

Mental health and attitudes toward seeking professional help among students of Vietnam National University - Ho Chi Minh City

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Abstract:

The study on mental health and attitudes towards seeking professional help among students at the Vietnam National University - Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCM) is the result of a cross-sectional survey conducted in October 2023, with the participation of 8,383 students. This research aims to assess the levels of risk for mental health problems among students at VNU-HCM. Additionally, the study explores the current attitudes towards seeking professional help among students when they face mental health problems in their academic and personal lives. The results indicate that students were at risk of experiencing depressive symptoms (from mild to severe levels, 77.7%) and anxiety symptoms (58.8%) to varying degrees; however, they rarely seek professional help ($M=1.66$; $SD=0.75$). VNU-HCM students' attitudes towards seeking professional assistance reveal that while they can endure the stigma associated with mental health, they remain hesitant to discuss these issues with others. They recognise the need for psychological therapy and have trust in professionals, yet they lack the initiative to seek help. These findings indicate the need for measures, including enhanced communication and the integration of multimedia platforms, to raise awareness and encourage students to seek professional help when needed.

Keywords: attitudes towards seeking help, mental health, students.

Classification numbers: 1.1, 1.2, 4.1

1. Introduction

The issue of mental health and related concerns has existed for a long time but has received little attention and consideration from healthcare facilities and systems [1]. Moreover, it has now increasingly spread to many other areas of society (e.g., education, social interactions, labour, and production). Research by T.M.T. Ton, et al. (2022) [2] shows that, in the context of the pandemic, the proportion of students exhibiting signs of stress, anxiety, and depression is quite high (51.84, 81.55, and 57.09%, respectively). Among them, the rate of students displaying signs of severe to very severe stress disorder is 7.96%, anxiety disorder is 35.92%, and depression is 8.55%.

Despite this high prevalence, students' awareness, coping strategies, and tendency to seek professional

mental health support remain limited. This highlights the necessity to examine not only the prevalence of mental health issues among students but also their attitudes and behaviours toward seeking psychological help.

This study explores key aspects through the following research questions: (1) How do mental health problems (depression, anxiety) manifest in VNU-HCM students?; (2) What are the main trends in students' attitudes towards seeking psychological support?; (3) How do mental health symptoms (depression, anxiety) among students correlate with their attitudes towards seeking professional psychological help?.

1.1. Literature review

Although mental health issues are prevalent and increasing (especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic), awareness, coping strategies, and the

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tendency to seek professional mental health support among students remain low. Research by T.T.H. Le (2017) [3] indicates that students' understanding of mental health is limited, particularly regarding certain concepts of mental disorders. Specifically, 46% of students surveyed stated they were unsure, and 6% responded that they were not at all sure about their answers. The research also highlights a correlation between mental health awareness and students' mental health status.

Another study by T.A.D. Kieu, et al. (2019) [4] identified four key aspects of students' understanding of bipolar disorder: the ability to accurately recognise bipolar disorder, general knowledge about the disorder, understanding of bipolar emotions, and willingness to seek help. The study found that students' knowledge in these areas was relatively low, while prejudice against mental disorders among students was higher compared to developed countries.

Research by A. Kamimura, et al. (2018) [5] reveals that only about 12.5% of students with depression and anxiety disorders sought mental health services in the past 12 months.

While numerous studies have examined students' mental health status and help-seeking behaviour, few have specifically explored the relationship between mental health problems and students' attitudes toward seeking professional psychological assistance. Understanding this relationship is essential to inform mental health prevention and support programs for students.

1.2. Concepts of mental health and attitudes toward psychological help-seeking

In this study, "mental health" is understood following the definition of the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2022) [6] as a state of well-being in which individuals can cope with normal life stresses, realise their abilities, study and work productively, and contribute to their communities.

