

Students' Attitudes Toward Seeking Psychological Help

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Abstract—Mental health is crucial for personal, social, and socio-economic development, becoming an increasingly relevant topic, especially in the post-global pandemic era. One vulnerable demographic comprises students who, during the pandemic, faced challenges such as adapting to new educational methods, societal or residential changes, heightened stress, responsibilities, and entering the job market. These life challenges proved insurmountable for some individuals during this phase. This research aimed to examine students' attitudes towards individuals seeking psychological help. By gaining a better understanding of young people's perceptions of seeking psychological assistance, a clearer insight into how to make psychological support more accessible and acceptable can be achieved. A questionnaire was completed by 210 students from various disciplines at the University of Zagreb. While the majority of students expressed a positive attitude towards seeking psychological help, a very small percentage reported having sought it. One of the most common obstacles to seeking appropriate help was a lack of financial means, with the most significant motivators being the positive experiences of those who sought help and an affordable cost.

Keywords—Mental health, students, psychological support, attitudes.

I. INTRODUCTION

MENTAL health refers to a state of psychological well-being that enables individuals to cope with life's stressors, realize their potential, perform effectively in academic and professional settings, and contribute to their community. The university period is usually a stimulating phase that allows many individuals to form significant relationships and develop their professional and personal identities. However, it is also a time when many young people must navigate life independently, without the continuous support of parents or institutions, which can be challenging. Students represent a particularly vulnerable group concerning mental health issues. They confront numerous challenges, such as adapting to new educational paradigms, societal shifts, changes in living conditions, limited financial resources, elevated stress levels, increased responsibilities, and the transition into the workforce. These challenges can be particularly daunting for some individuals.

Research consistently indicates that females and younger individuals exhibit more positive attitudes toward seeking professional help and are more likely to seek such help [1]-[7]. Common reasons for seeking counselling at university centers in Croatia include challenges related to academic demands, anxiety, poor time management, uncertainty about future

careers, depression, low self-confidence, and financial difficulties [8]-[11]. Despite the increasing availability of psychological services, many students still do not utilize them. Barriers to actively searching for help include a lack of time, financial constraints, the perception that their problems are not severe enough, a preference for self-reliance in problem-solving, and a lack of trust in the efficacy of psychological treatments [2], [12]-[14]. Reference [15] highlights the importance of emotional openness for actively seeking help since the stigma associated with seeking professional help remains a significant deterrent [16], [17]. Stigma refers to the belief that a person will be rejected or ridiculed because of a particular characteristic, and this concern reduces the likelihood of seeking help [18]. Even medical students viewed the risk of being labeled "crazy" as a barrier to either seeking psychotherapy for themselves or recommending it to their patients [19].

Of particular significance is the fact that today's student population has endured the COVID-19 pandemic during a crucial developmental period, as well as earthquakes in Zagreb, events that may have significantly undermined their sense of security and overall well-being. Research in Croatia on mental health during the pandemic and after the earthquakes [21], [22] shows that people generally exhibit more symptoms of impaired mental health compared to pre-pandemic data. Nearly half of the participants experienced significant levels of depression, anxiety, and/or stress, and a quarter of the participants expressed pessimism about the future. Existing research around the world confirms that the COVID-19 pandemic has had significant long-term impacts on students' mental health. Studies have shown increased rates of anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders among students, alongside decreased academic performance and motivation [20], [23]-[25]. In addition to the existing challenges faced by students, new stressors induced by the COVID-19 pandemic have been identified. These include fear and concern for the well-being of loved ones or oneself, social isolation, loneliness, reduced social and physical activities due to quarantine measures, family stress, difficulties in concentrating on studies, and sudden and radical lifestyle changes [24], [26]. Although it might be expected that these pandemic-induced challenges would lead to an increase in help-seeking behavior among students, research suggests the contrary – a decrease in the pursuit of professional assistance [27]-[31]. Some qualitative research [32] demonstrates that students are more likely to seek help from friends, family, or the Internet rather than from

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professionals. This preference underscores the importance of understanding and addressing the barriers to accessing professional mental health services.

