

The Stigma Associated With Mental Illness and How it Affects Adolescents' Desire for Assistance

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ABSTRACT

Adolescent mental health issues are becoming more and more of a global concern. However, the stigma associated with mental illness continues to be a significant obstacle to getting psychological assistance, particularly for young people. Purpose: This study aims to explore the relationship between the level of stigma against mental illness with the tendency of adolescents to seek professional help. Methods: The research method used is descriptive quantitative survey approach. The sample consisted of 75 adolescents aged 15-18 years who were selected purposively. The instrument used was a questionnaire consisting of two scales: the scale of stigma against mental illness and the scale of seeking psychological help. Results: The results showed that there was a significant negative relationship between the level of stigma with the tendency to seek help ($r = -0.56, p < 0.01$), which means that the higher the level of stigma, the lower the tendency of adolescents to seek professional help. In addition, adolescent girls tend to have less stigma and are more open to seeking help than adolescent boys. Implications: The implications of these findings suggest the importance of mental health education interventions in schools to reduce stigma and improve mental health literacy. The involvement of teachers, counselors, and parents is key in creating an environment that supports teens to speak up and seek help without fear of being judged. Conclusion: In conclusion, stigma around mental illness is a major factor in preventing teenagers from seeking treatment, and lowering stigma is a calculated move to increase access to mental health care.

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INTRODUCTION

Mental health disorders in adolescents have become a very urgent public health issue at the global level. Adolescence is a critical period in a person's psychological and social development, in which they are vulnerable to pressure from various aspects such as academic, family and social relationships. Mental disorders that are not treated properly at this time can have serious consequences, including decreased quality of life, decreased academic performance, and increased risk of suicide. Therefore, understanding and addressing adolescent mental health is a priority on the global health agenda.

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage marked by substantial physiological, emotional, and social changes. During this period, mental health challenges often emerge but stigma surrounding mental illness can heavily influence adolescents' decisions to seek help. Research in Ontario, Canada, reveals that stigma delays initial contact with mental health services, as youth grapple with feeling “sick enough” versus “not sick enough” to receive help; additionally, systemic stigma can also lead to being denied services (BMC Health Services Research, 2023).

Stigma can be understood at multiple levels: public stigma involves broader societal beliefs and discriminatory behavior, while self-stigma occurs when individuals internalize those negative views (Corrigan et al., 2004). Both forms significantly impede adolescents from seeking support, even when needed (Child & Youth Care Forum, 2022).

A broader systematic review highlights that stigma walls off many youths from professional help. With an effect size of $d = -0.27$, stigma especially internalized or treatment-related – ranks among the top barriers deterring young people from seeking mental health services, disproportionately affecting youth, minorities, and males (PubMed review, 2014).

Importantly, adolescents tend to recommend help for peers more readily than seeking help for themselves. This dynamic is influenced by stigma dimensions such as labeling and stereotypes. Although mental health literacy improves peer support, stigma still limits self-directed help seeking (PubMed longitudinal study, recent).

Moreover, culturally rooted stigma presents additional barriers. In certain communities such as among African American youth fear of judgment or shame prevents even discussion of mental health with family or professionals (Wikipedia, recent).

Taken together, mental illness stigma among adolescents operates across multiple layers social, structural, and internal and significantly deters help-seeking behaviors. Intervention strategies must go beyond awareness campaigns to include destigmatizing educational programming, accessible youth-friendly services, peer support initiatives, and culturally sensitive outreach to ensure adolescents feel validated, supported, and confident in seeking help.

In Indonesia, data from the Indonesia–National Adolescent Mental Health Survey (I-NAMHS) in 2022 shows a worrying picture. About 15.5 million teenagers have reported experiencing mental health problems in the past 12 months. Of these, about 2.45 million adolescents or about 5.5% meet the criteria for mental disorders according to the DSM-5 diagnostic standard. These figures indicate that mental disorders are not uncommon among Indonesian adolescents, and signal a great need for adequate mental health services and targeted interventions.

However, the main concern is the low utilization of professional assistance services by adolescents with mental disorders. The I-NAMHS survey showed that only about 2 to 2.6% of those with mental disorders actually accessed professional services over the past 12-month period. This

shows a significant gap between the need for mental health assistance and the realization of the search for such assistance. Factors such as social stigma, limited access, and lack of mental health literacy are believed to be the main causes of this low number of help seekers, thus demanding more attention in efforts to improve access and acceptance of mental health services for adolescents in Indonesia.