To ensure conceptual clarity and consistency, the term "mental health" is translated as "sức khỏe tâm thần" throughout this article. Accordingly, an individual's mental health condition can be viewed

across three general states: (1) mentally healthy, (2) at risk or in crisis, and (3) experiencing mental disorders.

This conceptual foundation provides a basis for exploring how mental health problems may influence students' attitudes toward seeking professional psychological support.

First, depression or depressive disorder, according to WHO (2023) [7], is a common mental disorder characterised by a prolonged period of depression, loss of pleasure, or lack of interest in activities. Depressive states are not the same as normal mood or emotional changes associated with daily life; victims of depression experience a depressed mood (feeling sad, irritable, or empty) throughout the day, almost every day, for at least two weeks (DSM-5). In addition, some other manifestations may also appear, such as poor concentration, excessive feelings of guilt or low self-worth, thoughts of death or suicide, changes in appetite or weight, and feeling very tired or lacking energy (DSM-5).

Anxiety disorders, or generalised anxiety disorders, involve persistent and excessive worry that interferes with daily activities [8]. This ongoing anxiety and tension can be accompanied by symptoms, such as restlessness, irritability, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, muscle tension, or difficulty sleeping [9]. Worries often focus on everyday matters like work responsibilities, family health, or minor issues such as housework or appointments. Individuals may experience this condition for months or even years.

A help-seeking attitude is understood as the general orientation or tendency to seek help, while help-seeking behaviour refers to asking for support from informal or formal support services to resolve emotional, behavioural, or health problems [10]. In the context of mental health issues, seeking help is a crucial skill that enables individuals, particularly students, to better understand and intervene in their situations. The behaviour of seeking professional help is an extremely important skill that assists students in reaching out to psychological and medical professionals for timely support to cope better and improve their mental health status [11].

2. Methods

2.1. Research sample

This study applied the convenience sampling method to survey students from 10 member universities of VNU-HCM. This method involves selecting samples based on the convenience and accessibility of the research subjects, without requiring a random or complicated sampling process. Specifically, the research sample was collected with the support of the Student Affairs Department of VNU-HCM and the Student Affairs Departments at member universities, according to the coordination request letter. This implementation method allows the research team to easily access and collect data quickly. This method not only saves time and costs but also enables the research team to gather a large sample in a short time, while still ensuring the representativeness of the sample by selecting a diverse range of students from different universities within the VNU-HCM system.

The official survey collected 8,383 samples, including 48.5% female students, 50.7% male students, and 0.8% identifying as "other" gender. The participants were full-time students from 10 member universities of the VNU-HCM, including the following institutions: University of Technology (18%), University of Science (20.3%), University of Information Technology (12.1%), International University (5%), University of Social Sciences and Humanities (13.6%), An Giang University (9.9%), Faculty of Medicine (12.2%), Faculty of Political Science - Administration (1.8%), University of Economics and Law (6.3%), and VNU-HCM Campus in Ben Tre province (0.9%). The survey support letter was sent to the member units through the VNU-HCM Student Affairs Department. The units then distributed the online link to students who met the criteria of academic year, major groups, gender, and residence to ensure representativeness. After receiving the link, students were required to read and understand the survey content and purpose, voluntarily agree to participate in the survey, and could withdraw at any time.

2.2. Research methods

By employing a quantitative research design, this study primarily utilises methods such as document research, questionnaire surveys, and statistical data processing. Regarding the document research method, we collected, synthesised, and analysed theoretical perspectives as well as practical research findings related to the survey content. Sources of knowledge came from books, specialised journals, scientific reports, research topics, and doctoral theses, both domestically and internationally. From this, we built a theoretical basis and developed a scale with specific indicators, corresponding to the levels for students to self-assess. Regarding the questionnaire survey method, we used questionnaires to collect data on the relationship between mental health and help-seeking attitudes. The questionnaires are described in detail below:

The patient health questionnaire (PHQ) by K. Kroenke, et al. (2001) [12] is used internationally to screen and assess depression. The scale consists of 9 items (e.g., loss of interest and pleasure in activities) based on DSM-IV criteria. The scale includes four levels of choice: 0 (not at all), 1 (several days), 2 (more than half of the days), and 3 (almost every day). Accordingly, the meanings of the scale scores are as follows: 0-4 (no depression), 5-9 (minimal depression), 10-14 (mild depression), 15-19 (moderate depression), and 20-27 (severe depression). Reliability analysis results show that Cronbach's alpha coefficient is at a good level ($0.887 > 0.6$), with total variable correlation greater than 0.3 (0.538-0.734).

The generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) questionnaire by R.L. Spitzer, et al. (2006) [13] is a self-report scale for generalised anxiety disorder. The scale includes 7 statements, describing anxiety symptoms that the individual has experienced in the last two weeks (for example: I cannot stop or control my anxiety attacks). The scale includes four levels of

choice: 0 (not at all), 1 (several days), 2 (more than half of the days), and 3 (almost every day). Accordingly, the meanings of the scale scores are as follows: 0-4 (no anxiety), 5-9 (mild anxiety), 10-14 (moderate anxiety), and 15-21 (severe anxiety). Reliability analysis results show that Cronbach's alpha coefficient is at a good level ($0.925 > 0.6$), with total variable correlation greater than 0.3 (0.677-0.826).

The attitude scale for seeking help from professionals is based on the Vietnamese version by L. Luong (2020) [14] and includes 29 observed variables, divided into four aspects: awareness of the need for psychotherapy help (8 items); ability to tolerate prejudice related to mental health (5 items); openness to discussing mental health issues (7 items); and trust in mental health professionals (9 items). The scale includes four levels of options: 0 (disagree), 1 (possibly disagree), 2 (possibly agree), and 3 (agree). The higher the total score across all aspects, the clearer the need for psychotherapy; the greater the ability to accept prejudice; the higher the openness; and the greater the trust in the expert, and vice versa.

The results of reliability analysis on each sub-scale show that Cronbach's alpha coefficient ranges from 0.646 to 0.745, with total correlation variables: awareness of the need for psychotherapy help (0.530-0.603), respectively, ability to tolerate prejudice related to mental health (0.513-0.513), openness to discussing mental health issues (0.344-0.475), and trust in mental health professionals (0.464-0.547).

Regarding statistical data processing methods, the data

obtained after the survey were processed using SPSS software version 20.0. The information and statistics used in the research include descriptive statistical analysis and inferential statistical analysis. Specifically, the article employs average score calculations to describe the actual state of help-seeking attitudes and Pearson correlation analysis to explore the relationship between mental health and help-seeking attitudes among students.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. The current status of depression and anxiety levels among VNU-HCM students

The survey results from 8,383 VNU-HCM students indicate a significant prevalence of depression and anxiety within the student community (Figs. 1 and 2). Regarding depression, the findings show that 1,869 students (22.3%) exhibited no signs of depression, while 6,514 students (77.7%) experienced varying levels of depression, ranging from mild to severe. Among these, mild depression was the most common (30.7%), whereas extremely severe depression had the lowest prevalence (10.4%) (Fig. 1).

