



Professional Help-Seeking Among University Students: Awareness, Barriers, and Preferences for Psychological Support

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ABSTRACT

University students frequently experience psychological difficulties; however, many do not seek professional support despite the availability of psychological services. The present study examined awareness of psychological services, help-seeking attitudes, perceived barriers, and support preferences among students of Uzbekistan State World Languages University. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 235 students using an anonymous online questionnaire.

The findings revealed that many students reported academic stress, emotional distress, and concerns about the future. Although most respondents were aware of the university's psychological services, only a small proportion indicated that they would seek help from a psychologist. Students demonstrated a stronger preference for informal support from family members and friends, while many expressed willingness to use anonymous online psychological support. Self-reliance, stigma-related concerns, and perceptions that professional assistance was unnecessary emerged as common barriers to help-seeking.

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Introduction

Mental health concerns among university students have become an increasingly important issue in higher education worldwide. During the transition from late adolescence to emerging adulthood, students experience substantial academic, social, and personal changes that may affect their psychological well-being. While this developmental period is often associated with identity exploration, growing independence, and new educational opportunities, it may also increase vulnerability to stress, emotional difficulties, and mental health problems (Arnett, 2000; Sussman & Arnett, 2014).

Research has consistently demonstrated that the university years coincide with the peak age of onset for many common mental disorders, particularly depression, anxiety disorders, and substance use disorders (Auerbach et al., 2018; Kessler et al., 2007). Moreover, a considerable number of students enter higher education with already established mental health conditions, suggesting that psychological difficulties often precede university enrollment rather than emerge exclusively during academic studies. Findings from the World Mental Health International College Student Initiative indicate that approximately one-third of university

students experience at least one common mental disorder within a 12-month period, highlighting the scale of this challenge across different countries (Auerbach et al., 2018).

The importance of addressing student mental health extends beyond emotional well-being alone. Mental health difficulties have been associated with reduced educational attainment, poorer academic performance, increased risk of university attrition, and disruptions in social functioning (Auerbach et al., 2016; Bruffaerts et al., 2018). When left untreated, psychological problems may progress into more severe conditions, negatively affecting students' quality of life and future development. Therefore, promoting mental health among university students should be viewed not only as a healthcare priority but also as an important educational objective.

In parallel with these challenges, students frequently encounter substantial academic stress. Academic workloads, examinations, competition, financial concerns, family expectations, and difficulties adapting to new educational environments represent some of the most commonly reported sources of stress among university students (Misra & Castillo, 2004; Reddy et al., 2018). Previous research suggests that academic stress may contribute to emotional exhaustion, reduced motivation, lower psychological well-being, and poorer academic outcomes. At the same time, social support and adaptive coping strategies appear to play an important protective role in helping students manage these demands and maintain psychological well-being.

Recognizing the growing prevalence of mental health difficulties among students, many universities have expanded psychological support services through counseling centers, peer-support initiatives, mental health awareness programmes, and more recently, digital interventions. Despite the availability of these resources and the existence of effective treatments, many students experiencing psychological distress do not seek professional support. Research suggests that while a substantial proportion of students express intentions to seek help, considerably fewer translate these intentions into actual help-seeking behaviors (Zhao et al., 2025). Several explanations have been proposed for this discrepancy. Students often prefer to manage their difficulties independently, underestimate the seriousness of their symptoms, or lack knowledge regarding available support services. Other commonly reported barriers include lack of time, concerns about privacy, perceived stigma, and doubts regarding the effectiveness of professional support (Gulliver et al., 2010; Zhao et al., 2025). Consequently, a significant gap remains between students' mental health needs and their utilization of available services.

Recent research suggests that digital and internet-based mental health interventions may offer promising opportunities for addressing this gap, particularly for students who value autonomy or encounter barriers to accessing traditional psychological services. Nevertheless, understanding students' mental health experiences, awareness of available support, and help-seeking preferences remains essential for developing effective and accessible mental health initiatives within higher education.

Although international research has provided valuable insights into student mental health, evidence from Uzbekistan remains limited. Therefore, the present study aims to examine stress, emotional well-being, existential concerns, awareness of psychological services, and help-seeking attitudes among students of Uzbekistan State World Languages University. By exploring students' experiences and perceptions related to mental health, this study seeks to contribute to the development of evidence-based recommendations for strengthening psychological support services within higher education institutions.

