

STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH: BARRIERS TO ACCESSING PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract. Despite the growing attention to mental health, many university students continue to face significant barriers to accessing mental health services. This article examines the psychological, social, and structural obstacles that hinder students from seeking such support, drawing on international data and examples from developed countries. In addition, it provides practical recommendations to enhance the availability and effectiveness of mental health services, with particular consideration of the context of Uzbekistan.

Keywords: Student mental health, service utilization, stigma, help-seeking behavior, psychological problems, higher education.

According to studies published in *The Lancet Psychiatry* in 2022, university students are at a critical stage of personal and academic development, during which they are increasingly exposed to significant psychological pressures worldwide. In particular, it has been found that approximately 35–45% of students experience substantial psychological distress during their studies, with the most common issues being anxiety, depression, and stress [1].

It is well known that many higher education institutions provide mental health services for students. However, according to a global analysis conducted by Osborn (2023), only 30–40% of university students utilize available mental health services to address their problems and stress. The reasons for this are numerous, and are particularly associated with students' concerns about their own mental health, as well as social pressures and a lack of awareness about available mental health services [2]. Understanding the factors that limit the use of these services is essential for improving mental health support systems. This article analyzes the main barriers that hinder students from seeking mental health support.

Social Influence

One of the most significant barriers to seeking psychological help is stigma, defined as negative attitudes and social pressures associated with mental health problems [3]. Many students perceive their mental health difficulties as a sign of personal weakness or failure. Studies conducted across various countries indicate that students often prefer to deal with their mental health issues on their own rather than seeking professional help. According to research carried out within the WHO World Mental Health International College Student (WMH-ICS) initiative, although 56.4% of students worldwide experience mental health problems, they tend to prefer self-management over seeking professional support [4].

Furthermore, some students view seeking help for mental health issues as an indication of “weakness.” They fear being judged as “weak” by others, which discourages them from accessing support services. A study conducted in Jordan in 2023 found that 84.7% of participants expressed negative attitudes toward professional psychological help, with higher levels of stigma observed particularly among males, individuals who had experienced the loss of a loved one, and those who considered seeking psychological help to be “shameful” [5].

Structural and Practical Barriers

Structural and practical factors further exacerbate the challenges students face in utilizing mental health services. A survey conducted among students from more than 17 higher education institutions in South Africa found that 77.1% of students encountered barriers such as high costs, long waiting times, and a lack of knowledge about where to seek help when attempting to access support centers. These factors create significant difficulties for students in using mental health services [6]. In the context of Uzbekistan, although psychological support provided by university psychologists is often free of charge, a major barrier remains students' lack of awareness about these services and uncertainty about how to access them.

Similarly, in the United States, despite the availability of psychological services, many students report long waiting times for appointments. According to a study published in Time magazine, students are often required to wait several weeks to receive help, which can further exacerbate their mental health problems [7].

Cultural Adaptation and Information Barriers

One of the key barriers to help-seeking is related to issues of cultural compatibility and lack of information. In many countries, particularly in developing contexts, mental health services are not adequately tailored to meet the needs of students. As a result, students often perceive these services as culturally unfamiliar or "alien." For example, a study conducted in Kosovo found that concerns about confidentiality are widespread among university students, which reduces their willingness to use mental health services [8].

Moreover, international research indicates that services lacking cultural adaptation tend to be less effective. Studies conducted by Sue (2009) demonstrate that the absence of cultural sensitivity in psychotherapy leads many individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds to discontinue psychological services prematurely. Services that fail to take cultural differences into account may appear irrelevant or inaccessible to students [9].

In addition, many students lack sufficient information about available mental health services. According to a study conducted by Hunt and Eisenberg (2010) in U.S. universities, one of the major barriers to help-seeking is students' lack of clear knowledge regarding the availability, location, and procedures for accessing mental health services. This information gap significantly reduces motivation to seek help, particularly among first-year students. Many students are not fully aware of the mental health resources available to them, which contributes to lower utilization rates of these services [10].

Developed countries have made significant efforts to address barriers to student mental health support. These initiatives provide important lessons for other regions, including Uzbekistan.

Conclusion

The experience of developed countries demonstrates that barriers to help-seeking are not only related to the availability or quality of services, but are also directly associated with cultural stigma, lack of information, distrust, and the complexity of accessing resources.

Although official data on mental health services in Uzbekistan remain limited, the key barriers to help-seeking identified in international research are also evident among university students. Factors such as cultural stigma, lack of awareness about psychological services, insufficient adaptation of services, and the perception of help-seeking as a sign of weakness continue to be highly relevant. Therefore, studying and adapting international best practices to the local context is of particular importance, especially in increasing the utilization of mental health services among students.

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