



EXPLORING STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS REGARDING MENTAL HEALTH KNOWLEDGE IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES OF SUKKUR REGION, SINDH

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Abstract

Mental health is a global issue, and one in four around the globe is facing a mental health disorder. In low- and middle-income countries almost 24% of university students have symptoms of depression. This study aims to explore the knowledge and knowledge barriers and coping strategies regarding mental health problems in university students of Sukkur region. This study used a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method. The participants were thirty-two (n=32) undergraduate students from four public universities of Sukkur region, Sindh. They were selected through purposive along with criterion sampling techniques. Data were collected through in-depth semi structured interviews and analyzed through thematic analysis. Students are aware of common mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, and there remains a significant knowledge gap about the availability of mental health resources. Cultural beliefs and social stigma play a vital role in discouraging help seeking behaviors, leading many students to prefer spiritual or traditional remedies over professional counseling. Insufficient mental health education, fear of stigma and lack of access to professional support contribute to students' unwillingness to seek treatment. However, limited financial resources and stigma prevent many students from accessing professional counseling. There is the value of peer support groups and training programs in overcoming mental health problems. Students who got professional help reported good academic achievement and overall well-being and its importance sharply available mental health services.

Keywords: *Mental Health, Awareness, Barriers, Coping strategies*

Introduction

The mental health knowledge defines an individual's understanding and awareness regarding mental health, such as identifying the signs of mental illnesses, knowing risk and protective factors, and being aware of where to get the right resources and counseling services. It includes being aware of basic mental health issues such as anxiety, stress, depression, and others (National Institute of Mental Health, 2021; Martinez et al., 2023). Mental health Knowledge covers following domains 1) Causes 2) recognition 3) how to seek information and 4) sources of help can predict their help seeking behaviors (Bamgbade et al., 2014).



Understanding mental health includes advocating for positive views toward asking for assistance and helping others who are struggling with mental health issues. It also entails being aware of the stigma associated with mental illness (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013).

Mental health is a global issue, and one in four around the globe is facing a mental health disorder. By the World Health Organization, 25% of the population is affected by mental health issues directly or indirectly (Subadhi et al., 2018; Begum et al., 2019). Globally, more than 970 million people are experiencing anxiety and depression disorders. Global Mental Health in the Lancet Commission of 2018, mental health is seen as fundamental human rights and requires a rights-based approach (Moitra et al., 2023).

Mental Health is a major issue in low- and middle-income countries. World health Organization (2009) survey reveals that nearly 85% of people face mental health issues in low- and middle-income countries. The ratio of unemployment, constant poverty, insecurity, and terrorism has increased mental health problems in Pakistan. Mental Health issues remained a topic of debate among academic scholars. Pakistan, where limited psychiatric hospitals and doctors are available for a population of 241.49 million (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics [PBS], 2023), creates a sense of uncertainty. Many socio cultural and religious factors impact individual's beliefs in Pakistan. Many people approach primary treatment in medical care units where the staff is not trained enough to deal with it. So, most people initially consult with faith leader (Peer, Fakir) and mental health issues due to supernatural reasons (Rathod et al., 2017; Begum et al., 2019; Munawar et al., 2020).

In universities, there are alarming challenges regarding the mental health issues of students. According to a report in low- and middle-income countries almost 24% of university students have symptoms of depression (Reis et al., 2021). For many students, the university period is a transition period from one place to another. Through this new period, students take on new responsibilities and face challenges such as adjusting to the new environment of living and learning, societal and family pressures, making independent decisions, future uncertainty, leaving family and friends behind, and interacting with a diverse population of students that affect the mental health of students. During this period students experience different types of mental health problems like depression, stress, and anxiety (Torrano et al., 2020). Mental health affects negatively on academic achievement as well as social and physical health (Almanasef, 2023).