Method

Participants

The study was conducted among students of Uzbekistan State World Languages University. A total of 235 students voluntarily participated in an anonymous online survey administered through Google Forms. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study prior to completing the questionnaire. No personally identifiable information was collected, ensuring participants' confidentiality and encouraging honest responses.

Design and Procedure

The study employed a cross-sectional quantitative research design. Data were collected using an online questionnaire developed for the purposes of assessing students' mental health experiences, awareness of psychological services, and help-seeking attitudes. The survey was distributed electronically among university students, and responses were collected anonymously.

Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences during the previous two weeks. Most items were rated using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (Never) to 4 (Almost every day). Additional questions assessed awareness of university psychological services, preferred sources of support during psychological difficulties, willingness to use psychological services, and perceived barriers to professional help-seeking.

Measures

The questionnaire consisted of five thematic sections.

The first section assessed perceived academic stress and included items related to academic pressure, exhaustion associated with coursework, and insufficient time for rest.

The second section examined emotional well-being through questions addressing sadness, irritability, and emotional distress.

The third section explored existential and social experiences, including loneliness, anxiety regarding the future, feelings of meaninglessness, and social withdrawal.

The fourth section focused on students' awareness of psychological services available within the university and their preferred sources of support when experiencing psychological difficulties.

The fifth section examined students' perceptions of mental health difficulties among their peers, willingness to use anonymous psychological support services, and perceived barriers to seeking professional psychological help.

Although the questionnaire assessed several dimensions of student mental health, the present study primarily focuses on help-seeking attitudes, awareness of psychological services, and students' preferences regarding psychological support. Mental health indicators were included to provide contextual information regarding the psychological challenges experienced by the participants.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted using response frequencies and percentages. The analysis focused primarily on students' awareness of available psychological services, preferred help-seeking sources, willingness to seek professional support, and attitudes toward anonymous psychological services. Findings related to academic stress, emotional well-being, and existential concerns were used to contextualize help-seeking patterns and provide a broader understanding of students' psychological experiences.

The results are presented using descriptive statistics and graphical representations generated from the survey data.

Results

Psychological Distress Among Students

The findings suggest that psychological distress is a notable concern among the surveyed students. Responses related to academic stress indicated that a substantial proportion of participants experienced academic pressure, exhaustion associated with coursework, and insufficient time for rest during the previous two weeks. Many students reported feeling overwhelmed by academic responsibilities and described difficulties maintaining an appropriate balance between study demands and personal recovery time.

Emotional well-being indicators revealed that a considerable number of students experienced symptoms such as sadness and irritability. Furthermore, future-related anxiety emerged as one of the most prominent concerns reported by participants. Feelings of loneliness and social withdrawal were also reported by some students, although these experiences appeared less prevalent than concerns regarding academic demands and uncertainty about the future. Taken together, these findings suggest that many students experience psychological challenges that may negatively affect their well-being and academic functioning.

Awareness of Psychological Services and Help-Seeking Preferences

Despite the presence of psychological difficulties, most students reported being aware of the psychological services available at the university. Specifically, 73.2% of respondents indicated that they knew a psychological service existed within the institution, whereas approximately one-quarter reported being unaware of such services.

However, awareness of psychological services did not appear to translate into professional help-seeking. When asked whom they would approach if they experienced psychological difficulties, students demonstrated a strong preference for informal sources of support. Family members were the most frequently selected source of support (45.5%), followed by friends (41.3%). In contrast, only 6.8% of respondents indicated that they would seek help from a psychologist. Notably, 38.7% reported that they would not seek help from anyone. These findings reveal a substantial discrepancy between students' awareness of available psychological services and their willingness to utilize professional psychological support.

Attitudes Toward Psychological Support and Alternative Sources of Assistance

Participants were also asked whether they would use an anonymous online psychological support service if such a resource were available. The majority of respondents (70.6%) indicated that they would use this type of service, suggesting a high level of interest in confidential and easily accessible forms of psychological support.

Students' perceptions regarding help-seeking barriers further supported this finding. When asked why university students often avoid consulting psychologists, respondents most frequently identified the belief that psychological assistance was unnecessary. Other commonly reported reasons included feelings of embarrassment or shame, fear of negative judgment from others, and concerns about discussing personal problems with a professional.

