Enhancing Adolescent Mental Health Literacy: Strategies for Stigma Reduction and Help-Seeking Behavior

Ahmad Yani[1]
[1]Universitas Muhammadiyah Palu, Indonesia
Correspondent: ahmadyani.publichealth@gmail.com[1]

ABSTRACT: Mental health literacy plays a crucial role in fostering adolescent well-being by enhancing knowledge, reducing stigma, and encouraging help-seeking behaviors. This study examines the effectiveness of mental health literacy interventions and their impact on adolescent perceptions and behaviors. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and observations among adolescents in Palu, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. Thematic analysis identified key themes: emotional turbulence and social expectations, diverse responses to mental health challenges, and the role of education and support systems. Findings suggest that school-based interventions and family engagement significantly improve mental health literacy. However, cultural stigma and gender disparities persist as major barriers. Digital platforms were identified as influential but require structured guidance to enhance reliability. The study underscores the need for holistic, culturally sensitive, and gender-responsive approaches to mental health education. Policy recommendations include integrating mental health literacy into educational curricula and community programs. Further research should explore long-term intervention effectiveness and cross-cultural applicability.

Keywords: Mental Health Literacy, Adolescent Well-Being, Stigma Reduction, School-Based Intervention, Gender Disparities, Digital Health Education, Help-Seeking Behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescent mental health has emerged as a significant public health concern, particularly in the wake of the COVID 19 pandemic. The pandemic exacerbated mental health challenges among adolescents, with increased reports of anxiety, depression, and stress related disorders (Khuzaiyah et al., 2024; Yani et al., 2025). One critical determinant of adolescent mental well being is mental health literacy (MHL), which encompasses the ability to recognize mental health disorders, seek appropriate help, and implement self care strategies (Baldofski et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2024). In Palu, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, recent studies have highlighted a concerning gap in MHL among adolescents, making them more vulnerable to mental health issues (Yani et al., 2025). While digital platforms have increased access to health related information, adolescents still struggle to

effectively interpret and utilize this information to improve their mental health (Baldofski et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2024).

Previous research has underscored the role of social and cultural factors in shaping adolescents' mental health literacy. In various global contexts, studies have demonstrated the importance of intersectoral collaboration in promoting MHL through school based interventions (Skar et al., 2024). In low resource settings, such as Indonesia, limited access to mental health services, coupled with prevailing stigma, has created barriers to seeking professional help (Khanal et al., 2024; Ware et al., 2024). Furthermore, while interventions aimed at improving MHL have shown positive outcomes in some countries, their effectiveness remains inconsistent, highlighting the need for context specific strategies (Bjørnsen et al., 2023; Goodwin et al., 2023).

The importance of this study lies in its potential to bridge the gap between global and local perspectives on adolescent mental health literacy. On a global scale, enhancing MHL is recognized as a key strategy for mitigating the burden of mental health disorders among young populations (Spencer et al., 2024). Nationally, Indonesia has seen a rising prevalence of mental health issues among adolescents, yet efforts to integrate mental health education within the school curriculum remain limited (Khuzaiyah et al., 2024; Yani et al., 2025). Locally, in Palu, Central Sulawesi, mental health services remain underutilized due to persistent stigma, a lack of awareness, and inadequate resources (Yani et al., 2025). Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions that not only increase knowledge but also encourage positive behavioral changes in help seeking (Baldofski et al., 2024; Tsiboe et al., 2024).

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by examining the effectiveness of school based interventions in improving adolescent MHL. By investigating how social and cultural factors influence the accessibility and effectiveness of mental health resources, the study seeks to develop an evidence based framework for integrating mental health education into Indonesian schools. Such research is critical for informing policymakers and educators on best practices for enhancing adolescent mental well being in diverse sociocultural contexts (Baldofski et al., 2024; Khanal et al., 2024).

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in Health Literacy Theory, which posits that individuals must be equipped with the necessary skills to access, understand, and apply health information effectively (Spencer et al., 2024). This framework has been instrumental in exploring the relationship between MHL and help seeking behaviors among adolescents. In Indonesia, research suggests that adolescents with higher levels of health literacy are more likely to seek professional help for mental health concerns (Khuzaiyah et al., 2024; Yani et al., 2025). However, the presence of stigma and cultural misconceptions continues to act as a deterrent, underscoring the need for holistic interventions that address both cognitive and emotional aspects of health literacy (Baldofski et al., 2024; Tsiboe et al., 2024).