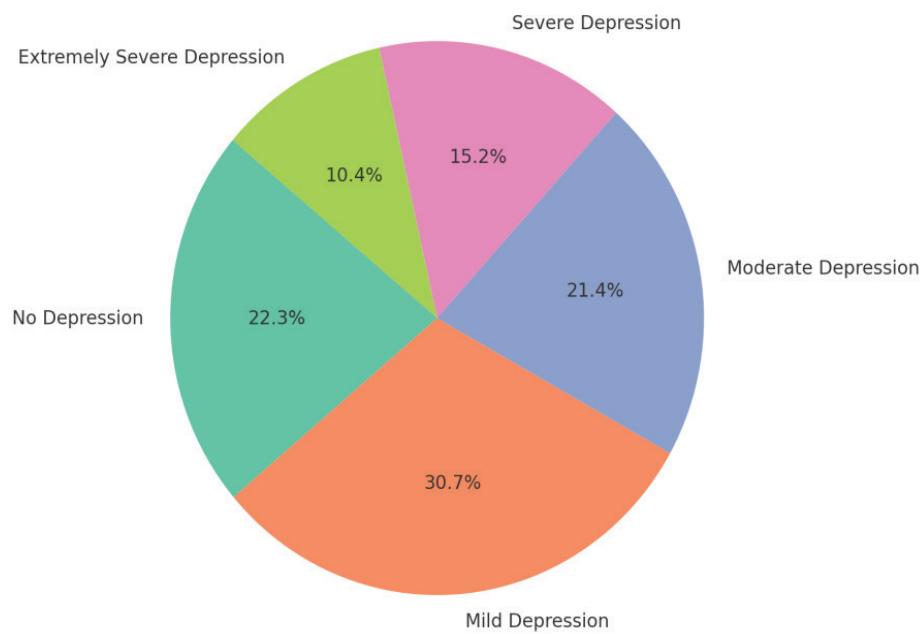


Fig. 1. Classification of student depression levels based on the PHQ-9 scale. Source: Research team (2023).

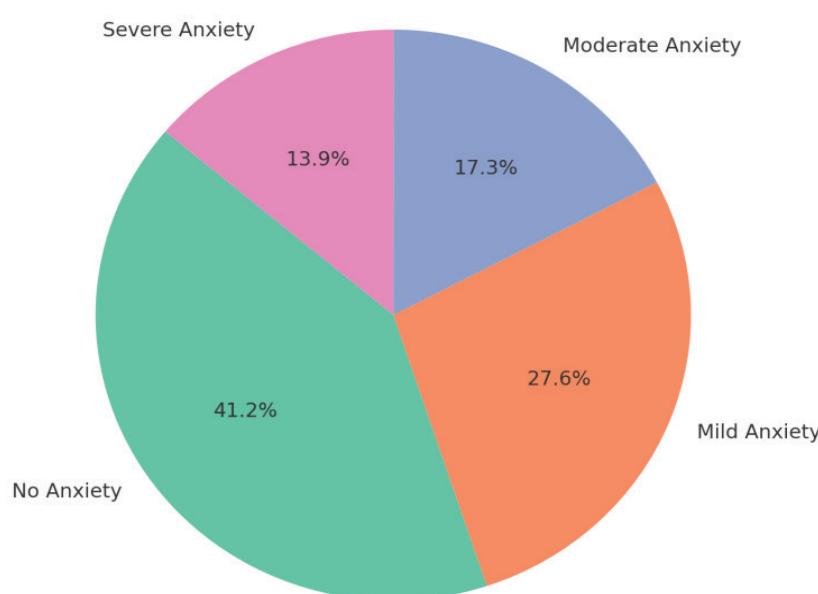


Fig. 2. Classification of student anxiety levels based on the GAD-7 scale.
Source: Research team (2023).

Similarly, in terms of anxiety, the results revealed that 3,451 students (41.2%) showed no signs of anxiety, while 4,932 students (58.8%) experienced varying levels of anxiety, with mild anxiety accounting for 27.6% and severe anxiety for 13.9%. These findings highlight the importance of addressing students' mental health, particularly through appropriate support and intervention measures (Fig. 2).

3.2. Status of students' attitudes toward seeking help from professionals

According to Table 1, in the attitude scale for seeking help from experts, the assessment results indicate that students participating in the survey have a high ability to tolerate prejudice related to mental health ($M=1.91$; $SD=0.88$). Furthermore, they are also clearly aware of

their own needs when it comes to seeking psychotherapy help ($M=1.77$; $SD=0.82$). They also exhibit a fairly high level of trust in mental health professionals ($M=1.65$; $SD=0.65$). However, they are still not ready to open up to others about issues related to mental health ($M=1.32$; $SD=0.65$).