As a theoretical basis for the research of students' attitudes toward using chat GPT as a cheating tool, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is used [33]. According to TPB, the best antecedent for future behavior is the intention to undertake a specific behavior, and one of the determinants of intentions, along with behavioral control and subjective norm, is the attitude toward the behavior. In Croatia, there is an absence of systematic monitoring of the prevalence of mental health disorders within the student population, as well as shifts in their attitudes towards seeking professional assistance. This study, conducted in collaboration with students from VERN' University in Zagreb and the Brave Phone Association, aims to enhance understanding of students' attitudes towards actively seeking professional help.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Goal

This study aimed to examine students' attitudes toward seeking psychological help. The research sought to analyze in detail how students maintain their mental health through various activities and to identify barriers that prevent them from seeking psychological assistance.

Sample

The final sample included 210 participants (77.6% female and 22.4% male). Participants were students from various study programs: biomedical and health sciences (7.1%); biotechnical sciences (1%); technical sciences (11.4%); social sciences (60.4%); humanities (12.8%); natural sciences (1.9%); interdisciplinary studies (1.9%); and arts (3.5%). The distribution of students across study years was relatively balanced: 24.8% first-year students, 34.3% second-year students, 16.2% third-year students, 16.7% fourth-year students, and 6.7% fifth-year students.

Procedure

The study was conducted during the summer semester of the academic year 2022/2023. Initially, a focus group with 5 second-year students from the University of VERN' was conducted to identify common prejudices or beliefs regarding seeking psychological help in our culture. Based on the discussion, a list of 5 popular beliefs about seeking psychological help, prevalent in Croatia, was compiled. This list was included in the final questionnaire, which comprised: four demographic questions (gender, year of study, type of study, place of residence); one question assessing the importance of mental health care; six questions assessing students' attitudes towards the identified beliefs about seeking psychological help; two general questions regarding the importance of mental health; two multiple-choice questions about perceived barriers and motivations for seeking professional help; and finally, ten questions about the frequency of experiencing specific emotions in the past ten days. The questionnaire was distributed via social media and posted on

the University of VERN' student portal, initially targeting university attendees, who subsequently shared the questionnaire with others, thereby expanding the sample. The survey was conducted from May 14, 2023, to May 31, 2023.

III. RESULTS

Before conducting further statistical analyses, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for normality of distributions was applied. Since all variables exhibited highly skewed distributions, non-parametric statistics were used for subsequent analyses. According to responses regarding the importance of mental health care, students perceived mental health as highly important ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 0.709$, $C = 5$, $D = 5$, $N = 201$). However, a comparison of responses by gender indicated that female students considered mental health care significantly more important ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 4.28$, $n = 163$) than male students did ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.13$, $n = 47$, $U = 2907$, $z = -3.322$, $p < 0.01$, $r = 0.23$). Attitudes towards seeking psychological help were assessed using items reflecting beliefs identified as common in Croatian slang and popular culture. Table I presents the results of agreement with these statements among the sample of 210 students, and Table II shows the gender differences for each item.

TABLE I
 DESCRIPTIVES FOR THE POPULAR BELIEFS

Items	N	MIN	MAX	M	SD	C	D
1. Professional help is mostly sought by individuals of weaker character.	210	1	5	1.69	1.015	1	1
M	47	1	5	2.32	1.304	2	1
F	163	1	5	1.5	0.834	1	1
2. If you go to a psychologist, you are not normal.	210	1	5	1.23	0.615	1	1
M	47	1	5	1.53	0.997	1	1
F	163	1	4	1.14	0.414	1	1
3. It is shameful if you have a diagnosis of a mental illness.	210	1	5	1.21	1.068	1	1
M	47	1	5	1.53	0.952	1	1
F	163	1	3	1.12	0.422	1	1
4. Everything the psychologist told you, I could have told you for free.	210	1	5	1.52	0.606	1	1
M	47	1	5	2.15	1.197	2	2
F	163	1	4	1.34	0.678	1	1
5. Psychological problems can be resolved on their own.	210	1	5	1.52	0.753	1	1
M	47	1	5	1.94	0.492	2	1
F	163	1	4	1.40	0.644	1	1
6. If I seek professional help, I am afraid of the medications that might be prescribed to me.	210	1	5	2.72	1.366	3	1
M	47	1	5	3.15	1.474	3	5
F	163	1	5	2.60	1.313	3	1