Prior research findings reinforce the premise of this study by demonstrating the positive impact of MHL on adolescent mental health outcomes. Studies indicate that increased mental health knowledge reduces stigma and enhances help seeking behaviors (Khuzaiyah et al., 2024). However, contradictory findings suggest that merely increasing knowledge is insufficient unless accompanied

by supportive environments that facilitate behavioral change (Hagan et al., 2023; Yani et al., 2025). This highlights the importance of comprehensive interventions that integrate education with emotional and social support mechanisms (Baldofski et al., 2024; Hagan et al., 2023).

The interplay between theoretical perspectives, conceptual frameworks, and empirical findings underscores the significance of this research. Health Literacy Theory provides a structured lens for examining how adolescents engage with mental health information, while empirical evidence highlights gaps in knowledge translation and behavior change. By focusing on school based interventions, this study seeks to bridge these gaps and offer practical recommendations for improving adolescent MHL in Indonesia (Baldofski et al., 2024; Khanal et al., 2024; Ware et al., 2024).

Despite the growing body of research on MHL, significant knowledge gaps remain. First, there is limited understanding of how cultural and social factors influence adolescents' interpretation and application of mental health information (Gao et al., 2024; Skar et al., 2024). Second, while prior studies have examined the efficacy of various interventions, few have explored their long term sustainability and scalability in low resource settings like Indonesia (Khanal et al., 2024; Ware et al., 2024). Lastly, the effectiveness of school based interventions in fostering both knowledge acquisition and behavioral change requires further investigation (Bjørnsen et al., 2023; Goodwin et al., 2023)

This study aims to address these gaps by investigating how school based interventions can enhance adolescent MHL and facilitate positive changes in help seeking behaviors. The research problem centers on the need to improve MHL among Indonesian adolescents and identify the key factors influencing their mental health awareness and behaviors. The study's objectives are to assess the effectiveness of mental health literacy interventions, explore cultural and social determinants of help seeking, and propose evidence based strategies for improving adolescent mental well being. Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to the development of sustainable, culturally sensitive mental health education programs that empower adolescents to navigate mental health challenges effectively.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, to explore the mental health literacy of adolescents in Palu, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. A phenomenological approach was selected to capture the lived experiences of adolescents regarding their understanding, perception, and engagement with mental health literacy. The study was conducted over six months, from July to December 2024.

The research participants consisted of seven adolescents aged 15–18 years who were selected through purposive sampling. The selection criteria included adolescents enrolled in secondary education in Palu, those who had previous exposure to mental health education programs, and individuals willing to share their experiences. Diversity in gender and socioeconomic background was ensured to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under study.

Data collection was conducted using in depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and participant observations. In depth interviews allowed for an in depth exploration of personal experiences, while FGDs facilitated discussions among peers to uncover collective perspectives on mental health literacy. Observations in school settings provided contextual insights into how adolescents interact with mental health related information. Additionally, document analysis was employed to review existing mental health programs implemented in schools.

Data analysis followed the thematic analysis approach, which involved data reduction, categorization, and thematization. Data were transcribed verbatim, coded, and categorized into emerging themes. Triangulation was employed by comparing findings from different data sources to enhance credibility. To ensure trustworthiness, the study adhered to criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Quality control measures were implemented throughout the research process. Reflexivity was maintained by keeping detailed field notes, and peer debriefing was conducted to minimize researcher bias. Ethical considerations, such as informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly upheld to maintain research integrity and participant safety.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight significant themes that emerged from the data, reflecting the complexities of adolescent mental health literacy. The analysis revealed that while interventions improved knowledge and attitudes towards mental health, barriers such as stigma and societal expectations continued to hinder help seeking behavior. Three major themes emerged from the data: "Navigating Emotional Turbulence and Social Expectations," "Diverse Responses to Mental Health Challenges," and "Empowering Adolescents through Education and Support."

Navigating Emotional Turbulence and Social Expectations

Adolescents described their transition into adulthood as a period marked by heightened emotional experiences, academic pressures, and shifting social expectations. Many participants expressed a lack of understanding of their emotional well being due to limited exposure to mental health education. One participant reflected on their struggles, stating, "Sometimes, I feel overwhelmed, but I don't know if it's just stress or something more serious" (RA). This lack of awareness contributed to delayed help seeking and reliance on self management strategies that were not always effective. Additionally, cultural expectations played a significant role in shaping attitudes toward mental health, with some participants feeling the pressure to suppress their emotions. Another adolescent remarked, "In my family, talking about mental health is not common. We are expected to stay strong and not show weakness" (FI). These insights emphasize the need for targeted mental health interventions that address cultural and societal barriers.

