

SRUDENT MENTAL HEALTH: BARRIERS TO ACCESS AND STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE INTERVENTION

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Abstract. Despite growing recognition of the importance of mental health in student populations, service provision and utilization remain limited and inconsistent across the world. Psychological distress among university students has been linked to a range of negative academic, social, and emotional outcomes, yet many students still do not access the care they need. This is due to a complex interplay of internal, institutional, and societal barriers, including stigma, limited awareness, and fragmented services. This article critically explores international trends in mental health service provision, argues for a coordinated, multi-level approach that strengthens early intervention, promotes mental health literacy, and ensures that university – based services are culturally sensitive, accessible, and responsive to student needs.

Keywords: student mental health, service utilization, stigma, help-seeking, psychological distress.

University life can be both exciting and overwhelming. Students often deal with academic stress, personal challenges, and transitions that can affect their mental well-being. While many universities now offer counseling services, a surprising number of students don’t use them – even when they’re struggling. This article explores the key reasons why students avoid counseling and what might help encourage them to seek support when they need it.

One of the biggest reasons students hold back from going to counseling is the stigma around mental health. Some students worry about what others will think if they find out they’re getting help, while others start believing the negative ideas themselves. These two types of stigma – public and self-stigma – are closely connected. When students internalize society’s views, they may begin to feel weak or ashamed for needing help, making it even harder to reach out [1]. Sadly, this can create a cycle where fear of judgment stops people from getting the support they deserve. A student’s social circle plays a powerful role in whether they choose to seek help. Many students are more likely to consider counseling if someone they trust – like a close friend or family member –

recommends it [1]. But sometimes, fear of being misunderstood or judged by others leads students to hide what they’re going through. In fact, most students prefer to talk to a peer first before turning to a counselor. How they view counseling and what they expect from it also matters. If they don’t think it will help or feel unsure about the process, they’re unlikely to take the first step.

Apart from stigma and social influence, there are everyday reasons why students avoid counseling. Scheduling issues, long wait times, and uncertainty about confidentiality can all get in the way [1]. Some students also worry that the counselor might not understand them or be able to help. Interestingly, male students are often more hesitant than female students when it comes to seeking help, possibly due to stronger negative stereotypes. On top of that, students sometimes believe their problems aren’t “serious enough” for counseling. Struggles like sleeplessness, anxiety, or low mood are often normalized rather than seen as reasons to get support.

Even though awareness of mental health is improving, research shows that only around one in three university students actually use mental health services during their time at university [2]. In wealthier countries like the U.S. or Canada, services are often available on campus – but they’re still underused, especially by international students. In one study, just 2.6% of international students accessed mental health support, compared to much higher numbers among domestic students. Language barriers, unfamiliar systems, and feeling like an outsider are just some of the reasons behind this gap.

Many students don’t fully understand what counseling involves or how it could help them. If they’ve never been taught about mental health, or if no one has explained how to access services, they’re unlikely to explore that option on their own [1]. This is especially true in environments where counseling isn’t openly talked about. Some universities don’t provide enough information about their services or fail to reach students in ways that feel relevant and approachable.

In countries with fewer resources, students face even more challenges. A lack of trained mental health professionals, high costs, and poor infrastructure mean that even those who want help might not be able to get it [3]. But these problems aren’t limited to developing countries. Even in well-funded institutions, if services are fragmented, slow, or not tailored to students’ needs, they can feel out of reach or ineffective.

Having a good support system makes a huge difference. Students who feel connected and supported are more likely to seek help, while those who feel isolated are more likely to stay silent [3]. For students from minority or marginalized backgrounds, services that are culturally insensitive or discriminatory can feel unsafe. This highlights the need for more inclusive, student-centered approaches that reflect the diversity of today’s university campuses.

Interestingly, research shows that it’s not about who you are – it’s about what you believe. Factors like gender, ethnicity, or what subject you study aren’t strong predictors of who goes to counseling. Instead, personal attitudes and beliefs matter more [1]. Many students say they’d go to counseling if they really needed it – but when the moment comes, doubts, fears, or logistical issues often stop them. Even those who start counseling often stop after one or two sessions due to dissatisfaction or difficulty fitting it into their schedules.

Mental health struggles are common among university students, but many still hesitate to seek the help they need. Whether it’s because of stigma, lack of information, social pressure, or practical barriers, these challenges can stop students from getting support at a crucial time in their lives. By improving awareness, making services more accessible and inclusive, and addressing students’ real concerns, universities can help create an environment where mental health is taken seriously – and where asking for help is seen as a strength, not a weakness.

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