Based on the data from Tables I and II, it is evident that students generally disagree with the proposed beliefs about psychological help, with average ratings being low across all items. However, there is a significant difference in attitudes between male and female students regarding these beliefs. Male students are more inclined to agree with all proposed beliefs

compared to female students, although these differences are of small effect size according to Cohen's criteria (except for the statement "Everything a psychologist tells you, I could tell you for free," where the effect size is moderate).

TABLE II
RESULTS FROM MANN WHITNEY TEST REGARDING GENDER DIFFERENCES IN POPULAR BELIEFS

Item	M/F	N	U	z	p	r
1. Professional help is mostly sought by individuals of weaker character.	M	47	2482,5	-4.188	0.000	0.29
	F	163				
2. If you go to a psychologist, you are not normal.	M	47	3031	-3.404	0.001	0.23
	F	163				
3. It is shameful if you have a diagnosis of a mental illness.	M	47	2921,5	-4.134	0.000	0.29
	F	163				
4. Everything the psychologist told you, I could have told you for free.	M	47	2142	-5.455	0.000	0.38
	F	163				
5. Psychological problems can be resolved on their own.	M	47	2554	-4.002	0.000	0.28
	F	163				
6. If I seek professional help, I am afraid of the medications that might be prescribed to me.	M	47	3.003	-4.002	0.021	0.28
	F	163				

Additionally, students were given options to indicate their preferred activities for maintaining their mental health, as shown in Table III.

TABLE III
THE FREQUENCY OF BEHAVIORS AMONG STUDENTS TO MAINTAIN PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH

Activities	N	%
Conversation with a close person	166	79
Conversation with a friend	161	77
Walk	128	61
Conversation with a family member	115	55
Work on self-confidence	101	48
Sport	90	43
Reading	90	43
Faith, prayer, meditation	42	20
Conversation with a professional	35	17

The most frequently used strategies include talking to a close person (79%), socializing with friends (76.7%), and walking (61%). Under the "Other" category, prayer/faith/meditation was mentioned as a standard method. Among these results, it is essential to highlight the relatively low frequency of engaging with a professional, mentioned by only 17% of participants. The questionnaire also aimed to explore the primary barriers to seeking professional help. Most students (57.1%) identified a lack of financial resources as the most significant barrier. This underscores the need for education and awareness among the student population regarding the availability of free counseling services under health insurance schemes. Additionally, significant barriers included the fear of being prescribed medication (42%) and lack of free time (37%). The lack of free time can also imply minimizing the importance of personal issues, highlighting the importance of raising awareness about how mental health quality is crucial for personal growth and development. These findings are presented in Table IV.

TABLE IV
PERCEIVED BARRIERS TOWARD SEEKING PROFESSIONAL HELP

Barriers	N	%
Lack of financial resources	120	57
Fear of prescribing medication	88	42
Lack of free time	77	37
Minimizing the seriousness of one's problems	65	31
Mistrust towards professionals	58	28
Risk for later employment	52	25
Fear	39	19
Shame	34	16
Discomfort	31	15

The study aimed to identify barriers and factors that would encourage students to seek psychological help if needed actively. The most significant incentives identified were affordable cost and the positive experiences of others. These results are displayed in Table V.

TABLE V
PERCEIVED MOTIVATORS FOR SEEKING PROFESSIONAL HELP

Motivators	N	%
More affordable price	127	60
Positive experiences of other students	127	60
Family support	119	57
Support of friends	117	56
Normalizing the need for psychological help	93	44
Identifying the cause of the problem	86	41
Awareness of the importance of professional help	64	30

Finally, the concluding part of the study focused on the frequency of specific emotions experienced by the participants in the last week before completing the questionnaire (Table VI).