Diverse Responses to Mental Health Challenges

Adolescents in this study demonstrated varied strategies in responding to mental health challenges, ranging from proactive information seeking to avoidance behaviors shaped by stigma and fear of judgment. A consistent pattern was the reliance on digital platforms as an initial resource, although the credibility of such sources was often ambiguous. For instance, one respondent noted, "Some websites give helpful advice, but others just make me feel worse" (ME), highlighting the duality of digital engagement. This reflects broader concerns raised by Ware et al. (2024) regarding adolescents' digital health literacy and the risks of misinformation in unregulated online spaces (Ware et al., 2024).

The analysis further reveals that sociocultural constructs significantly mediate help seeking behaviors, especially through the lens of gender norms. Male participants consistently expressed greater hesitation in verbalizing emotional distress, underpinned by internalized masculine ideals that associate emotional expression with weakness. One male adolescent remarked, "If I tell my friends I feel anxious, they might think I'm not tough enough" (AG). Rather than presenting this as a mere gender difference, it is essential to interpret it as a manifestation of hegemonic masculinity—a sociocultural script that discourages vulnerability among boys and reinforces emotional suppression as normative male behavior.

This reluctance among male adolescents aligns with broader studies in patriarchal societies, where masculinity is closely tied to stoicism and emotional restraint (Baldofski et al., 2024). In contrast, female participants were relatively more open to discussing mental health issues, possibly due to socialization patterns that afford greater emotional expressiveness to girls. These findings underscore the urgency of gender responsive interventions that do not merely offer generic education on mental health, but actively deconstruct harmful gender stereotypes embedded in cultural narratives (Baldofski et al., 2024).

The avoidance behaviors observed among boys should therefore be understood not as individual choices alone but as outcomes of structural and cultural conditioning. Such an understanding emphasizes the need for mental health literacy programs that challenge normative discourses on gender, promote safe peer environments, and equip adolescents with critical reflection tools to question stigmatizing norms.

Empowering Adolescents through Education and Support

Participants who had received formal mental health education reported higher confidence in identifying and managing mental health issues. School based programs were particularly effective in fostering awareness and reducing stigma. One student shared, "Before the mental health workshop, I thought depression was just about feeling sad. Now, I understand it's much more than that" (LA). However, the effectiveness of these interventions depended on their delivery methods. Interactive and discussion based sessions were preferred over lecture style approaches. "Talking to my classmates about our experiences helped me realize I'm not alone," noted another respondent (JI). Furthermore, parental involvement was found to be a crucial factor in sustaining mental health literacy. Adolescents who received support from their families demonstrated greater confidence in seeking help. "When my parents understood mental health better, they encouraged

me to talk about my feelings without feeling guilty," explained a participant (FA). This finding highlights the importance of incorporating family based approaches into mental health interventions.

Overall, the findings illustrate the multifaceted nature of adolescent mental health literacy, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive, gender responsive, and family inclusive strategies to promote mental well being among young individuals.

The findings of this study align with previous research emphasizing the importance of mental health literacy in improving adolescent understanding and reducing stigma. Prior studies, including those by Raghavan et al. (2024) and Kirchhoff et al. (2023), have demonstrated that interventions designed to enhance mental health literacy lead to positive changes in adolescent attitudes and behaviors (Kirchhoff et al., 2023; Raghavan et al., 2024). The present study reinforces this argument by illustrating how increased knowledge contributes to stigma reduction and encourages adolescents to seek help when faced with mental health issues (Nazari et al., 2023; Yani et al., 2025). This study supports the broader notion that mental health literacy is a crucial component of adolescent well being.