Mental health problems among university students are growing concern worldwide (WHO, 2022). University students often face mental health problem due to different factors as new environment of university and overload of university work. This is only due to lack of knowledge regarding mental health problems (Aziz et al., 2023).

In Pakistan, nearly 24% people including youngster have mental health problems (WHO, 2022). Pakistan where literacy rate is 59.3% (Dawn, 2023). Due to this low literacy rate people go to faith leaders and believe in supernatural causes of illness (Begum et al., 2019). This situation also affects university students where mental health knowledge is limited and shortage of help seeking facilities. The lack of mental health knowledge among university students impacts their ability to recognize and properly manage mental health problem and that has negative impacts on their academic achievement, social interactions, and overall well-being (Almansef, 2023).



According to the Sindh Mental Health Authority [SMHA] the registered cases of suicide from 2016 to 2020 are 767, because people face significant challenges regarding mental health problems specially knowledge because the stigma associated with mental health issues makes it even more difficult for people to seek help.

As the university students in Sindh are not exempted from this condition because of low literacy rate in Sindh as 61.8% (The Express Tribune, 2023). This literacy rate leads to lack of mental health awareness and knowledge in the region.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore the students' perceptions regarding mental knowledge in public universities of Sukkur Region, Sindh.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the perceptions of students regarding mental health knowledge in public universities of Sukkur region, Sindh.
2. To identify the students' perceptions regarding mental health knowledge barriers in public universities of Sukkur region, Sindh.
3. To examine the students' perceptions regarding coping strategies for mental health problems.

The scope of the study is to explore students' perceptions regarding mental health knowledge in public universities Sukkur region, Sindh. This research not only enhances the understanding of how students perceive mental health issues, but it also provides valuable insights for curriculum developers and policy makers that will enhance mental health knowledge in university curriculum and policy.

Literature Review

It is a state of mental well-being that makes it possible to manage life stresses, realize their potential, learn and work effectively, and make contribution to their community (WHO, 2022). It is vital part of health and well-being that supports our ability as individual and collective capabilities to develop relationships and influences the world we live in. Mental Health is a fundamental human right. And it is essential for socioeconomic, communal and personal growth.

Mental health is defined as the absence of mental illness and encompasses an individual's personal and social well-being, including both internal and external behavior. Mental health includes more than just the absence of mental disorder (Alvi, 2015). It exists on a complex continuum that is experienced differently by each individual, with variable degrees of difficulty and distress, as well as potentially very different social and therapeutic results. Mental Health issues involve a range of mental states and disorders, including psychosocial disabilities and mental disorders that are linked to considerable suffering poor performance or self-harm risk.

Mental Health Knowledge in the Pakistan

Pakistan's mental health knowledge influenced by a number of systematic, social and cultural variables. Mental health Knowledge is a key sign of mental health and can improve one's overall well-being. In Pakistan, the rate of mental health concerns remains unclear (Javed et al., 2020).

Mental health services, including policies, programs, and funding are insufficient to address the entire burden of mental health concern in Pakistan. In Pakistan, a variety of socio



cultural and religious factors impact peoples' beliefs. Mental health issues are not frequently accepted and often stigmatized. Most people seek primary medicine treatment for mental health concerns; however, many hospitals staff lacks the necessary training to address these difficulties. Mental health knowledge and cultural views about mental health may be prevalent in poor nations, influencing help-seeking behavior. Pakistan has a literacy rate of 59.3% (Dawn, 2023). Due to this low literacy rate, many people seek help from faith healers for their illness, believing in supernatural causes (Begum et al., 2019; Noor Ullah et al., 2024).

Mental Health Knowledge in the Sindh

In Sindh mental health is an important public health issue. Recent evidence suggests that mental health awareness in Sindh is improving but misconceptions remain widespread. Mental health knowledge in Sindh has improved because of initiatives initiated by government and non-government organizations with the aim to increase public awareness. Sindh mental health policy is the best step of the government which emphasizes mental health education and seeks to integrate mental health knowledge into medical field and training programs (SOHRIS, 2024). The study showed that mental health knowledge in Sindh is strongly affected by cultural beliefs and misconception. For example, 35% of respondents associated mental illness with past sins, 28% connected it with supernatural causes and 70% believed that mental illness was contagious (SMHA, 2024).

