effort.
So does honesty.
So does persistence after disappointment.

When children hear parents say,
"I'm proud that you had the courage to try,"
they begin to understand that success is not measured only by outcomes.
It is also measured by character.
This does not mean lowering standards.
Excellence remains a worthy goal.

The difference is that excellence becomes a direction rather than a condition for self-worth.
Children continue striving for high standards, but they are no longer paralysed by the possibility of making mistakes.
They become learners instead of performers.
The most resilient young adults are not those who experience the fewest failures.
They are those who recover, reflect and return with greater wisdom.
This is true not only in academics but throughout life.
Careers change.
Relationships evolve.
Plans fail.
Unexpected opportunities appear.
People who approach life with courage rather than perfection adapt more effectively because they understand that uncertainty is not something to fear.
It is something to navigate.
Parents also influence courage by the way they speak about their own lives.
When children hear stories only about success, they assume successful people never struggled.
When parents share moments of disappointment, uncertainty and recovery, they teach an invaluable lesson.
Strong people are not people who never fall.
They are people who continue walking after they have fallen.
Perhaps that is the greatest legacy parents can leave.
Not children who are afraid of making mistakes.
But adults who are confident enough to face challenges, secure enough to ask for help and resilient enough to keep growing throughout life.
As we conclude this chapter, it is worth remembering that failure-friendly parenting is not about making failure comfortable.
Failure will always disappoint.
It is about making recovery possible.
It is about ensuring that children never confuse a disappointing outcome with a disappointing life.
The SAFE Framework reminds us that resilience is built long before crisis occurs.
A Secure Base gives children emotional safety.
Autonomy Support gives them confidence to make decisions.
A Failure-Friendly Mindset gives them the courage to learn from setbacks.
Together, these qualities prepare young adults not merely to achieve success, but to sustain it with emotional well-being.

In the next chapter, we turn to the final pillar of the SAFE Framework—Early Recognition. Even in the healthiest families, emotional difficulties can arise. Parents who recognise the early signs of distress and respond with empathy rather than fear can make a profound difference in their child's recovery.

Key Takeaway

The goal of parenting is not to raise children who are afraid to fail, but adults who are courageous enough to keep trying. When parents celebrate effort, resilience, honesty and growth alongside achievement, they create young adults who pursue
excellence with confidence rather than fear. Perfection may produce impressive results, but courage builds meaningful lives.

Chapter 7

E – Early Recognition
Seeing the Signs, Starting the Conversation.

Clinical Perspectives from the IIT Mental Health Team

Students frequently conceal academic setbacks, emotional distress and even significant mental health difficulties because they worry about burdening or disappointing their parents. Many fear that their struggles will be dismissed, misunderstood or met with immediate advice rather than empathy. Clinical experience suggests that emotional distress is often hidden behind continued academic functioning, making subtle changes in behaviour, communication and emotional expression important early warning signs.

7.1 When Stress Becomes More Than Stress

Recognising the Difference Between Normal Struggles and Emotional Distress

Every parent worries.
When a child leaves home to join an IIT, those worries often become quieter but more persistent.
"Is my child eating well?"
"Are they getting enough sleep?"
"Are they coping with the workload?"
"How will I know if something is wrong?"
These are natural questions.
The challenge is that parents no longer witness their child's daily life. They are no longer present to notice subtle changes in mood, behaviour or routine. Instead, they rely on phone calls, messages and occasional visits home to understand how their child is coping.
This uncertainty can be unsettling.
It is important, however, to begin with a reassuring truth.
Not every difficult emotion is a mental health problem.

Stress is a normal part of life.
Feeling anxious before an examination is normal.
Missing home during the first semester is normal.
Feeling disappointed after poor grades is normal.
Experiencing uncertainty about career choices is normal.
These emotions are not signs of weakness.
They are part of being human.
In fact, some degree of stress is not only expected but helpful.

It sharpens attention, motivates preparation and helps us respond to challenges. Most students experience periods of increased stress during examinations, project deadlines or placement season, and most recover once these pressures pass.
The concern arises when stress no longer passes.
When sadness refuses to lift.
When anxiety begins to dominate everyday life.

When motivation disappears.

When the child you know no longer seems like themselves.
This is one of the most important principles for parents to remember.
Do not focus only on symptoms.
Focus on change.
Parents know their children better than anyone else.
You know who is naturally quiet and who is usually talkative.
You know who enjoys socialising and who prefers solitude.
You know what brings your child joy, how they respond to disappointment and what "normal" looks like for them.
Early recognition begins by noticing when that normal changes.
Perhaps your daughter, who usually enjoys speaking with the family every weekend, suddenly becomes unusually withdrawn.
Perhaps your son, who has always been enthusiastic about learning, begins expressing indifference towards everything.
Perhaps conversations become noticeably shorter, enthusiasm disappears or there is a persistent sense that something is "not quite right."
These changes deserve attention.
Not panic.

