



Association between Psychological Distress and Mental Help-Seeking Intention among Undergraduate Students; A Cross-Sectional Study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Psychological distress has a crucial association with mental help-seeking intentions among undergraduate. Psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and stress, significantly affects the academic performance of undergraduate students. Depression, anxiety, and psychological distress in India, undergrads have a 63.1%, and 22.9% experienced suicidal ideation. **Aim of study:** To assess the association between mental distress and mental health help-seeking intention among undergraduate students. **Material and Methods:** The descriptive quantitative cross-sectional study design was used to assess the association between mental distress and mental health help-seeking intention among undergraduate students, the estimated sample was calculated by OpenEpi which is 279, and a nonrandom purposive sampling technique was used to collect data. There were three parts of the questionnaire used in the study. The first part was about the socio-demographic data of the participants and the second part was used to collect the mental help-seeking intention scale and the third part patient health questionnaire (PHQ-9) is used which has 10 questions if the issues plugged you in the past 2 weeks. SPSS was used for data analysis. **Results:** A total of 287 undergraduate students (mean age 21.42±2.75 years, 48.8% male, 51.2% female. Majority of the students, 178 (62%) fall in moderate intention level followed by greater intention, 56 (20%). A significant association was observed between psychological distress and mental help-seeking intentions. ($p < 0.05$). While insignificant and weak negative correlation ($r = -0.096$) was found between scores of Psychological distress and mental help-seeking intentions ($p > 0.05$). **Conclusion:** Most of the students are experiencing mental distress. These findings highlight that there is an urgent need for mental health intervention to address the issues comprehensively. Efforts should be to reduce mental distress and deal with depression. Future research should focus on a longitudinal approach to further study the mental health of undergraduates and the effectiveness of interventional strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Psychological distress has a crucial association with mental help-seeking intentions among undergraduates. Studies have reported that psychological distress is significantly associated with coping strategies among undergraduates, which results in the stigma of help-seeking behavior, which eventually affects professional help-seeking intentions (1-3). Additionally, some of the factors, such as gender, years abroad, residence type, and family history of psychological disorders, have been reported as causes of psychological distress and intention to seek professional mental help (4, 5).

Psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and stress, significantly affects the academic performance of undergraduate students. Studies showed

that scholarship-awardee undergraduate nursing students frequently experience psychological distress, with severe anxiety symptoms impacting their academic performance (6). A study showed that stress management programs have improved psychological distress and academic achievement for university entrance test applicants, emphasizing the adverse effects of distress on performance (7). Furthermore, psychological distress among adolescents has a significant association with lower academic performance and involvement in harmful behavior such as substance abuse and chronic illnesses, highlighting the multidimensional effect of distress on academic performance (8-10).

Depression, anxiety, and psychological distress among undergraduate students in Pakistan and India are very high based on previous studies; in India, undergrads have a 63.1% prevalence of psychological distress, 27.8% were depressed, and 22.9% experienced suicidal ideation (11). Similarly, In Pakistan, studies reported that 67.5% of medical undergraduate student’s experience anxiety, whereas 58% of students are depressed (12). Research on medical students showed that distress levels up to 90%, with academic burden being a significant factor of psychological distress (13).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The descriptive quantitative cross-sectional study design was used to assess the association between mental distress and mental health help-seeking intention among undergraduate students; the estimated sample was calculated by OpenEpi, which is 279, and a nonrandom purposive sampling technique was used to collect data from the study participants. Data was collected in March 2024 from undergraduate students of three colleges. Male and female undergraduate students from first year to final year and aged 18 years to 35 years were included in the study. Written informed consent was taken from each participant, those who refused to participate in the study, age greater than 35 or less than 18 were exclude from the study. Three parts of the questionnaire were used in the study. The first part was about the socio-demographic data of the participants, the second part was used to collect the mental help-seeking intention scale, and the third part was a patient health questionnaire (PHQ-9), which has ten questions if the issues plugged you in the past 2 weeks. The ethical approval was taken from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Memon Medical Institute Hospital Karachi, approval number (IRB/MMIH/2024/07). Informed consent was taken from each participant. This study has no risk; no adverse outcomes are expected for the participants. All the information was kept confidential and would not be used other than for research purposes.

All the descriptive and analytical analysis were performed using SPSS version 25; a p-value less than or equal to 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

A total of 287 undergraduate students were included in this study. The mean age was 21.42±2.75 years. The frequency of males was 140 (48.8%) and females 147 (51.2%). The majority of the students belong to the first year, 118 (41.1%), followed by second-year students, 91 (31.7%). Most of the students, 240 (83.6%) did not meet a health professional. Baseline details are depicted in Table 1.