TABLE VI
FREQUENCY OF SPECIFIC EMOTIONS EXPERIENCED BY THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE LAST WEEK

Emotions	M	SD	C	D
Bad	2.68	0.911	3	3
Insecure	2.67	0.998	3	3
Depressive	2.05	1.068	2	1
Anxious	2.62	1.213	3	3
Worthless	1.85	1.038	2	1
Happy	3.55	0.751	4	4
Satisfied	3.36	0.934	3	3
Fulfilled	3.27	1.01	3	3
Proud	3.17	1.019	3	3
Self-confident	3.28	1.026	3	3

Gender differences in the experience of emotions were evident in four items related to negative emotions, where girls reported experiencing them more frequently than boys. On the other hand, boys more frequently felt confident compared to girls. The results are presented in Table VII.

TABLE VII
 RESULTS FROM MANN WHITNEY TEST REGARDING GENDER DIFFERENCES IN
 EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

	M/F	N	C	U	z	p	r
Bad	M	47	2	2591.5	-3.575	0.000	0.25
	F	163	3				
Insecure	M	47	2	2570.5	-3.616	0.000	0.25
	F	163	3				
Depressive	M	47	1	2964	-2.486	0.013	0.17
	F	163	2				
Anxious	M	47	2	2798	-2.891	0.004	0.2
	F	163	3				
Worthless	M	47	1	3341	-1.439	0.150	
	F	163	2				
Happy	M	47	4	3452.5	-1.129	0.259	
	F	163	4				
Satisfied	M	47	3	3498	-0.964	0.335	
	F	163	3				
Fulfilled	M	47	3	3457	-1.066	0.287	
	F	163	3				
Proud	M	47	3	3151	-1.942	0.052	
	F	163	3				
Self-confident	M	47	4	2503	-3.785	0.000	0.26
	F	163	3				

IV. DISCUSSION

A review of qualitative and quantitative research on the barriers to seeking professional help identified stigma as the most significant obstacle [16]. Beyond public stigmatization, a typical societal reaction towards individuals seeking professional assistance, self-stigmatization also plays a role. Self-stigmatization involves a decrease in self-esteem or self-worth when individuals perceive themselves as socially undesirable [2]. This study aimed to evaluate students' attitudes at the University of Zagreb, Croatia, regarding pursuing psychological help, using a list of prevalent negative beliefs. According to the TPB, attitudes toward seeking help are the strongest predictors of the intention to seek help [34]. The results indicated that students generally disagreed with negative beliefs, with average scores being very low and the dominant value for all items being $D = 1$. However, despite these low scores, male students displayed significantly more negative attitudes than female students, although these differences had a small effect size. Gender differences in attitudes towards psychological help and in actively seeking help are well documented in previous research. Women show a greater willingness to seek help, have higher tolerance for stigma, and are more inclined to emotional openness compared to men [1]-[7].

The most common strategies for maintaining mental health were talking to a close person (79%) and socializing with friends (76.7%). These results are unsurprising, especially since three-quarters of the sample were females, who tend to share more emotionally with others. Reference [35] suggested a gender difference in stress response behavior, women are more likely to experience "tend and befriend" behavior, which involves establishing and maintaining social relationships. Only 17% of participants chose to consult a mental health care

professional. This finding suggests that the expressed attitude towards seeking psychological help is generally more positive when referring to others or when the individual does not face an actual problem. However, when students consider whether to actively seek professional help for themselves, various barriers likely hinder them. In the previous study on the Croatian sample [2], only 23.6% of students with clinically significant psychological issues sought help.

The primary barrier reported by students (57.1%) was a lack of financial resources. This indicates that most students believe psychological counseling services require payment. This perception may arise from either a lack of awareness of free services available through university counseling centers and primary health care or from these services being inaccessible to them. Some universities lack student counseling centers, and primary health care services often have long wait times. Additionally, students may be hesitant to use free services offered by universities or primary care due to concerns about anonymity and confidentiality, heightening the fear of stigma. Seeking help from a private professional enhances anonymity, making these services more appealing. Previous research shows that the most common reason for visiting student counseling centers is academic achievement-related issues [8]-[11], suggesting that students may primarily associate these centers with educational support.