One of the common mistakes parents make is looking for a single dramatic warning sign.
Mental health difficulties rarely begin that way.
More often, they develop gradually.
Small changes accumulate over time.
Energy decreases.
Sleep becomes irregular.
Appetite changes.
Social interactions become less frequent.
Academic work begins to suffer.
Hope slowly gives way to helplessness.
The earlier these changes are recognised, the easier it is to offer support.
Parents should also remember that emotional distress does not always look like sadness.
Some young adults become irritable rather than tearful.
Others become unusually quiet.
Some throw themselves into work, hoping that constant activity will distract them from emotional pain.
Others begin avoiding responsibilities altogether.

Every child expresses distress differently.
This is why comparison with others is rarely helpful.
Compare your child only with themselves.
Ask,
"Is this a significant change from how my child usually thinks, feels or behaves?"
If the answer is yes, it is worth becoming curious.
Curiosity is more helpful than assumption.
Instead of concluding,
"Something is seriously wrong,"
or,
"It's just a phase,"
parents can begin with a simpler question.
"I've noticed you've seemed different lately. How have you really been?"
Sometimes that single conversation is enough.

Sometimes it opens the door to understanding a struggle that has remained hidden for weeks.
The purpose of early recognition is not to label children or diagnose illnesses.
That is the role of mental health professionals.
The role of parents is different.
It is to notice.
To remain emotionally available.
To ask with kindness.
To listen without judgement.
And, when needed, to help their child access appropriate support.
Just as recognising a persistent fever allows early medical treatment, recognising persistent emotional distress allows timely psychological support.
In both cases, early attention often leads to better outcomes.
Parents do not need to become experts in mental illness.
They simply need to remain experts on their own child.
That may be the most important expertise of all.

Key Takeaway
Stress is a normal part of growing, learning and achieving. The concern is not whether your child experiences stress, but whether they continue to recover from it. Parents do not need to diagnose mental health problems—they need to notice meaningful changes, stay connected and begin compassionate conversations early.

7.2 The Signs Parents Should Never Ignore

Behaviour Is Often the First Clue

Parents sometimes expect emotional distress to announce itself dramatically.
In reality, it rarely does.
More often, it whispers before it shouts.
The first signs are usually subtle. A child who once called regularly begins avoiding conversations. A naturally enthusiastic student sounds emotionally flat. Someone who was always organised begins missing deadlines. These changes are easy to dismiss individually.
Together, they may tell an important story.
This is why parents should pay attention not only to what their children say, but also to how they are changing.
One of the earliest changes is often found in behaviour.
A student who previously enjoyed spending time with friends may begin withdrawing from social activities. Someone who actively participated in clubs, sports or hobbies may gradually lose interest. Phone calls become shorter, messages become less frequent and conversations become limited to practical matters.
Not every quiet period is a cause for concern.
The concern arises when these changes are persistent, unexplained and represent a clear departure from the child's usual personality.

Emotions may also begin to change.
Parents may notice that their child sounds persistently sad, unusually irritable or emotionally exhausted. Some students become increasingly anxious about situations that previously did not trouble them. Others appear emotionally numb, responding to both good and bad news with the same lack of enthusiasm.

Sometimes the most noticeable change is a loss of hope.
Statements such as,
"Nothing seems to matter anymore."
"What's the point?"
"I don't think I'll ever be good enough."
should never be dismissed as casual remarks.
Young adults do not always ask for help directly.
Sometimes they reveal their distress through the way they speak about themselves and their future.
Changes in daily routines can provide equally valuable clues.
Persistent sleep difficulties, sleeping excessively, marked changes in appetite, neglect of personal hygiene or ongoing physical complaints without an obvious medical explanation may all reflect emotional distress rather than simply poor habits.
Academic functioning may also change.
An occasional poor examination result is part of student life.
A sustained decline in attendance, repeated inability to complete assignments, loss of motivation or a noticeable drop in performance despite continued effort deserves attention.
The goal is not to become alarmed by every setback.
It is to recognise when ordinary academic stress begins affecting overall functioning.
Parents should also be attentive to unhealthy ways of coping.
Some students begin isolating themselves.
Others may increasingly rely on alcohol or other substances to manage stress. Some become excessively absorbed in gaming, social media or other activities that provide temporary escape while gradually distancing them from everyday responsibilities. These behaviours may not always indicate a mental health disorder.
They do indicate that the student may not be coping well.
Among all warning signs, perhaps the most important are expressions of hopelessness or thoughts about death or self-harm.
Parents sometimes worry that asking about such thoughts may put ideas into a child's mind.

Research has consistently shown that this fear is unfounded. Evidence indicates that asking directly and sensitively about suicidal thoughts does not increase suicidal ideation or suicidal behaviour. Such conversations can facilitate disclosure and access to appropriate support (Dazzi et al., 2014)
If your child talks about feeling that life is not worth living, expresses thoughts of self-harm or suicide, gives away valued possessions, says goodbye in unusual ways or suddenly becomes calm after a prolonged period of severe distress, these signs should always be taken seriously.
Do not assume they are seeking attention.
Do not wait to see whether things improve.
Seek professional help immediately and remain with your child until appropriate support is available.
Remember, no single sign tells the whole story.
It is the pattern, the persistence and the change from your child's usual behaviour that matter most.
When in doubt, choose connection over assumption.