Sindh mental health authority (SMHA) has taken lead through educational awareness campaigns. The main purpose of these campaigns is to educate people regarding mental issues and their solutions in remote areas (The News, 2022 & SMHA, 2024).

Even with efforts, significant challenges remain, knowledge about mental health remain low in many parts of the Sindh, especially in rural areas with limited access to mental health services. Stigma and misconception about mental health there remain significant barriers for seeking help. Misconceptions and stigma in the society hinder and are big barriers to seeking mental health help. Mental health experts said for the improvement of mental health education there is need of awareness that encourage people to access the services that are important (Mandhro, 2014 & Ilyas, 2024).

Mental Health knowledge in Public Universities of Sindh

Mental health knowledge among university students in Sindh is gradually improving specially in urban centers such as Karachi, Hyderabad and Jamshoro. However awareness remains uneven and many students still face stigma academic pressure family expectations financial stress and limited access to counseling services. Mental health knowledge recognizing mental health problems understanding causes and risk factors, knowing where to seek professional help and developing supportive attitudes towards people with mental health conditions (Aziz Fazal, & Abbasi, 2025).

Recent studies show that Pakistani university students' mental health literacy varies according to age, gender, family system province and social support (Aziz et al., 2025). Evidence from Karachi also shows that social and academic pressures are strongly linked with depression, anxiety and stress among undergraduate students. This suggests that mental health education in Sindh's universities should focus not only on symptoms of depression and anxiety, but also on practical stressors such as peer pressure, family pressure, finances and academic expectations (Ali et al., 2026).



Institutional and policy developments show some progress. The university of Sindh established a psychological Wellness and Counseling Cell in 2024 to provide counseling services for students and youth across Sindh (University of Sindh, 2024). At the policy level, the Sindh Mental Health Policy 2023-20230 was launched in January 2024 to improve mental health services and develop a sustainable mental health system in province (Ilyas,2024). These Initiatives can support universities through counseling centers, awareness campaigns, peer support programs and referral systems. Overall, Sindh's universities need stronger and more practical mental health knowledge programs, including orientation sessions, trained counselors, anti stigma campaigns, facility training and crisis response systems (Farhan, 2024).

Research Methodology

The present study was conducted with the use of qualitative research design to explore the perception of the mental health knowledge of undergraduate students in public sector universities of Sukkur region in Sindh. The subjects consisted of undergraduate students of different public universities in the area. A purposive sampling technique using a criterion based for selecting participants was used to provide relevant exposure of the phenomenon under study. A total of 32 students were sampled, each from four departments (Computer Science, Mathematics, Education and Business Administration) and of both genders.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to gather data which gave the participants time to talk in detail. The interview protocol was developed based on an extensive literature review. Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis was used to uncover patterns, themes and sub-themes. The data analysis system was systematic and iterative in order to build rigor and validity based on Creswell (2009), and the approach to generating insights was inductive.

Findings

Knowledge and understanding of Mental Health

Mental health was defined by respondents as emotional stability and cognitive well-being which are influenced by academic pressure; societal issues were cited as recurring stressors. Mismanagement of emotions and genetic factors also played role emphasizing the need for more understanding and institutional support (National Institute of Mental Health, 2021; Martinez et al., 2023).

One respondent (R1), shared their understanding of mental health: *"First, we should know what mental health is. Most students face pressure on their minds during their studies, and they feel unhealthy. Everyone should talk about mental health."* The respondent emphasized the need of open discussions in addressing these issues effectively.