One of the main barriers leading to Low help-seeking among adolescents is the social stigma against mental illness. This Stigma is not just a simple negative view, but includes various forms such as stereotypes, prejudices, to discrimination that systematically affect how society perceives and treats individuals with mental disorders. In many cultures, including Indonesia, this stigma is often strongly attached to social norms and values that regard mental health problems as a sign of personal weakness or incapacity, so people with mental disorders are often ostracized or labeled negatively.

This social Stigma is compounded by the low level of mental health literacy in the wider community. Many people, including teenagers, do not understand the causes, symptoms, and treatment of mental illness, so myths and misconceptions continue to circulate. Lack of education and accurate information makes this stigma difficult to remove and even reinforced by false assumptions, such as that mental illness is a disgrace or something shameful to talk about openly. This condition has an impact on how adolescents feel great social pressure to hide their condition, which ultimately generates isolation and worsens their mental condition.

Among adolescents themselves, social stigma often causes feelings of shame and fear of being judged by peers and family. Fears of social rejection or exclusion make many adolescents reluctant to speak openly about the psychological difficulties they are experiencing. As a result, they tend to delay and even avoid seeking professional help, despite feeling a need for support. This lack of courage has the potential to aggravate the mental disorder experienced, because without proper intervention, the problem can develop into a more serious and difficult condition to overcome.

Qualitative and quantitative research conducted in Indonesia shows that the school environment has an important role in shaping help-seeking behavior among adolescents. Supportive schools, especially those that integrate improved mental health literacy, strengthening social support, as well as anti-stigma policies, are able to create a more positive climate for adolescents to recognize and address their mental health problems. Not only does this environment improve teens' understanding of mental health, but it also provides a much-needed sense of security and emotional support to encourage them to seek help.

One of the relevant quantitative studies is the study by Sarfika et al. (2024), who found a significant negative association between stigma levels and knowledge of depression, with a correlation coefficient of $r = -0.45$ ($p < 0.001$). That is, the higher the mental health literacy of adolescents, the lower the level of stigma they have. This finding is in line with the results of qualitative research from Palu which revealed that adolescents tend to be more comfortable sharing mental problems with peers than with school counselors. This is due to their concern for the judgmental attitude of the professionals, which ends up influencing their decision to seek help.

In addition, school-based interventions such as mental literacy programs and digital campaigns have been shown to be effective in increasing understanding as well as reducing stigma among adolescents. However, the implementation of these programs in Indonesia still faces various obstacles. Factors such as the lack of training for teachers as mental health facilitators, limited



funding, and uneven policy support are the main challenges. Therefore, there is a need for systematic efforts to strengthen the capacity of schools and government policies so that these interventions can be carried out optimally and have a wider impact on the mental well-being of adolescents.

Thus, this study is important to examine more deeply the influence of stigma on the tendency of adolescents to seek psychological help. The findings of this study are expected to be the basis for the development of contextual, culture-based, and effective interventions in improving the mental well-being of Indonesian adolescents.

METHODS

This study used a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional survey design to explore the relationship between mental illness stigma and help-seeking behavior among adolescents. The sample consisted of 75 adolescents who were selected purposively. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire containing mental stigma measurement instruments as well as a pre-validated psychological help seeking scale. The data collection process is carried out face-to-face with the supervision of researchers to ensure the validity and clarity of answers. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics to describe the characteristics of the sample and the distribution of stigma scores and help search. Furthermore, Pearson's correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between stigma levels and adolescents' propensity to seek professional help. The study also considered demographic variables as controls to identify factors that could potentially influence outcomes.

RESULTS

1. Univariate Analysis

Univariate analysis was carried out to determine the frequency distribution and descriptive statistics of the stigma variables of mental illness and the search for psychological help in adolescents.

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Mental illness Stigma and Help Seeking

Variables	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Mean	SD
Stigma of Mental Illness	Low	30	40.0	28.5	6.3
	Medium	35	46.7		
	Height	10	13.3		
The Search For Psychological Help	Yes	25	33.3	15.8	4.7
	No	50	66.7		

The results of the analysis showed that most adolescents were in the medium stigma category (46.7%), followed by low stigma (40.0%), and only a small percentage showed high stigma (13.3%). Meanwhile, the majority of respondents (66.7%) never sought psychological help, indicating that the tendency of adolescents to access mental health services is still low, although the level of stigma they feel is not classified as high in general.

