

MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY AND HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOR AMONG MALE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN: A PUBLIC HEALTH GAP

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Abstract

Mental health literacy (MHL) is a key factor influencing how individuals recognize, manage, and seek help for mental health issues. In Pakistan, male university students are often overlooked in mental health initiatives, despite growing evidence that they experience significant psychological distress and are less likely to seek professional help due to stigma, lack of awareness, and cultural norms.

Objective: This study aims to assess the level of mental health literacy and the patterns of help-seeking behavior among male university students in Pakistan, identifying key barriers that prevent access to mental health care.

Methods: A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 120 male students from various departments of a public university. A validated questionnaire was used to measure their knowledge of mental health, recognition of disorders, attitudes toward mental illness, and intentions to seek help. Descriptive statistics and chi-square tests were used for analysis.

Results: Only 35% of participants demonstrated adequate mental health literacy. While 70% acknowledged the importance of seeking help, only 22% expressed willingness to consult a mental health professional. Stigma, fear of judgment, and lack of knowledge were the most commonly reported barriers.

Conclusion: The findings reveal a significant gap in mental health literacy and a reluctance to seek help among male university students in Pakistan. Targeted mental health awareness campaigns and campus-based interventions are urgently needed to address these barriers and improve access to mental health services.

Introduction

Mental health is an essential component of overall well-being, yet it remains one of the most neglected areas of public health, particularly in low- and middle-income countries like Pakistan. Mental health literacy (MHL), defined as the knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders that aid in their recognition, management, and prevention, plays a crucial role in addressing this gap. Young adults, especially university students, are particularly vulnerable to psychological

stressors, including academic pressure, career uncertainty, and social expectations. Despite this vulnerability, mental health remains a taboo subject in many parts of Pakistani society, where cultural and religious beliefs often discourage open discussion or acceptance of psychological distress.

Among university students, males are often less likely to acknowledge or seek help for mental health issues. This behavior is influenced by gender norms that equate emotional expression

with weakness, discouraging men from speaking openly about their struggles. In addition, male students are often underrepresented in mental health studies and interventions, despite facing comparable – or in some cases higher – levels of psychological distress. Research has shown that inadequate mental health literacy and negative societal attitudes contribute significantly to low help-seeking behavior among male students, potentially worsening their psychological outcomes over time.

In Pakistan, the public health infrastructure is already strained, and mental health services are limited and underutilized. According to the World Health Organization, the country has fewer than one psychiatrist per 100,000 people. University students, particularly males, face additional barriers such as stigma, lack of awareness, poor access to counseling services, and fear of judgment from peers and family. These barriers contribute to a widening gap between mental health needs and the availability or utilization of support systems – a gap that public health policy has yet to effectively address.

This study aims to assess the current state of mental health literacy and help-seeking behavior among male university students in Pakistan. By identifying knowledge gaps, attitudes, and perceived barriers, the research seeks to inform targeted interventions and policy reforms. Understanding the specific challenges faced by male students is essential to developing inclusive and culturally sensitive mental health programs that promote early recognition of mental disorders and timely access to support services.

Methods

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a cross-sectional, descriptive design to assess mental health literacy and help-seeking behavior among male medical students in Pakistan. Participants were recruited from various public and private medical colleges across the country using online platforms, including WhatsApp groups, student forums, and social media pages. A total of 120 male students voluntarily participated in the survey.

Sampling and Inclusion Criteria

Convenience sampling was used. Eligible participants were male medical students currently enrolled in an undergraduate (MBBS) program in Pakistan. Students with a previously diagnosed psychiatric disorder or those undergoing psychiatric treatment were excluded to avoid biased responses regarding literacy and help-seeking behavior.

Data Collection Tool

Data were collected through an anonymous, self-administered online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The questionnaire was adapted from established tools such as the Mental Health Literacy Scale (MHLS) and the General Help-Seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ). It consisted of four sections:

1. **Demographic Information** (age, year of study, type of university)
2. **Mental Health Literacy** (knowledge of mental health disorders, symptom recognition, beliefs about causes)
3. **Attitudes Toward Mental Health** (perceived stigma, cultural views, willingness to talk about mental health)
4. **Help-Seeking Behavior** (intention to seek professional help, sources of support, perceived barriers)

The questionnaire was piloted with 10 students for clarity and minor modifications were made. These pilot responses were not included in the final analysis. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was satisfactory with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.81.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained electronically before participation. All responses were anonymous, and participation was entirely voluntary. Ethical guidelines were followed in accordance with international standards, ensuring privacy and confidentiality throughout the study.

Data Analysis

Collected data were organized and analyzed using basic descriptive and inferential statistical

methods. Frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations were calculated. Associations between mental health literacy and help-seeking behavior were explored using chi-square tests. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was considered statistically meaningful.