Taken together, these findings suggest that reluctance to seek professional help may not necessarily reflect a lack of psychological need. Rather, students appear to prefer informal or anonymous forms of support, potentially due to concerns related to stigma, privacy, self-reliance, or perceptions regarding the necessity of professional psychological assistance.

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine students' psychological well-being, awareness of psychological services, and help-seeking attitudes at Uzbekistan State World Languages University. The findings suggest that while many students experience psychological difficulties, professional help-seeking remains relatively limited despite substantial awareness of available psychological services. These results contribute to the growing body of literature highlighting the gap between psychological need and utilization of mental health support among university students.

First, the findings indicate that psychological distress is a relevant concern among the surveyed students. Many participants reported experiencing academic pressure, emotional exhaustion, sadness, and concerns regarding their future. These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that the transition to emerging adulthood is accompanied by numerous academic, social, and personal challenges that may increase vulnerability to psychological distress (Arnett, 2000; Auerbach et al., 2018). Similarly, previous studies have identified academic stress as one of the most significant sources of psychological burden among university students and have linked it to reduced well-being, emotional exhaustion, and poorer academic outcomes (Pascoe et al., 2020). The presence of these difficulties among participants highlights the importance of providing accessible and effective mental health support within higher education institutions.

A particularly noteworthy finding of the present study is the discrepancy between awareness of psychological services and willingness to utilize them. Although the majority of students reported being aware of the psychological services available at the university, only a small proportion indicated that they would seek support from a psychologist when experiencing psychological difficulties. Instead, students demonstrated a stronger preference for informal sources of support, particularly family members and friends. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that awareness of services alone is insufficient to promote professional help-seeking behavior (Zhao et al., 2025). International studies similarly report that many

students experiencing psychological distress rely primarily on informal support networks or attempt to cope independently rather than accessing professional mental health services.

The finding that a substantial proportion of respondents would not seek help from anyone is particularly concerning. Previous studies have identified self-reliance as one of the most common barriers to professional help-seeking among young adults (Gulliver et al., 2010; Zhao et al., 2025). Emerging adulthood is characterized by increasing autonomy and a desire for independence, which may contribute to the belief that personal difficulties should be managed without outside assistance. While self-reliance may promote resilience in some situations, excessive reliance on individual coping strategies may prevent students from receiving timely support when psychological difficulties become more severe.

The results also provide insight into potential barriers that discourage students from seeking professional psychological assistance. Participants identified factors such as embarrassment, fear of negative judgment, and perceptions that psychological support may be unnecessary. Similar barriers have been reported across different cultural contexts and continue to represent significant obstacles to service utilization among university students (Gulliver et al., 2010; Zhao et al., 2025). These findings suggest that increasing the availability of services alone may not be sufficient. Universities should also focus on improving mental health literacy, reducing stigma, and normalizing help-seeking behavior through educational initiatives and awareness campaigns.

One of the most promising findings of the present study concerns students' attitudes toward anonymous psychological support. A large majority of respondents indicated that they would be willing to use an anonymous online psychological support service if such a resource were available. This finding is particularly important because it suggests that students may not be opposed to receiving psychological support itself, but rather to the perceived social and personal barriers associated with traditional face-to-face services. Similar conclusions have been drawn in recent research emphasizing the potential value of digital mental health interventions, online counseling, and internet-based self-help programmes for university students (Taylor et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2025). Anonymous and easily accessible forms of support may therefore represent an effective strategy for reaching students who might otherwise avoid seeking help.

Several practical implications emerge from these findings. Universities should continue developing psychological support services while simultaneously addressing barriers that prevent students from using them. Mental health awareness programmes, psychoeducational workshops, peer-support initiatives, and digital mental health resources may help improve students' willingness to seek support when needed. Furthermore, the strong interest in anonymous psychological services observed in the present study suggests that universities may benefit from integrating confidential online support options into existing mental health systems.

The present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample was drawn from a single university, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to students from other institutions or regions. In addition, the use of self-report measures may have introduced response biases. Future research may benefit from including students from multiple universities and exploring help-seeking behavior through both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insight into students' mental health experiences and help-seeking attitudes within the context of higher education in Uzbekistan. The findings suggest that psychological need exists among students; however, awareness of available services does not necessarily translate into professional help-seeking. Addressing this gap may require not only the expansion of psychological services but also the development of accessible, confidential, and stigma-sensitive forms of support that better correspond to students' preferences and needs.

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