Key Takeaway
Parents are not expected to diagnose mental health conditions. Their role is to notice meaningful changes in behaviour, emotions, relationships and daily functioning. When these changes persist or are accompanied by hopelessness or thoughts of self-harm, respond with compassion, begin

an open conversation and seek professional help promptly. Early recognition can change the course of recovery.

7.3 Starting Difficult Conversations

How to Ask So Your Child Feels Safe to Answer

For many parents, recognising that something is wrong is only the beginning.
The more difficult question is often,
"How do I talk to my child without making things worse?"
This fear is understandable.
Parents worry that they may say the wrong thing, ask too many questions or unintentionally push their child further away.
As a result, many delay the conversation.
They wait for a better time.
They hope the problem will resolve on its own.
Unfortunately, emotional distress often grows in silence.
The most important step is simply to begin.
Not with advice.
Not with assumptions.
But with curiosity and compassion.
A conversation about mental health should feel different from an interrogation.
Young adults are far more likely to open up when they feel understood than when they feel questioned.
Instead of beginning with,
"What's wrong with you?"
or,
"Why have you changed?"
try beginning with an observation.
"I've noticed you haven't sounded like yourself lately."
"You seem more tired than usual."
"I've been thinking about you because you seem quieter these days."
Observations are less threatening than conclusions.
They invite conversation rather than defensiveness.
Once the conversation begins, resist the urge to fill every silence.
Parents often become uncomfortable when children do not respond immediately.
They ask another question.
Then another.
Sometimes silence simply means the young person is deciding whether it feels safe enough to speak.
Give them that space.
Listening is more important than talking.
When children do begin to share, avoid interrupting with reassurance too quickly.
A parent who immediately says,
"Don't worry."
"Everything will be fine."
or,
"You're overthinking."
is trying to reduce suffering.
But the child may hear something different.

"You don't understand how I feel."
A more helpful response is to acknowledge the emotion before addressing the problem.
"That sounds really difficult."
"I can understand why you're feeling overwhelmed."
"Thank you for trusting me with this."
Validation is not the same as agreement.
It simply communicates that another person's emotional experience makes sense.
Many parents also feel compelled to solve the problem immediately.
This is natural.
Parents have spent years protecting their children.
Yet young adults often need something before they need solutions.
They need to feel heard.
Sometimes the most supportive question is,
"What would be most helpful for you right now?"
The answer may surprise you.
It may not be advice.
It may simply be someone willing to listen.
Parents should also be prepared for the response,
"I'm fine."
These two words can mean many different things.
Sometimes they genuinely mean everything is alright.
At other times they mean,
"I'm not ready to talk."
Avoid turning this into a confrontation.
Instead, leave the door open.
"I understand. I just wanted you to know that if anything is bothering you, I'm always here to listen."
Young adults often return to conversations when they know there is no pressure.
One conversation is rarely enough.
Building emotional safety is an ongoing process.
Check in again after a few days.
Send a simple message.
"Just thinking about you."
"Hope today has been a little easier."
"Call whenever you feel like talking."
These small gestures communicate something powerful.
"You don't have to carry this alone."
There are, however, times when parents need to ask direct questions.
If your child expresses hopelessness, talks about life not being worth living or gives you reason to believe they may be thinking about harming themselves, do not avoid the subject.
Ask calmly and directly.
"Sometimes when people feel this overwhelmed, they think about hurting themselves or feel that life isn't worth living. Have you been having thoughts like that?"
Many parents fear that asking this question will introduce the idea.
Research consistently shows that it does not.
Instead, it often provides relief.
It tells young adults that they do not have to hide their most
frightening thoughts.
If the answer is yes, remain calm.
Listen.
Stay with your child.

Seek professional help immediately.
You do not have to manage the situation alone.
Perhaps the most important thing to remember is this.
Children do not expect perfect words.
They hope for a safe person.
Parents who approach difficult conversations with patience, humility and genuine curiosity often discover that the relationship itself becomes part of the healing process.
Sometimes healing begins not with advice.
But with the simple feeling of finally being understood.

Key Takeaway
Difficult conversations begin with curiosity, grow through listening and deepen through compassion. Parents do not need the perfect words; they need a willingness to notice, ask, listen and remain emotionally present. When children feel safe enough to speak honestly, the conversation itself often becomes the first step towards healing.

7.4 When and How to Seek Professional Help

Asking for Help Is a Sign of Strength

One of the greatest misconceptions about mental health is that seeking professional help means that a person has failed to cope.
Nothing could be further from the truth.
When a child develops persistent fever, severe asthma or uncontrolled diabetes, parents do not hesitate to consult a physician. They recognise that early treatment improves outcomes and prevents complications.
Mental health deserves the same approach.
Seeking help is not a sign of weakness.It is a sign of wisdom.
Many emotional difficulties experienced by young adults respond well to timely intervention. Anxiety disorders, depression, adjustment difficulties, sleep problems, burnout and stress-related conditions are all highly treatable. The earlier support is provided, the greater the likelihood of recovery and the less disruption to academic, social and emotional functioning.
One question parents often ask is,
"When should I seek professional help?"