Mental health Problems

Mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, and stress, are widespread among university students, affecting their academic and social well-being (Reis et al., 2021; Torrano et al., 2020). In Pakistan, limited resources and cultural stigma hinder proper understanding and treatment (Begum et al., 2019).

The respondents focus that mental health problems such as stress, and depression, often stem from family pressure, academic challenges, and societal expectations.

One respondent (R19) said: *"If a student is not performing well in a subject or getting low grades, he may have a mental health problem."*



Barriers to Mental health knowledge

Social Barrier

Social barrier has significant effect on students' perceptions of mental health knowledge, that hinders getting mental health knowledge openly in our society where different misconceptions exist and they make it difficult to resolve and understand mental health problems (Khan, 2023). Respondent (R29) states: *"Due to a lot of judgment involved people try to avoid discussing mental health issue."* Illustrating how fear of judgment creates a barrier to open dialogue.

Therefore, societal attitudes, such a viewing mental health issues as personal issues, are discouraging people to discuss openly.

Cultural Barrier

Mental health cultural barriers have significantly influenced the perception, access, and treatment of mental health conditions. Diverse cultural beliefs, stigma, and different attitudes towards mental health prevent open discussions and seeking help. (Subadhi et al., 2018; Torrano et al., 2020).

One respondent explained (R20) *"In our cultural mental health are often misunderstood. Many people linked these issues to supernatural causes or Evil Shade (Jin) and then go to peer faqeer for help."*

Academic Barrier

Mental health knowledge is essential for identifying and resolving mental health concerns, but with other challenges academic barrier has its own role (Subadhi et al., 2018; WHO,2022). Academic institutions particularly in Sindh, face significant gaps in awareness and support, increasing students, mental health problems. Addressing these barriers is critical to improving mental health education (Javed et al., 2020; Almanasef, 2023).

In this regard, Respondent (R3) disclosed: *"The lack of awareness and discussion about mental health in our university is a significant barrier. Mental health is not concentrated on enough, even though it is a critical issue, leading to a raise in the suicide ration."*

Coping Strategies for mental health Problems

Friends and teacher support

Friends and teachers support and play a vital role in fostering mental health awareness and help seeking behavior among university students. Social support from friends enhances resilience and reduces feelings of isolation, while teacher involvement encourages students to access resources and manages academic stress effectively. This Strategy improves mental health literacy, and promote overall well-being (Reis et al., 2021; Alanasef,2023).

Similarly, Respondent (R17) expressed: *"Sharing with friends is often more comfortable because they understand us better. However, some teachers who are more empathetic can also offer support, but overall, friends play a large role in mental health discussions. They create a space where we feel safe and understood."*

This response shows that friends are often the main source of emotional support for students, while supportive teachers can also play a helpful role in coping with mental health problems.

Personal strategies

Personal strategies for mental health involve proactive approaches to maintain emotional well-being and resilience. These include regular physical activity, mindfulness practices, stress management techniques, social connections and healthy sleep habits (WHO,2021). Building



coping skills and seeking professional support when needed are crucial for overall mental wellness (Saddique et al., 2022).

Respondent (R13) emphasized the importance of physical and positive engagement: *“I will join an environment where I can get pleasure and happiness, entertain myself with physical activities, and avoiding living alone because loneliness puts me into depression.”*

Professional Support

Professional support for mental refers to assistance provided by trained experts such as psychologists, counselors, and social workers to individual experiencing mental health challenges. These professionals use evidence-based interventions to diagnose, treat, and prevent mental health disorders. Support ranges from therapy and counselling management and crisis intervention, promoting emotional well-being and recovery (American Psychological Association, 2021; World Health Organization, 2022).

Similarly, another respondent (R7) emphasized the significance of early intervention: *“Counseling can solve mental health problems at the initial stage. If the condition worsens, professional medical intervention becomes necessary.”*

This response shows that professional support is important for early identification and treatment of mental health problems. It also highlights the need for accessible counseling services and mental health awareness in academic institutions.