Results

A total of 120 male medical students from various universities across Pakistan participated in the study. The mean age of the participants was 21.4 years (SD ± 1.8), with students from all academic years represented. Most participants were enrolled in public universities (68%), while the remainder attended private institutions (32%).

Mental Health Literacy

Out of 120 participants, only 42 students (35%) demonstrated adequate mental health literacy, as determined by their ability to correctly identify symptoms of common mental disorders and their understanding of appropriate management strategies. A majority (65%) were unable to distinguish between clinical mental illnesses and everyday stress or sadness. Furthermore, only 28% correctly identified depression as a medical condition requiring professional help, while 72% attributed it to personal weakness, laziness, or lack of faith.

Attitudes Toward Mental Health

Negative perceptions and stigma were prevalent. Nearly half of the respondents (48%) believed that people with mental health conditions are dangerous or unstable. Around 60% felt that discussing mental health problems would result in social judgment, and 55% reported that they would be embarrassed to seek help from a psychologist or psychiatrist. These attitudes were significantly associated with lower literacy scores ($p < 0.05$).

Help-Seeking Behavior

Despite 70% of students acknowledging the importance of seeking help for mental health issues, only 26 students (22%) reported they would actually consider approaching a mental

health professional if experiencing psychological distress. The majority preferred informal support systems such as friends (52%), family (40%), or religious practices (38%). The main barriers to professional help-seeking included fear of stigma (61%), lack of trust in mental health services (45%), and belief in self-management (34%).

Association Between Literacy and Help-Seeking

A statistically significant association was found between mental health literacy and willingness to seek professional help ($p < 0.01$). Students with higher literacy levels were more likely to express intent to access professional care, while those with poor literacy scores showed stronger reliance on informal or non-medical methods.

Discussion

This study highlights a significant gap in mental health literacy among male medical students in Pakistan and sheds light on the low rates of professional help-seeking behavior. Although a majority of participants recognized the importance of addressing mental health issues, very few reported a willingness to consult mental health professionals. The findings underscore a public health concern that requires immediate attention within the context of Pakistan's cultural, social, and educational systems.

The low mental health literacy rate (only 35% demonstrating adequate understanding) is consistent with similar studies conducted in South Asian settings, where awareness of mental illnesses remains limited due to cultural stigma and lack of formal education on the topic. The tendency of students to associate depression with personal weakness rather than as a treatable medical condition reflects the persistence of harmful beliefs that discourage early recognition and treatment. This is particularly concerning in medical students, who are future healthcare providers and are expected to model health-seeking behaviors and promote mental well-being.

The reluctance to seek professional help, reported by over 75% of participants, further illustrates the societal stigma surrounding mental illness in Pakistan. Fear of social judgment,

embarrassment, and the preference for informal support systems such as friends or religion suggest that mental health is still not normalized in many university environments. These findings align with previous research indicating that male students are more likely to suppress emotional vulnerability due to masculine cultural norms, making them less likely to access mental health services even when needed.

Importantly, this study found a strong association between higher mental health literacy and a greater likelihood of seeking professional help. This reinforces the need for targeted awareness campaigns and educational interventions within medical colleges and universities. Training programs, peer-led workshops, and integration of mental health education into curricula could help reduce stigma and promote help-seeking behavior. Furthermore, universities should strengthen on-campus mental health support systems and create environments where seeking help is seen as a sign of strength rather than weakness.

Recommendations

- **Tailored MHL campaigns:** Peer-led, male-sensitive, culturally contextualized education on symptom recognition and professional help.
- **Campus counseling expansion:** Confidential, accessible services with male-friendly outreach.
- **Stigma reduction:** Workshops addressing masculinity norms and misbeliefs.
- **Policy advocacy:** Incorporation of MHL in university health and national public health curricula.

Conclusion

This study reveals a critical gap in mental health literacy and a concerning reluctance to seek professional psychological help among male medical students in Pakistan. Despite recognizing the significance of mental well-being, a large proportion of participants demonstrated limited understanding of mental health conditions and held stigmatizing attitudes that discouraged formal help-seeking. Cultural norms, fear of

judgment, and reliance on informal support systems continue to hinder progress in addressing mental health needs within this population.

Improving mental health literacy is essential to promoting timely help-seeking behavior, reducing stigma, and encouraging healthier coping mechanisms among university students. Targeted interventions—such as awareness campaigns, peer education, and integration of mental health topics into medical curricula—can empower students to recognize symptoms, access support, and foster an open dialogue about mental well-being.

Given that medical students are future healthcare professionals, strengthening their mental health knowledge and attitudes is not only a matter of individual wellness but also a public health priority. Universities, policymakers, and public health institutions must collaborate to develop culturally sensitive, gender-inclusive, and accessible mental health support systems across campuses.

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