A useful principle is this: Seek help when emotional distress is persistent, severe or begins interfering with daily life.
If sadness continues for weeks without improvement, anxiety becomes overwhelming, sleep and appetite change significantly, academic functioning deteriorates, relationships suffer or your child begins expressing hopelessness, professional assessment is appropriate.
You do not have to wait until a crisis develops.
Early intervention is always preferable to delayed intervention.
Parents are also sometimes uncertain about whom to consult.
Different professionals play different roles, often working together as a team.
A counsellor can help students navigate adjustment difficulties, academic stress, relationship concerns and everyday emotional challenges.
A clinical psychologist specialises in psychological assessment and evidence-based psychotherapies that help individuals understand and change unhelpful patterns of thinking, emotion and behaviour.

A psychiatrist is a medical doctor who assesses mental health conditions, considers biological as well as psychological factors and, when necessary, recommends medication alongside psychotherapy and other interventions.
These professionals are not alternatives to one another.
They frequently collaborate to provide comprehensive care.
Parents also worry about medication.
Some fear that psychiatric medication may be addictive or permanently alter their child's personality.

These concerns are understandable but often arise from misunderstanding.
Medication is not required for every emotional difficulty.
When it is recommended, the decision is based on a careful assessment of the individual's symptoms, their severity and the best available scientific evidence.
For many students, psychotherapy alone may be sufficient.
For others, a combination of psychotherapy and medication provides the most effective treatment.
The treatment plan should always be individualised and discussed openly with the treating clinician.
Another common concern is confidentiality.
Young adults may hesitate to seek help because they fear that everything they say will immediately be shared with their parents.

Confidentiality is a cornerstone of mental healthcare.It allows young adults to speak honestly and develop a trusting therapeutic relationship.

Information shared during care should ordinarily remain confidential. However, Indian law recognises specific circumstances in which limited disclosure may be necessary, including to prevent a threat to life or protect another person from harm.The law recognises that such disclosure should be proportionate and consistent with applicable legal and professional obligations.

One of the most valuable roles parents play during treatment is providing encouragement rather than pressure.
Psychological healing may take time.
Some days are better than others.
Progress may be gradual.
Parents who remain patient, maintain realistic expectations and continue offering emotional support create an environment that promotes recovery.
There is another important message worth remembering.
It is important to understand that seeking professional help does not replace the role of parents.It strengthens it.
Perhaps the greatest barrier to seeking help that i have witnessed in my clinical experience is stigma.
Many families worry,
"What will others think?"
A more helpful question is,
"What does my child need?"
Mental health difficulties are not moral failures, character flaws or signs of weak parenting.
Responding early reflects responsibility, compassion and courage.
The purpose of treatment is not simply to reduce symptoms.
It is to help young adults return to learning, growing, building relationships and

living meaningful lives. And that is a goal every parent shares.

Key Takeaway
Seeking professional help is a sign of strength, not failure. Parents do not need to wait for a crisis before consulting a mental health professional. Early assessment, timely intervention and continued family support significantly improve recovery. The most important step is often the simplest one—recognising that your child deserves help just as they would for any other health condition.

7.5 Hope, Healing and Recovery

The Power of Early Support and Unwavering Hope

If there is one message parents should carry with them after reading this handbook, it is this:
Most young people who experience emotional difficulties recover well, especially when they receive timely support.
Mental health challenges are common during late adolescence and emerging adulthood. This is a period of enormous transition—new academic demands, changing relationships, increasing independence and important life decisions. Feeling overwhelmed at times is not unusual.
What makes the greatest difference is not whether difficulties arise.
It is how quickly they are recognised and how compassionately they are addressed.
Recovery rarely follows a straight line.
There will be good days and difficult days.
There may be periods of rapid improvement followed by temporary setbacks.
This is true of most health conditions, both physical and psychological.
Parents should not interpret every difficult day as a failure of treatment.
Healing takes time.
Patience is part of the process.
One of the strongest predictors of recovery is hope.
Hope is not the belief that problems do not exist.
Hope is the belief that problems can be understood, managed and overcome.
When young adults lose hope, parents often become its guardians.
They hold on to the belief that recovery is possible until their child is able to believe it again.
Sometimes the most powerful words a parent can say are,
"We'll get through this together."
"You don't have to face this alone."
"This chapter of your life is not the whole story."