Findings

Findings based on the study data, Exploring the students’ perceptions regarding mental health knowledge in public universities of Sukkur region, Sindh, provide important information about mental health awareness, Barriers and coping strategies. Cultural beliefs and social stigma play a vital role in discouraging help seeking behaviors, leading many students to prefer religious or traditional remedies over professional counseling.

Students’ perceptions of mental health differ with many associating it with emotional stability and cognitive well-being. Students believe social pressures, financial limits and family expectations are major contributors.

Many students even consider mental health problems as personal weakness or supernatural illness and do not go for healthcare and help.

The study highlights some structural hurdles to mental health awareness and helps within universities. Some participants reported that the universities have no programs of counseling service or mental health awareness initiatives.

By coping strategies students use many methods to manage mental health problems including self-help strategies and social support.

However, limited financial resources and stigma prevent many students from accessing professional counseling. The research shows the value of peer support groups and training programs in overcoming mental health problems.

In conclusion, the study explores the need for planned mental health awareness in universities to fill the knowledge gap and reduce the stigma. So, it is time to take some steps as awareness workshop, counseling services and peer support programs.

Conclusion

It is concluded that the study needs to improve mental health understanding among the students of universities of Sukkur region of Sindh. The study points out the role of cultural beliefs



and societal shame in stopping students from getting professional mental health treatment. However, most of the students turn to religious or traditional solutions and delaying or avoiding research-based treatment.

As a result, students mostly rely on self-help techniques such as physical exercise, social interactions and personal coping strategies. However, these are often insufficient to treat serious mental health problems.

In conclusion, this research explores and stresses the need and importance of collaboration among the policy makers, educational institutes and mental health. By promoting mental health knowledge and services in universities helps build a stronger, healthier and a well-managed, educational or campus community to deal with any kind of mental health issue.

Practical Implications

This study provides and explores the important insights of perception of students regarding mental health in public universities of Sukkur region. Most importantly this exploratory study indicates the gaps in knowledge, barriers to seek mental health care and the best measures to deal with the mental health issue. The result chip in to existing knowledge and proposes some important and valuable implications for universities, policy makers and mental health specialists. The research stresses the importance of the inclusion of mental health education in higher studies curricula to raise students' knowledge and provide them with some coping strategies. Similarly, it emphasizes the dire need of mental health resources like professional and peer counseling programs and supportive digital platforms. Universities ought to create and friendly and safe interactive environment where students can discuss the mental health issues comfortably.

Furthermore, the faculty training about mental health is also an important step to help teachers identify and assess the early signs of mental health of the students to provide guidance. Universities must make some goal-oriented policies to improve mental health services. Awareness programs should be initiated to eradicate the cultural misconceptions stigmas attached to mental health problems. Fund raising policies should be introduced with institutional commitment to deal with financial challenges owing to the service of mental health crisis. The role of peer support networks in promoting mental health awareness culture in universities and encouraging student led projects and training programs. Universities that priorities mental health play an important role in cultivating emotionally strong graduates, who can effectively manage both academic and personal challenges.

A collaborative strategy among universities, policymakers, and mental health professionals is required to ensure long term improvements in students' well-being, academic success, and employment opportunities in Sindh and beyond.

Recommendations

On the basics of discussion and findings following are the recommendations of the research study.

1. It is recommended to the students of public universities they should use Digital and online mental health support platforms such as mobile applications, as they can easily get knowledge about mental health and help.
2. It is recommended that students of public university should participate in the programs where mental health discussions are arranged by the support of university through interactive sessions and also storytelling methods that can help to increase the mental health knowledge.



3. It is recommended that universities conduct Regular training sessions and workshops should be arranged to teach students how to and cope mental health problems and can help from available resources.
4. It is recommended that Universities should create policies that support students' mental health by offering flexible academic facilities for those who are struggling with mental health challenges.
5. It is recommended that university should avail affordable services to students with the help of university partnership with mental health professionals.

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