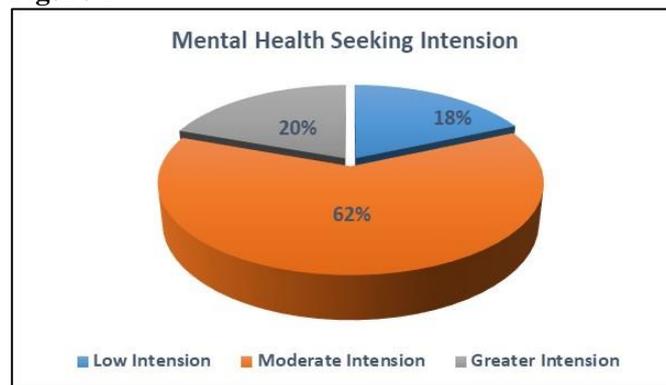
Table 1

Baseline Characteristics in accordance with score of help-seeking intention

Demographics	N (%)	Score (Mean ±S.D)	p-value
Age			
17 -22	208 (72.5)	12.61±4.38	0.809
23 - 28	70 (24.4)	12.99±4.54	
29 – 34	9 (13)	13.00±4.38	
Gender			
Male	141 (49.12)	12.83±4.50	0.655
Female	146 (50.87)	12.60±4.34	
Year of Study			
1st year	118 (41.1)	12.72±4.23	0.214
2nd year	91 (31.7)	13.36±4.77	
3rd year	53 (18.5)	11.83±4.21	
4th year	25 (8.7)	12.16±4.17	
DPT Students			
Hostel	82 (28.6)	12.46±4.46	0.678
Alone	28 (9.8)	13.54±4.66	
With family	174 (60.6)	12.72±4.33	
Other	3 (1)	11.33±6.80	
Have you ever met a mental health professional?			
No	240 (83.6)	12.86±4.32	0.368
Yes, it was diagnosed but not treated	20 (7)	11.25±5.58	
Yes, treated with medication	17 (5.9)	11.94±4.17	
Yes, treated with psychotherapy	10 (3.5)	13.30±4.45	

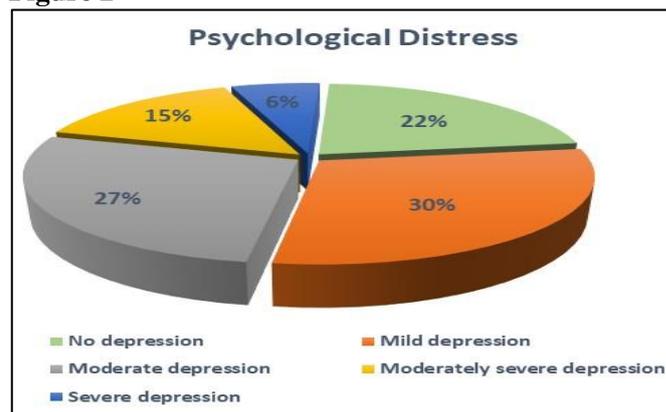
Majority of the students, 178 (62%) falls in moderate intention level followed by greater intention, 56 (20%) Figure 1.

Figure 1



While most of the students suffered from mild depression, 85 (30%), followed by moderate depression, 78 (27.18%). Figure 2.

Figure 2



The overall mean score of mental health-seeking intention and psychological distress was 12.71 ± 4.41 and 9.89 ± 6.02 , respectively. ($p < 0.05$).

A significant association was observed between psychological distress and mental help-seeking intention. ($p < 0.05$). Table 2. An insignificant and weak negative correlation ($r = -0.096$) was found between scores of psychological distress and mental help-seeking intention. ($p > 0.05$).

Table 2

Association between psychological distress and mental help-seeking

Psychological Distress Scale	Mental Help Seeking Scale			p-value
	Low Intention (1-8)	Moderate Intention (9-15)	Greater Intention (>15)	
No depression (1-4)	10 (15.9)	39 (61.9)	14 (22.2)	
Mild depression (5-9)	19 (22.4)	47 (55.3)	19 (22.4)	
Moderate depression (10-14)	12 (15.4)	53 (67.9)	13 (16.7)	0.001
Moderately severe depression (15-19)	11 (25.6)	27 (62.8)	5 (11.6)	
Severe depression (>20)	1 (5.6)	12 (66.7)	5 (27.8)	

DISCUSSION

In the study, we examined the psychological distress and mental help-seeking intention among undergraduates; most of the participants did not meet a healthcare professional for mental health (14). It was observed that 30% of the study participants have mild depression; the observed rates in our study are higher than those previously reported, which indicated a rate of 24.5% for depression in the USA (15).

Our study showed a significant association between mental health-seeking intention and depression ($p < 0.05$), which is consistent with previous studies that showed a significant association between depression and mental help-seeking behavior (5, 14, 16, 17).

Furthermore, in our study, psychological distress was about two-thirds of the participants, as opposed to

previous research, which reported 41.9% psychological distress (18).

Moreover, in our study there was not significant difference between gender, age and residence type to mental health seeking intention, which is contrary to previous studies that reported that socio demographic variables, including economic and marital status, have significant affect the people help seeking for mental health problems in various studies (2, 19-21).

CONCLUSIONS

The prevalence of mental distress among undergraduate students, with most students experiencing some degree of depression. These findings highlight that health intervention should be mentioned to address the issues comprehensively. Efforts should be made to reduce mental distress in dealing with depression and increase awareness

Strength

The study addressed the mental distress among undergraduate students which is very important topic to be studied and also mental help seeking intention which is very rarely studied in Pakistan.

Limitations

The study was observational and multiple-choice questions were included, which may cause potential biases and limitations in the understanding of questions. Limitations on the addition of any other detail or personal opinion and lack of any other type in the questionnaire were also limitations in the study. Furthermore, the sample size was small and the study was conducted in one city.

Recommendations

Future research should focus on a longitudinal approach to further study the mental health of undergraduates and the effectiveness of interventional strategies.

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