In general, the surveyed students' attitudes towards seeking help from professionals were at a good level, with three-quarters of the aspects having an average score of more than half. Thus, the surveyed students demonstrate a desire to seek help and a need to address emotional, behavioural, and health problems in general. This also suggests that, in some respects, the students participating in the study may possess a general understanding of mental health.

3.3. Correlation between depression, anxiety, and help-seeking attitudes of students

After data collection and analysis, for the purpose of more effective analysis, we only used results from students with minimal to severe depression. The results obtained were from 6,514 students exhibiting these symptoms. Subsequently, we continued to analyse the correlation between depressive symptoms and aspects of attitudes towards seeking help from professionals. The results are presented specifically in Table 2.

Table 1. Status of students' attitude towards seeking help from professionals.

No.	Attitude to seek help from professionals	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
1	Recognise the need for psychotherapeutic help	8383	0	3	1.77	0.82
2	The ability to tolerate stereotypes related to mental health	8383	0	3	1.91	0.88
3	Openness with people about mental health issues	8383	0	3	1.32	0.65
4	Trust in mental health professionals	8383	0	3	1.65	0.65
5	Attitude to seek help from professionals (general)	8383	0	3	1.66	0.75

Source: Research team (2023).

Table 2. Correlation results between the level of depression and anxiety and the attitude of seeking help from professionals.

No. Attitude to seek help from professionals	Degree of depressive symptoms			Level of anxiety expression		
	N	r	p	N	r	p
1 Recognise the need for psychotherapeutic help	6514	0.181**	0.000	4932	0.189**	0.000
2 The ability to tolerate stereotypes related to mental health	6514	-0.149**	0.000	4932	-0.135**	0.000
3 Openness with people about mental health issues	6514	-0.165**	0.000	4932	-0.148**	0.000
4 Trust in mental health professionals	6514	-0.048**	0.000	4932	0.014	0.342

**: Statistically significant correlation at $p<0.01$ (p-value less than 0.01). Source: Research team (2023).

The Pearson correlation analysis results from Table 2 indicate that most correlations between attitudes towards seeking professional help and the levels of depressive symptoms and anxiety expression among students are very low to low. First, the recognition of the need for psychotherapeutic help is positively correlated with both depressive symptoms ($r=0.181^{**}$, $p=0.000$) and anxiety expression ($r=0.189^{**}$, $p=0.000$). This suggests that the clearer the need to seek psychological help, the higher the levels of depression and anxiety. In other words, students with higher levels of depressive symptoms and anxiety tend to have a stronger recognition of the necessity of seeking professional assistance.

Conversely, the ability to tolerate stereotypes related to mental health is negatively correlated with depressive symptoms ($r=-0.149^{**}$, $p=0.000$) and anxiety expression ($r=-0.135^{**}$, $p=0.000$). These findings suggest that a higher tolerance for mental health-related stereotypes is associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety. This implies that individuals who readily accept social stereotypes about mental health tend to experience lower levels of depression and anxiety, whereas those who are more sensitive to these stereotypes may feel greater psychological pressure, leading to more severe mental health issues.

Similarly, openness with others about mental health issues also exhibits a negative correlation with depressive symptoms ($r=-0.165^{**}$, $p=0.000$) and anxiety expression ($r=-0.148^{**}$, $p=0.000$). This suggests that individuals who are more open in discussing mental health issues tend to report lower

levels of depression and anxiety. In contrast, those who are more reserved or uncomfortable talking about mental health may face greater challenges in coping with psychological distress.

Finally, trust in mental health professionals demonstrates a very weak negative correlation with depressive symptoms ($r=-0.048^{**}$, $p=0.000$) and no significant correlation with anxiety expression ($r=0.014$, $p=0.342$). This indicates that higher trust in mental health professionals is associated with slightly lower levels of depression, although the strength of this relationship is minimal. Further research is needed to explore this association in more depth.