2. Bivariate Analysis Pearson's Correlation Test Was Used to Look at the Relationship Between Stigma Levels and Psychological Help-Seeking

Table 2. Bivariate Analysis Pearson's Correlation Test Was Used to Look at the Relationship Between Stigma Levels and Psychological Help-Seeking

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Correlation Coefficient (r)	p-value
The Stigma of Mental Disorders	Help-Seeking Behaviour	-0.52	<0.001

Bivariate analysis using Pearson's correlation test was conducted to determine the relationship between the level of mental disorder stigma and adolescents' tendency to seek psychological help. The results of the analysis showed that there was a significant negative relationship between the two variables ($r = -0.52$; $p < 0.001$). This correlation indicates that the higher the level of stigma felt by adolescents, the lower their tendency to seek professional help. A correlation value in the moderate range indicates that stigma is an important factor influencing help-seeking behaviour, although other factors such as mental health literacy, peer influence, family norms, and access to services may also contribute to psychological help-seeking behaviour.

DISCUSSION

1. Univariate Analysis

The results of univariate analysis in this study showed that most adolescents have a level of stigma against mental disorders in the medium category (46.7%), followed by low stigma (40.0%) and high stigma (13.3%). An average stigma score of 28.5 (SD = 6.3) indicates that although the majority of adolescents are not at the extreme level of stigma, negative views of mental health are still strong enough to influence daily behavior, especially when it comes to seeking help. These findings are in line with several previous studies that emphasize that social stigma is not always extreme, but in moderate forms it can trigger adolescent fears and doubts in seeking professional help.

On the aspect of seeking psychological help, it is seen that the vast majority of respondents (66.7%) have never accessed professional services, with only 33.3% having sought help. The average help-seeking behavior score of 15.8 (SD = 4.7) reflects the adolescent's low propensity to seek help even though mental needs may be present. These findings suggest a gap between attitudes towards mental health and concrete action in seeking help. This reinforces the hypothesis that there are other barriers besides stigma, such as low literacy of mental health services, limited access, and the influence of social and family norms that have not been fully supported.

In the context of the Health Belief Model theory, Low help-seeking may be associated with the perception that barriers outweigh benefits. Perceptions of fear of being judged, doubts about the effectiveness of professional help, and shame are the main barriers, as revealed also in the study by Gulliver et al. (2010). Meanwhile, adolescents' knowledge and attitudes about the symptoms and treatment of mental disorders are still limited, so they have difficulty recognizing when and to whom to seek help.

Recent literature support reinforces these findings. Research by Setia Lesmana & Chung (2024) states that stigma perception and mental health literacy simultaneously mediate the relationship between psychological conditions and the decision to seek help. In the school context,



a supportive environment has proven to play an important role. Schools with anti-stigma policies, teacher training, and peer support can lower barriers to seeking help. The study emphasizes that without strengthening institutional capacity, individualized interventions will not be effective enough in broadly changing adolescent behavior.

According to Sarfika et al. (2023), a teen's level of stigma decreases as their comprehension of depression symptoms and therapy increases. This demonstrates the significance of systematic and ongoing mental health teaching in schools. In addition to reducing stigma, this literacy improvement initiative may boost teenagers' drive to identify their own psychological needs.

Qualitative research from Palu and the article "Perceptions of Mental Health Challenges..." (2023) also highlight that adolescents are more comfortable sharing problems with peers than school counselors or teachers. This happens because of fears of stigmatization and judgment from adult authorities. In collective cultures such as in Indonesia, perceptions of social status and the "face of the family" also affect the reluctance of individuals to be open to psychological problems, because it is considered humiliating themselves or the social environment.

The findings indicate that interventions should be multi-level. Mubarak (2025) points out that stigma explains up to 29% of the variation in help-seeking intentions among adolescents. Therefore, it is necessary to design a strategic approach that includes curriculum-based literacy, peer counselor involvement, teacher training, and digital campaigns that reach social media where teenagers are active. The use of digital platforms that are popular among teenagers can expand educational reach and facilitate open discussion without direct pressure from the surrounding environment.

Overall, the study's findings demonstrate that, despite its low prevalence, stigma is still a significant barrier that is strengthened by a lack of knowledge and social support. Therefore, efforts to lessen stigma must be supplemented by improvements in access and literacy as well as structural adjustments in the home and school environments. Strategies that combine cognitive, emotional, and structural approaches will be more effective in creating a healthy social environment for Indonesian remaja mental health.