These simple messages remind young adults that their future is larger than their current struggle.
Recovery is strengthened by connection.
Students who remain connected to supportive family members, trusted friends, mentors and mental health professionals are often better equipped to navigate emotional challenges than those who struggle in isolation.
This is why psychological safety remains so important.
A young adult who feels accepted is more likely to ask for help.
A young adult who feels heard is more likely to continue treatment.
A young adult who feels hopeful is more likely to persevere.
Throughout this book, we have explored the four pillars of the SAFE Framework -
A Secure Base, Autonomy Support ,Failure-Friendly Mindset and Early Recognition of Distress ensures that emotional difficulties are noticed and addressed before

they become overwhelming.
Together, these four principles create something far more valuable than academic success alone.
They create psychological safety.
No parent can prevent every disappointment.
No family can eliminate every challenge.
But every parent can create a home where children know they can speak honestly, seek help without shame and return without fear of judgement.
That is the environment in which resilience grows.
That is the environment in which recovery becomes possible.
As your child moves through the IIT years and beyond, there will be examinations, interviews, achievements, disappointments and countless moments of uncertainty.
There will also be opportunities to demonstrate something far more enduring than academic excellence.
Compassion.
Courage.
Connection.
And hope.
In the end, these are the qualities that sustain not only successful students, but healthy, fulfilled human beings.
Your child may not remember every piece of advice you offered.
They may not remember every conversation about academics or career choices.
But they are likely to remember something far more important.
That when life became difficult, you were there.
Listening.
Believing.
Supporting.
That quiet certainty may become one of the greatest protective factors they carry throughout life.

Key Takeaway
Recovery is possible, and hope is one of its strongest foundations. Parents cannot remove every challenge from their child's life, but they can ensure that no challenge is faced alone. By offering unconditional support, encouraging timely professional help and maintaining hope even during difficult times, parents become powerful partners in their child's healing and lifelong emotional well-being.

Chapter 8

Beyond IIT
Raising Emotionally Healthy Adults for Life

Clinical Perspectives from the IIT Mental Health Team

Across counselling conversations, one message has remained remarkably consistent. Students rarely remember the specific advice their parents gave during difficult times; they remember how their parents responded. They remember being listened to without judgement, reassured that one setback did not define them, and reminded that love was never dependent on grades, placements or achievements. Psychological safety is built through these everyday interactions, becoming one of the strongest foundations for resilience and lifelong well-being.

8.1 The Finish Line Is Not IIT

Success Is a Journey, Not an Entrance Examination

For many families, the day their child receives an IIT admission offer is unforgettable.
Years of hard work, sacrifice and perseverance culminate in a single moment of celebration. Parents who have stood beside their children through countless examinations, coaching classes and moments of self-doubt finally breathe a sigh of relief.
"We made it."
It is a beautiful moment.
But it is not the end of the journey.
It is the beginning of a new one.
One of the greatest misconceptions surrounding IIT is that admission guarantees a successful and fulfilling life. An IIT education undoubtedly opens remarkable opportunities. It offers outstanding academic training, exposure to exceptional peers and access to world-class research and innovation.
Yet a meaningful life is built upon much more than academic excellence.
Success in adulthood depends not only on intelligence, but also on qualities such as emotional resilience, adaptability, empathy, integrity, healthy relationships and the ability to navigate uncertainty.
These qualities are not taught through lectures alone.
They are developed through experience, supported by relationships and strengthened by psychologically safe environments.
This is why parenting remains so important long after children leave home.
The role of parents gradually changes, but their influence endures.
Children who feel emotionally secure are more likely to take healthy risks, recover from setbacks, seek help when needed and develop the confidence to build lives that are both successful and meaningful.
Throughout this handbook, we have repeatedly returned to one central idea.
Achievement and emotional well-being are not competing goals.
They are complementary.
A student who feels psychologically safe is not less ambitious.
If anything, they are more willing to challenge themselves because they know that failure will never threaten their sense of worth or belonging.
As parents, it is worth asking a different question.

Not,"How successful will my child become?"
But,
"What kind of adult is my child becoming?"
Will they possess the courage to face uncertainty?
Will they be able to build healthy relationships?
Will they know how to care for their own mental well-being?
Will they have the wisdom to balance ambition with compassion?
Will they remain curious, adaptable and hopeful when life does not unfold as planned?
These questions extend far beyond the walls of an IIT campus.
They are questions about life itself.
Many years from now, your child's achievements will undoubtedly matter.
But so will their ability to experience joy, maintain meaningful relationships, cope with disappointment and contribute positively to the lives of others.
These are not separate from success.
They are among its most enduring expressions.
As parents, it is natural to celebrate milestones.
Admission into IIT deserves celebration.
Graduation deserves celebration.
Career achievements deserve celebration.
Yet milestones should never be mistaken for destinations.
Life continues to unfold through countless opportunities for learning, growth and reinvention.
Your child will experience triumphs and disappointments, certainty and uncertainty, beginnings and endings.
Through every stage, the lessons learned at home—the security of unconditional love, the confidence to think independently, the courage to learn from failure and the willingness to seek help when needed—will continue to guide them.
Perhaps that is the greatest purpose of parenting.
Not simply helping children reach an institution.
But preparing them for a lifetime of learning, purpose and well-being.
An IIT degree may shape a career.
A psychologically safe childhood shapes a life.