3.4. Discussion

Overall, students are at risk of facing mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, yet they rarely seek professional help despite having the desire to do so. This result is somewhat consistent with the findings of V.H. Nguyen, et al. (2019) [11], who surveyed 1,390 first-year students from the 2017-2018 academic year across nine regular training programmes at Hue University of Medicine and Pharmacy. The data indicate that the percentage of students with accurate knowledge about help-seeking behaviour for mental health issues is very low, at only around 21%. Additionally, the authors found that most of these students (60%) sought help from informal sources such as parents, friends, or relatives. In contrast, seeking help from formal sources, such as specialists, psychologists, or healthcare workers, accounted for a smaller proportion (around 40%). Notably, the percentage of students seeking consultation from

teachers at the university was very low, at only about 10-13%. Thus, the attitude of VNU-HCM students towards seeking help from professionals indicates that they are likely to endure stigma related to mental health but are still hesitant to discuss these issues with others. They are aware of the need for psychological therapy and have confidence in professionals but lack the initiative to seek help.

The correlational results are also similar to the study by A. Kamimura, et al. (2018) [5], where about 12.5% of students with depression and anxiety disorders had sought mental health services in the past 12 months, and the study by V.H. Nguyen, et al. (2019) [11], where only about 2.5% of students were always ready to seek help when experiencing mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, or stress, and about 50% of students with moderate to severe symptoms of depression, anxiety, or stress sought help. Thus, poor mental health is also a factor that encourages students to seek help. This study has also identified additional factors related to students' attitudes, such as awareness of the need for help, the ability to endure stigma, and openness about mental health, which are motivating factors for seeking professional help.

This study is limited by its use of Pearson correlation, which identifies associations but does not establish causality. Future research could apply multiple regression or structural equation modelling (SEM) to explore underlying mechanisms. Additionally, the cross-sectional design prevents analysis of longitudinal changes in mental health and help-seeking behaviours. Lastly, as the sample is limited to VNU-HCM students, the findings may not be fully generalisable. Despite these limitations, the study provides a foundation for further research on student mental health and help-seeking attitudes.

4. Conclusions

Research results show that students at VNU-HCM have an average attitude towards seeking help from professionals. The analysis also indicates that the

awareness of the need for psychotherapeutic help has a low positive correlation, while the aspects of tolerance of prejudice and openness about mental health both exhibit a low negative correlation with students' mental well-being. Additionally, trust in professionals shows a low correlation with depressive symptoms. This suggests a need for measures to raise awareness and encourage students to seek professional help when facing mental health problems. Potential measures include promoting multimedia communication, education, and outreach by agencies, organisations, departments, Youth Unions, and Student Associations to help students develop a positive attitude towards studying and taking care of their own mental health.

Although this study provides important insights into students' mental health and their attitudes toward psychological help-seeking, several limitations should be noted. Firstly, the data were collected primarily through self-reported questionnaires, which may be subject to response bias, as students might underreport or overreport their levels of anxiety, depression, or help-seeking attitudes. Secondly, the study employed a cross-sectional design, collecting data at a single point in time, which prevents drawing causal inferences between mental health symptoms and help-seeking attitudes. Finally, the research focused on common mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, without fully addressing other mental disorders or the personal and social factors that may influence help-seeking behaviour.

These limitations suggest that future studies should consider larger and more diverse samples, employ more varied data collection methods, incorporate longitudinal designs, and broaden the scope of mental health issues examined to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between mental health and students' help-seeking attitudes.

CRediT author statement

Le Minh Cong: Overview and Theoretical framework, Appraisal, Writing - Reviewing and Finalising the manuscript; Nguyen Van Tuong: Research design and Methodology, Data processing and Management, Writing - Reviewing and Finalising the manuscript; Nguyen Hoang Anh Thu: Data collection, Quantitative analysis, Visualisation, Writing and Editing.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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