Navigating Emotional Turbulence and Social Expectations

The transition to adulthood is often marked by significant emotional and social changes. The study findings indicate that adolescents frequently experience emotional distress but lack the necessary tools to interpret and manage their emotions effectively. This finding is consistent with prior research, which suggests that inadequate mental health literacy limits an individual's ability to recognize early symptoms of mental distress (Spencer et al., 2024)

Furthermore, societal and cultural expectations significantly shape adolescent perceptions of mental health. The reluctance to discuss emotional challenges due to fear of being perceived as weak is a common theme across various studies (Hagan et al., 2023). While increasing knowledge is essential, interventions must also address cultural factors that hinder open discussions about mental health. Research by Yani et al. (2025) highlights the importance of culturally sensitive approaches in mental health interventions to ensure their effectiveness in diverse populations (Yani et al., 2025).

Diverse Responses to Mental Health Challenges

The study findings indicate that adolescents exhibit varied responses to mental health challenges, ranging from proactive help seeking to complete avoidance. Digital resources play a crucial role in shaping adolescent attitudes toward mental health, with some individuals using online platforms to educate themselves, while others encounter misinformation that exacerbates their distress. Prior research supports these findings, demonstrating the dual role of digital platforms in both promoting and hindering mental health awareness (Khanal et al., 2024; Ware et al., 2024).

Gender differences also emerged as a significant factor influencing mental health perceptions. Male adolescents reported greater reluctance to discuss mental health issues compared to their female counterparts, a trend documented in previous studies (Baldofski et al., 2024). This highlights the need for gender responsive interventions that encourage open dialogue and normalize help seeking behavior among male adolescents. Addressing these disparities requires the development of targeted strategies that dismantle harmful gender norms associated with mental health discussions.

Empowering Adolescents through Education and Support

Educational programs on mental health literacy have proven to be an effective means of enhancing adolescent knowledge and reducing stigma. Participants who had undergone structured mental health education demonstrated higher confidence in identifying and addressing mental health concerns. This aligns with research by Goodwin et al. (2023), which found that school based interventions significantly improved student awareness and willingness to seek professional help (Goodwin et al., 2023).

However, the effectiveness of these interventions depends on their delivery. Findings from this study suggest that interactive and discussion based learning methods yield better outcomes than traditional lecture style approaches. Research by Suryaputri et al. (2023) reinforces this notion, emphasizing that engaging pedagogical approaches enhance adolescent retention and application of mental health knowledge (Suryaputri et al., 2023). Additionally, parental involvement was identified as a crucial factor in sustaining adolescent mental health literacy. Adolescents who received support from their families displayed greater confidence in seeking help, underscoring the need for family inclusive interventions (Almansour, 2024).

Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into adolescent mental health literacy, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The study's reliance on qualitative methods, while providing in depth perspectives, may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Future research should incorporate mixed method approaches to strengthen the validity of the results.

Additionally, the study was conducted within a specific cultural context, which may influence the applicability of the findings to other regions. Cross cultural studies are necessary to explore the universality of the identified themes and tailor interventions accordingly. Moreover, while digital literacy was explored, a more comprehensive assessment of digital mental health interventions is required to understand their long term impact on adolescent mental health literacy.

Implications

The study findings underscore the need for holistic interventions that integrate school based education, community involvement, and digital literacy initiatives to enhance adolescent mental health literacy. Future research should explore the scalability of these interventions across diverse settings to ensure their effectiveness in different sociocultural contexts.

Moreover, addressing gender disparities in mental health discussions remains a critical area for further study. Understanding how societal expectations influence male reluctance to seek help can inform the development of targeted interventions that foster a more inclusive and supportive mental health environment. Expanding the scope of research to assess the long term impact of mental health literacy programs will provide valuable insights into sustaining positive behavioral changes among adolescents.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the critical role of mental health literacy in improving adolescent understanding and reducing stigma. The findings indicate that interventions targeting mental health education can enhance adolescents' ability to recognize, understand, and respond to mental health challenges effectively. However, cultural and social barriers continue to limit open discussions and help seeking behaviors. The study underscores the importance of school based mental health programs and family engagement in fostering a supportive environment for adolescents. Additionally, digital literacy presents both opportunities and challenges in shaping adolescent perceptions of mental health, requiring more structured guidance for effective information dissemination. Addressing gender disparities in mental health discussions is crucial, as male adolescents exhibit greater reluctance to seek help. Future research should explore scalable interventions that integrate school based, community driven, and digital approaches to improve adolescent mental health literacy. Developing policies that support the integration of culturally sensitive and evidence based mental health education into school curricula can play a pivotal role in mitigating stigma and encouraging help seeking behaviors. Further research is needed to assess the long term impact of these interventions and their adaptability across diverse sociocultural settings.

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