Key Takeaway
Admission into IIT is a remarkable achievement, but it is not the destination. The true goal of parenting is to raise emotionally healthy, resilient and compassionate adults who can flourish throughout life's successes and setbacks. When psychological well-being grows alongside achievement, success becomes not just something children accomplish, but something they are able to sustain and enjoy.

8.2 The Parent Your Child Will Remember

The Legacy That Lasts Beyond Success

Every parent hopes to leave something valuable to their child.
Some leave an education.
Some leave financial security.
Some leave opportunities they themselves never had.
All of these are important.
But perhaps the greatest inheritance parents leave is something that cannot be seen or measured.

It is the emotional experience of growing up.
Long after childhood has passed, people remember how they felt in the presence of their parents.
Did they feel accepted?
Did they feel understood?
Did they feel safe enough to admit mistakes?
Did they feel encouraged to become themselves?
Or did they spend years trying to earn approval they believed could disappear with a single failure?
These emotional memories quietly shape adulthood.
They influence how people approach relationships, respond to stress, recover from setbacks and even how they eventually parent their own children.
Psychologists sometimes speak of an internal working model—the set of beliefs we develop about ourselves, other people and the world through our earliest relationships. Without realising it, children carry these beliefs into adulthood.
A child who grows up feeling emotionally secure often develops a quiet confidence:
"I am worthy of love."
"People can be trusted."
"Asking for help is acceptable."
"Mistakes do not diminish my value."
These beliefs become invisible strengths that support resilience throughout life.
In contrast, when love appears uncertain or closely tied to achievement, children may carry a different set of beliefs.
"I must always prove myself."
"Mistakes make me less worthy."
"I should handle problems alone."
These beliefs can persist long after academic success has been achieved.
This is why parenting is never only about childhood.
It is about adulthood.
Every conversation, every response to failure, every moment of listening and every act of encouragement contributes to the kind of adult a child eventually becomes.
Parents sometimes underestimate the influence of ordinary moments.
They remember birthdays and graduations.
Children often remember something much simpler.
The parent who stayed calm after disappointing results.
The reassuring message before an important interview.
The late-night phone call that ended with,
"Whatever happens tomorrow, we are proud of you."
The embrace that communicated acceptance without needing words.
These moments become anchors.
During future periods of uncertainty, young adults often return to these memories for strength.
They become part of the child's inner voice.
Perhaps the greatest compliment an adult child can offer a parent is not,"You gave me everything I wanted."
But,
"With you, I could always be myself."
That sentence reflects psychological safety in its purest form.
It tells us that the relationship became a place of honesty rather than performance, connection rather than fear and acceptance rather than judgement.
As children grow older, the relationship naturally evolves.
Parents gradually become less involved in everyday decisions.
Yet they often become even more important emotionally.

The role changes from directing life to enriching it with wisdom, perspective and unconditional support.
Many adults continue seeking advice from their parents, not because they are unable to decide independently, but because they value the calm, trusted presence their parents provide.
That is the enduring legacy of emotionally safe parenting.
Throughout this handbook, we have explored psychological safety through the SAFE Framework.
We have discussed secure attachment, autonomy, learning from failure and recognising emotional distress early.
These are not simply parenting strategies.
They are ways of nurturing relationships that endure across a lifetime.
Years from now, your child may not remember every lesson you taught.
They may forget the details of countless conversations.
But they are unlikely to forget how you made them feel.
If they remember that home was the place where they were loved without conditions, heard without judgement and supported
through every season of life, then you have given them something that no examination, degree or career can ever provide.
You have given them an emotional home they will carry within them wherever life takes them.

Key Takeaway
Children may outgrow your guidance, but they never outgrow the emotional lessons they learn from your relationship. The parent they
remember is not necessarily the one who solved every problem, but the one who offered acceptance, trust and unwavering support. The greatest legacy you can leave is not an impressive résumé for your child, but an inner voice that says, "I am loved, I am capable and I am never alone”

8.3 Bringing the SAFE Framework into Everyday Life

Small Conversations, Lifelong Impact

By now, you have travelled through the four pillars of the SAFE Framework.
You have explored how a Secure Base provides emotional safety, how Autonomy Support nurtures independence, how a Failure-Friendly Mindset transforms setbacks into opportunities for growth and how Early Recognition allows emotional difficulties to be addressed before they become crises.
These principles are supported by decades of research in developmental psychology, attachment science and clinical practice.
Yet one important question remains.
How do parents put these ideas into practice?
The answer is both simple and reassuring.
Not through dramatic changes.
But through small, consistent interactions repeated over time.
Psychological safety is rarely created during major life events.
It is built in ordinary moments.
A five-minute phone call between classes.
A message before an examination that says,
"Take care of yourself. We believe in you."

