

## **ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: INSIGHTS FROM RECENT REASEARCH**

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**Abstract.** Mental health difficulties are increasingly recognized as a major concern among university students worldwide. Most recent research shows that psychological distress and common mental disorders are highly prevalent students, often affecting their academic performance, relationships, and future career prospects. This article explore why although there is a range of services available, access and utilization remain uneven due to systemic barriers and fragmented support structures limiting effective care. Special consideration is given to the context of Uzbekistan, where student mental health services are still developing.

**Keywords:** mental health, psychological distress, service utilization, early intervention, mental disorder, symptoms.

In these days, evidences of marked increase of psychological difficulties among university students have made the need for the mental health awareness an area of growing concern within this population. Because university students are usually at a critical developmental stage, they often experience high levels of psychological distress that can vary between normal emotional fluctuations and more severe mental health disorders [1]. International scientists have found recently that around 35% of first-year students report symptoms that indicate a lifetime mental disorder, and 31.4% experience symptoms within a 12-month period. Furthermore, longitudinal studies across some European countries and the United States over the past decade reveal a rising prevalence of psychological distress and common mental disorders among students. Although suicidal behavior remains lower among students compared to non-student peers, the fact that it has similarly increased during the last decade (4.3%) must be considered [1].

The consequences of untreated mental health difficulties among university students are profound, and are increasing. They encompass academic under-performance, interpersonal relationship breakdowns, and exclusion from the

workforce. It has also been found that financial and academic pressures may further exacerbate these outcomes, as they are now greater than two decades ago. Despite the clear and pressing fact need for mental health support has risen, access to these services remains inconsistent.

Recent international evidence indicates that universities in many countries lack counseling services for students, especially those, which fall under developing or least developed countries category. While in high-income countries, a range of services exists, they are not commonly used because most of the services are often fragmented, poorly coordinated, and significantly underutilized. As an example, research by Osborn et al. indicates that only about one-third of students in the United States reportedly use these services, with substantial disparities in access regarding gender, ethnicity, age, and institutional factors [1]. Furthermore, other factors, such as stigma, lack of awareness, confidentiality concerns, perceived ineffectiveness of services, and cost serve as barriers in accessing the services and contribute to delays or avoidance in help-seeking behavior. Which is why, according to international statistics, a considerable number of students who could benefit from professional mental health services never access them [1].

In understanding these patterns, it is crucial to recognize the internal processes that influence students’ decision-making. Thornicroft et al. introduce the concept of the "internal help-seeking pathway," which refers to the steps individuals take from recognizing a mental health need to deciding whether to seek formal care [2]. According this model, students first evaluate their symptoms, weigh the perceived costs and benefits of seeking help, and consider their own self-reliance and coping abilities before making a decision. And the barriers at any point in this pathway can prevent access to professional support (minimizing symptoms, fearing stigma, or believing that they should handle problems independently). Thornicroft and colleagues also emphasize the importance of improving mental health literacy in order to help students in decision-making [2].

Although international evidence of the review was emphasized above, its findings are highly relevant to the context of Uzbekistan. This country lacks systematic research on the mental health needs of university students, and the available data, such as the 2021 UNICEF Uzbekistan report, suggest that approximately 25% of adolescents experience symptoms of anxiety or

depression [3]. However, University-based mental health services remain limited, with most support focusing on academic counseling rather than clinical interventions. Given these challenges, there is a pressing need for universities to adopt a more holistic and proactive approach to student mental health, and it is very important to develop coordinated, accessible, and culturally appropriate mental health services within Uzbekistan's higher education institutions. Encouraging earlier intervention and reducing the overall burden of mental illness among university populations can be effectively addressed by programs that strengthen mental health literacy, normalize seeking professional help, and provide diverse, culturally sensitive service options.

In conclusion, despite the fact that good progress has been made in recognizing and addressing student mental health needs in recent years, many issues, such as service provision, utilization, and effectiveness still remain stable. Improving mental health outcomes for university students are often underscored and has become complex because of the intersection of factors, such as psychological attitudes, social support structures, systemic barriers, and policy environments. At the end, the best strategy to moving forward and bringing positive changes would be a coordinated, evidence-based approach that combines individual, institutional, and societal efforts, which are necessary to ensure that all students receive the mental health support they need to thrive academically, socially, and personally.

#### **References:**

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