The second most common barrier is the fear of being prescribed medication, which can be associated with the concern that their problem is more severe than they believe. There is a common misconception that seeking help results in being prescribed medication that dulls the individual and reduces symptoms without addressing the underlying issue. Other barriers mentioned by students include lack of time and downplaying the seriousness of the problem, which can be considered a single category. It is generally assumed that when a problem is perceived as severe, individuals will find the time to address it (e.g., scheduling a visit to the dentist for a toothache or a doctor for a stomach or headache). Previously mentioned research with Croatian students [2] also emphasizes that students identify several significant barriers to seeking help: the belief that their problems are not severe enough, reliance on self-solving issues, lack of trust in the effectiveness of psychological treatments, and not knowing where to find free professional help. In Western, individualistic societies, there is a strong emphasis on self-reliance. Individuals with psychological difficulties might attribute their condition to personal deficiencies such as weak character and thus avoid seeking help to maintain a positive self-image. Reference [27] highlights the importance of psychological resilience as a protective factor for mental health. Still, at the same time, self-reliance is also a significant barrier to actively seeking help, especially for men. For women, talking to close people can be seen as an essential protective factor and, at the same time, a barrier to seeking professional help.

A significant barrier mentioned by students in this study is distrust of professionals. It would be interesting to investigate whether this distrust stems from unpleasant experiences with professionals or, conversely, from a lack of personal experience

and the more significant influence of media and popular culture on attitudes towards professional help. Previous research shows that prior experience of receiving professional help predicts more favorable attitudes toward seeking psychological help [3], suggesting that making free psychological help more accessible is necessary.

Finally, the last question in the survey asked how often students experienced certain emotions in the past week. The results showed that students most frequently felt happy, satisfied, and fulfilled, with no gender differences in these emotions. However, female students significantly more often felt bad, insecure, depressed, and anxious, while male students more often felt confident. Previous research has also indicated that women tend to experience negative emotions, particularly sadness and fear, more often and more intensely than men [36], [37]. It is expected that students who experience more frequent and intense unpleasant emotions will more often actively seek help. In previous research [4], students with more problems are more willing to seek help, but this is only confirmed for females. For males, this effect is not observed; authors suggested as the number of problems increases, avoidance factors prevail. Women experience more chronic and daily stress compared to men, which is closely related to differences in stress-coping strategies. Women are more likely to use emotional and avoidance coping styles, while men tend to employ rational coping and emotional-expressive suppression [38]. Some authors [39] argued that researchers should take emotional experience and expressivity into account when examining gender differences in emotional responses. Emotional experience mainly pertains to an individual's physiological arousal triggered by external stimuli, while emotional expressivity involves the outward expression of this subjective experience.

In other words, men and women have different experiences of stress and use various strategies to cope with life challenges. Women are more likely to seek help from others, which is inconsistent with the expected male role. Further research is needed to find ways to make psychological help more accessible to men.

This research has several limitations that need to be considered. Firstly, the sample size of students was relatively small and was not representative. Future research should aim for more extensive and diverse samples to address these limitations. Secondly, while e-survey questionnaires are convenient, cost-effective, and eco-friendly, they can introduce biases such as self-selection. Interested or motivated students may be more inclined to participate, skewing the results. This might explain the higher representation of female participants, who are generally more interested in the topic of mental health and in filling out questionnaires, especially online ones. In social research, it is a significant challenge to motivate male participants to voluntarily participate in surveys, especially in the field of mental health, and the male perspective can be overlooked. Furthermore, most respondents reported experiencing more positive feelings, especially happiness, in the past week, making the sample biased. Literature shows that happier people have better mental health, more resources to

cope with stressors, and are more willing to help others [40]. It is recommended that more qualitative research be conducted in the future, using interviews or focus groups, to gain deeper insights into attitudes, motives, and barriers to seeking professional help. Additionally, the questionnaire was mainly based on negative beliefs about seeking professional help. It is recommended to conduct more comprehensive research that includes other aspects of attitudes, not just cognitive beliefs, as well as various other variables, especially previous experience with professional help, problems that students consider severe enough to seek help, intentions to seek help in the future, and so on. Finally, conducting longitudinal research at regular intervals is recommended to track changes in attitudes and actual seeking of psychological help and treatment among the student population.

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