A conversation that begins with,
"How have you been feeling?"
rather than,
"How did your exam go?"
These moments may seem insignificant.
They are not.
Children develop their understanding of relationships from repeated experiences.
Every interaction quietly answers an important question:
"Is this a person with whom I can be completely honest?"
When the answer is consistently yes, trust deepens.
Parents often ask how frequently they should speak with children studying away from home.
There is no ideal number.
The quality of conversations matters far more than the quantity.
A brief conversation filled with genuine curiosity and attentive listening is often more meaningful than a long conversation dominated by advice or questions about performance.
Sometimes, the most valuable message is simply,
"I was thinking about you today."
These words communicate connection without expectation.
Another important habit is learning to notice effort rather than only outcomes.
When parents acknowledge perseverance, kindness, integrity and courage alongside academic success, children develop a broader understanding of what truly matters.
Achievement remains important.
Character becomes equally important.
Families also benefit from creating small rituals of connection.
A weekly phone call.
A Sunday video conversation.
Sharing photographs of everyday life.

Celebrating birthdays and festivals together, even from a distance.
These rituals create continuity.
They remind young adults that although they may be physically away from home, they continue to belong.
No family communicates perfectly all the time.
Misunderstandings will occur.
Parents may occasionally react with frustration.
Children may become impatient or withdrawn.
Healthy families are not those without conflict.
They are those that know how to repair relationships.
A simple apology.
A willingness to revisit a difficult conversation.
The humility to say,
"I think I misunderstood you."
These moments often strengthen trust more than avoiding conflict altogether.
As children grow older, parents should also allow the relationship to evolve.
Instead of measuring closeness by dependence, begin measuring it by openness.
A child who makes independent decisions but continues to seek your perspective has not grown distant.
They have grown.
The SAFE Framework is therefore not a checklist.
It is a way of relating.
It is choosing connection over criticism.

Curiosity over assumption.
Encouragement over pressure.
Listening over lecturing.
Hope over fear.
None of these conversations requires perfect words.
They require presence.
Because psychological safety is not built through isolated acts of parenting.
It is built through the relationship itself.
One conversation.
One response.
One ordinary day at a time.

Key Takeaway
Psychological safety is created through everyday interactions rather than extraordinary moments. Small conversations, consistent emotional availability, respectful listening and timely repair after misunderstandings gradually build relationships in which children feel safe to be honest, seek support and grow with confidence. The SAFE Framework is not something parents do occasionally—it is something they live every day.

8.4 Raising Resilient Families

Growing Together Through Every Stage of Life

Parenting is often described as preparing children for life.
Less often do we recognise that children prepare parents as well.
Every stage of a child's life asks parents to learn something new.
The birth of a child teaches responsibility.
The school years teach patience.
Adolescence teaches flexibility.
Young adulthood teaches trust.
Parenting is therefore not a journey of changing only children.
It is also a journey of changing ourselves.
As children grow into adults, families undergo an important transformation.
Relationships become less hierarchical and more collaborative.
Parents gradually move from being decision-makers to trusted advisers.
Children move from dependence to responsibility.
Mutual respect begins to replace authority as the foundation of the relationship.
This transition does not weaken families.
It strengthens them.
One of the greatest misconceptions is that resilience is an individual quality.
In reality, resilience often grows within relationships.
People cope better with adversity when they know they belong.
Families that communicate openly, resolve disagreements respectfully and support one another during difficult times become powerful sources of emotional strength.
Resilience is therefore not simply the ability to endure hardship.
It is the confidence that hardship does not have to be faced alone.
Throughout this handbook, we have focused on helping parents become a source of psychological safety for their children.
The truth, however, is that psychological safety benefits the entire family.
When children feel safe to speak honestly, parents understand them better.

When parents listen without judgement, misunderstandings decrease.
When mistakes are viewed as opportunities for learning, blame gives way to growth.
Everyone benefits.
Strong families are not families in which no one struggles.
They are families in which struggle can be spoken about openly.
Where asking for help is seen as wisdom rather than weakness.
Where disagreement does not threaten belonging.
Where love remains constant despite changing circumstances.
These families do not eliminate life's difficulties.
They change the way those difficulties are experienced.
As the years pass, your child's achievements will continue to evolve.
There may be postgraduate studies, new careers, marriage, parenthood and unexpected changes that neither of you can yet imagine.
Through each stage, your relationship will remain an important source of stability.
One day, your child may become a parent.
Without consciously intending to do so, they will draw upon many of the experiences they had growing up.
The way they were comforted.
The way conflict was handled.
The way failure was understood.
The way love was expressed.
In this way, psychologically safe parenting extends beyond one generation.
It becomes a family legacy.
Perhaps that is one of the most meaningful contributions parents can make—not simply raising resilient children, but helping create resilient families. Families in which compassion is stronger than criticism.
Connection is stronger than fear.
Hope is stronger than despair.
As we come to the close of this handbook, remember that there is no such thing as a perfect parent.
There never has been.
Children do not need parents who always know the right words or make the perfect decisions.
They need parents who are willing to listen, to learn, to apologise when necessary and to remain emotionally available throughout life's changing seasons.
Those ordinary acts of love are what make extraordinary families.
And they are the foundation upon which resilience is built.