Overall, these findings confirm that stigma, although not at an extreme level, remains a significant barrier for adolescents in seeking psychological help. This condition aligns with the principles of mental health services in Law Number 17 of 2023 concerning Health, which emphasises that mental health is an integral part of overall health. The law affirms that every citizen, including adolescents, is entitled to safe, quality, and affordable healthcare services, including palliative care services (Chapter VIII, Articles 408–412). Within this framework, palliative care is not only intended for terminal conditions, but encompasses comprehensive biopsychosocial and spiritual support for individuals with health problems that impact quality of life, including mental disorders. Thus, low help-seeking behaviour indicates that there is still a gap between regulatory mandates and service implementation. This further reinforces the importance of systematic interventions that not only focus on mental literacy education but also on strengthening the capacity of healthcare facilities and schools as providers of psychosocial support services and community-based palliative care approaches mandated in national regulations.

2. Stigma of Mental illness and its influence on the Search for Help Among Adolescents

The results of this study indicate a significant negative correlation between stigma and psychological help-seeking behaviour ($r = -0.52$; $p < 0.001$). A negative sign on the value of r in quantitative statistics indicates an inverse relationship, meaning that when one variable increases, the other decreases. Thus, the higher the stigma experienced by adolescents, the lower their likelihood of seeking professional help. The strength of the relationship (0.52) indicates that the correlation falls into the moderate-to-strong negative association category, suggesting that stigma can be considered a fairly strong determinant. This interpretation is consistent with findings from various previous studies. For example, Mubarak's (2025) study found that stigma explains a significant portion of the variability in adolescents' decisions to access psychological services. Meanwhile, the study by Corrigan et al. (2014) confirms that this negative relationship is linked to stereotype internalisation (self-stigma), fear of labelling, and concerns about social discrimination. Thus, these findings reinforce the conclusion that stigma is not merely a negative perception, but a psychosocial mechanism that directly reduces the likelihood of adolescents engaging in help-seeking behaviour.

In the context of national regulations, mental health is an integral part of health as affirmed in Law No. 17 of 2023 concerning Health. Article 1 paragraph 3 defines that 'health is a condition of physical, mental, spiritual, and social well-being that enables every person to live productively socially and economically,' affirming that mental health is a fundamental right of every citizen. Furthermore, Article 165 paragraph (1) states that 'everyone has the right to obtain quality, safe, and affordable mental health services.' Thus, the high level of stigma that prevents adolescents from seeking help shows a gap between regulatory guarantees and the reality of mental health service-seeking behaviour, making the results of this study urgent in the context of fulfilling the mental health rights of adolescents.

Research in Indonesia by Sarfika et al. (2024) also found a significant negative relationship between mental health literacy and stigma, which impacts low help-seeking behaviour. Setia Lesmana and Chung (2024) added that stigma plays a strong mediating role in determining low professional help-seeking, especially among adolescents who have limited social spaces to discuss their psychological conditions. Another international study, published in BMC Health Services Research (2023), reinforces that stigma causes uncertainty among adolescents in determining when and how they deserve mental health services, leading them to delay or avoid seeking help.

Based on these findings, the researchers assume that the negative relationship between stigma and help-seeking behaviour is influenced by several psychosocial factors specific to Indonesian adolescents. Social and cultural norms that still consider mental disorders as a weakness or family disgrace contribute strongly to the internalisation of stigma. In addition, low mental health literacy means that adolescents are unable to recognise early symptoms or the urgency of treating psychological problems. Concerns about peer judgement are a major obstacle because adolescents have a high need to be accepted in their peer group. The lack of adolescent-friendly mental health services and the suboptimal counselling services in schools reinforce adolescents' tendency not to seek help when experiencing psychological problems. Thus, the results of this study illustrate that stigma is not only an individual barrier but also a structural problem that requires systematic intervention at the family, school, and community levels.



CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of the univariate analysis, it can be concluded that most adolescents have a level of stigma towards mental disorders in the moderate category (46.7%), with only a small percentage showing high stigma (13.3%). On the other hand, the tendency to seek psychological help is still relatively low, where 66.7% of respondents have never accessed professional services. The average help-seeking score also shows that many adolescents are not used to or have not dared to seek help despite possible mental stress. This indicates a gap between awareness of mental disorders and concrete action to get help, which is most likely influenced by other social and psychological factors such as cultural norms and access to services.

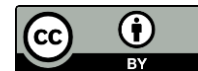
Meanwhile, the results of the bivariate analysis showed a significant negative relationship between the level of stigma and psychological help-seeking behavior ($r = -0.52$; $p < 0.001$). That is, the higher the stigma adolescents feel towards mental disorders, the lower their chances of seeking professional help. This link reinforces the finding that stigma is one of the major barriers to mental health treatment among adolescents. Therefore, interventions to reduce stigma - whether through education, strengthening social support, or media campaigns need to be the focus of efforts to improve access to mental health services for adolescents.

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