Key Takeaway
Resilience is not built in isolation—it grows within relationships. Families that offer love without conditions, communicate openly, repair misunderstandings and face challenges together become lasting sources of strength across generations. The greatest legacy parents leave is not perfection, but a family culture in which every member feels safe, valued and supported.

8.5 A Letter to Every Parent

The Most Important Lesson of All

Dear Parent,
If you have reached this page, it tells me one important thing.
You care deeply about your child.
You may have picked up this handbook because your son or daughter has entered IIT. Perhaps you wanted to understand the pressures they face. Perhaps you wanted to know how to support them better. Perhaps, like every parent, you simply wanted them to be happy.
Whatever brought you here, I hope you leave with one reassuring thought.
You do not have to be a perfect parent.
There is no perfect sentence that prevents every misunderstanding.
No perfect decision that guarantees lifelong happiness.
No perfect family without disagreements, disappointment or difficult days.
Fortunately, children do not need perfection.
They need presence.
They need parents who are willing to listen before judging.
To understand before advising.
To encourage without controlling.
To remain beside them, especially when life does not unfold as expected.
Your child will experience success.
They will also experience failure.
They will discover friendships that enrich them and disappointments that challenge them.
They will make decisions that fill you with pride and, occasionally, decisions you wish they had not made.
That is not a sign that parenting has failed.
It is a sign that life is unfolding.
During those moments, your child may not need immediate solutions.
They may simply need to know that there is one place in the world where they never have to earn love, explain their worth or hide their struggles.
Let that place be your home.
As parents, we naturally hope our children achieve great things.
We celebrate ranks, degrees, placements and promotions.
These milestones deserve celebration.
But they are not the measure of a life.
A meaningful life is measured by something deeper.
The ability to love and be loved.
The courage to face adversity.
The wisdom to ask for help.
The resilience to begin again after disappointment.
The compassion to care for others.
And the confidence to remain true to oneself.
If your parenting helps your child develop these qualities, you have given them a gift that no examination can measure and no setback can take away.
One day, years from now, your child may not remember every piece of advice you offered.
They may forget many conversations about marks, careers and future plans.
But they are unlikely to forget how you made them feel.
They will remember whether they felt accepted.
Whether they felt heard.
Whether they knew they could call you on their worst day as easily as on their best.

That is the legacy of psychologically safe parenting.
As a psychiatrist, I have seen the extraordinary difference that one supportive family can make. As a fellow traveller in the journey of parenting, I also know that every parent occasionally wonders,"Am I doing enough?"
Perhaps the better question is,
"Am I helping my child feel safe enough to be completely honest with me?"
If the answer is yes—or if you are striving towards that answer—you are already giving your child one of life's greatest protective factors.
Thank you for investing your time, your love and your willingness to learn.
By nurturing psychological safety today, you are shaping not only your child's future, but also the generations that will follow.
I wish you and your family courage during difficult times, joy during moments of celebration and, above all, a relationship that continues to grow in trust, understanding and love.
Because, in the end, the greatest achievement is not helping your child enter IIT.
It is helping them become a resilient, compassionate and emotionally healthy human being.

With warm regards,
Dr. Yamini Kannappan

Key Takeaway
Children may not remember every lesson we teach, but they will always remember how we made them feel. When parents provide a secure base, encourage independence, respond to failure with compassion and recognise distress early, they give their children something far more valuable than success alone—a lifelong sense of psychological safety. That is a gift that endures well beyond the IIT years.

Afterword

THE SAFE PROMISE
A Parent's Pledge
"My child may not remember every word I say, but I hope they will always remember how I made them feel."
S — Secure Base
I promise to be your safe place.
I will love you without conditions. I will listen before I judge. I will remind you that your worth is never determined by your grades, your rank or your achievements. You will always have a home where you belong.
A — Autonomy Support
I promise to help you grow, not control you.
I will respect your growing independence. I will guide you without taking over. I will trust you to make decisions, learn from experience and become the person you are meant to be.
F — A Failure-Friendly Mindset
I promise that failure will never become your identity.
We will celebrate courage as much as success. We will treat mistakes as opportunities to learn. When life does not go as planned, I will help you stand up—not make you feel small.
E — Early Recognition
I promise to notice before I judge.
I will pay attention to changes in your emotions and behaviour. I will ask with compassion. I will listen without fear. When you need help, I will stand beside you—not behind you.
My Commitment
I will choose connection over criticism.
I will choose curiosity over assumptions.
I will choose encouragement over pressure.
I will choose hope over fear.
I will remember that my role is not to make life perfect for you, but to help you face life with confidence.
I may not always say the right words.
I may not always make the right decisions.
But I will always strive to make our relationship a place of psychological safety, where you can be honest, vulnerable and completely yourself.
Because my greatest achievement as a parent will not be that you entered an IIT.
It will be that you become a resilient,
compassionate, emotionally healthy and fulfilled human being.

The SAFE Promise
Love without conditions.
Guide without controlling.
Teach without shaming.
Notice without judging.
Stand beside your child—through every success, every setback and every new beginning.
Children do not need perfect parents. They need psychologically safe parents.

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