



Original Article

The relationship between mental health literacy and psychological help-seeking attitudes of nursing undergraduate students: A cross-sectional descriptive study

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Abstract

Objectives: To determine the relationship between mental health literacy (MHL) levels and psychological help-seeking attitudes levels among nursing students.

Methods: This cross-sectional and descriptive study was conducted with 306 nursing students. Data were collected using a Personal Information Form, the MHL Scale, and the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale-Short Form (ATSPPHS-SF). Data were collected online through Google Forms. In the study, descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, and linear regression analysis were used.

Results: Mean total scores on the MHL Scale and ATSPPHS-SF were 12.44 ± 3.22 and 9.29 ± 2.69 , respectively. There was a positive and significant correlation between the score of resource-oriented MHL and ATSPPHS-SF ($r=0.180$, $p<0.05$). The resource-oriented MHL explained 3.2% ($R^2=0.032$) of the increase in attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help and increased attitude toward seeking professional psychological help by 40% ($\beta=0.400$) ($p<0.05$).

Conclusion: The MHL and attitudes toward seeking psychological help of nursing students participating in the study were at a low level. As the resource-oriented MHL of the nursing student increased, their attitudes toward seeking psychological help levels increased, as well. For this reason, it can be recommended to give importance to training on preventive mental health services in the pre-graduate period to increase MHL levels and develop a positive psychological help-seeking attitude.

Keywords: Help-seeking behavior; literacy; mental health; nursing students; universities.

About one out of every three people in the world is faced with a mental illness at some point in their life. However, the rate of those seeking professional help for this is very low. The low level of mental health literacy (MHL) is considered to be one of the main reasons for delays in seeking help.^[1] The concept of MHL was first defined by Jorm et al.^[2] as “*knowledge and beliefs that help the recognition, management, or prevention of mental disorders.*” According to Jorm, MHL consists of the following components: *knowledge of how to prevent mental disorders, recognizing when a disorder is developing,*

knowledge of help-seeking options and available treatments, knowledge of effective self-help strategies for milder problems and first aid skills to support others who develop a mental disorder or are in a mental health crisis.^[3] With the emergence of the concept of MHL, the individual who is affected by mental problems has been seen as the primary factor in managing their own symptoms by seeking professional help.^[4] Community studies conducted in many countries on mental disorders have shown that individuals have inadequate knowledge about professional help resources and effective treatments

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Submitted Date: August 15, 2023 **Revised Date:** May 06, 2024 **Accepted Date:** September 16, 2024 **Available Online Date:** December 26, 2024

Journal of Psychiatric Nursing - Available online at www.phdergi.org



and do not seek professional help, and those who seek help may be late for years. MHL has been studied in the context of attitudes that develop appropriate help-seeking behavior.^[5] Seeking help for mental health problems is defined as “an attempt to get outside help to cope with mental health problems.” This includes both formal and informal sources of help.^[6] The process of seeking help begins when individuals realize that they have problems. Individuals who realize this make various attempts to solve their problems. For example, they get help from social support sources such as family or close friends and try to cope with their problems with the advice or support they receive. In cases where these supports do not work in solving their problems, they may tend to seek help from experts and see this step as their last option.^[7] Studies show that the biggest obstacle for individuals to avoid seeking psychological help is the lack of knowledge. This information illustrates the importance of MHL in seeking psychological help. Because of the low level of MHL; it can cause individuals to have insufficient knowledge about mental illnesses, to not know how and when to receive mental health services, thus delaying diagnosis and treatment, and undesirable situations. While university students, who are in the transition stage from adolescence to young adulthood, try to fulfill developmental tasks specific to the period they are in, they also have to cope with the problems brought about by university life. Young people who start university education are expected to behave like adults, to effectively solve the problems they encounter, and to make their own decisions; on the other hand, they are expected to show academic achievement. In addition to all these responsibilities, university students have to adjust to a new environment, and this causes them to face many problems abruptly.^[8] University students can sometimes solve their problems, but they occasionally need help from parents, friends, teachers, or experts. For this reason, they show various help-seeking behaviors. Help-seeking is defined as “*the behavior of actively seeking help from other people*,” which involves discussing one’s problem with another person for support or guidance.^[9] In a study, it was reported that the academic achievement of Turkish university students was adversely affected due to mental health problems, such as anxiety disorder, depression, and substance abuse, they dropped out of university, or that they tended to commit suicide.^[10]

In a study, the highest prevalence of mental health disorders among university students was found in eating disorders, followed by compulsive disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and sleep disorders.^[11] In general, mental disorders such as anxiety and depression first appear during adolescence and young adulthood, and about three-quarters of mental disorders first begin before the age of 25.^[12,13] For these reasons, it is important to develop psychological help-seeking

What is presently known on this subject?

- Professional help-seeking behaviors in the fight against common mental disorders are quite low, and one of the main reasons for delays in seeking help is considered to be low.

What does this article add to the existing knowledge?

- Attitudes toward seeking psychological help were positively affected by resource-oriented MHL, which is an important component of MHL.

What are the implications for practice?

- The findings reveal that nursing students who will work in preventive and curative mental health services should receive training in nursing curricula and postgraduate in-service training programs to improve their MHL and psychological help-seeking attitudes so that they can recognize the mental health problems that may be seen in the individuals they serve early and receive appropriate treatment and care.

attitudes to provide early diagnosis and treatment of mental health problems in university students. On the other hand, this situation becomes even more important for nursing students who are educated to take part in services provided for the protection and maintenance of individuals’ health. The relationship between the two concepts emerges more clearly when the lack of knowledge is the biggest obstacle to seeking psychological help and the components of MHL are also considered. The aim of this study, which was planned to draw attention to this issue, was to determine the relationship between nursing undergraduate students’ MHL and their psychological help-seeking attitudes. In line with this purpose, we sought to answer the question “What is the relationship between MHL and psychological help-seeking attitudes of undergraduate nursing students?”

Materials and Method

Type and Design

This study is cross-sectional and descriptive design.

Place and Date

Data were collected at a state university located in the Central Anatolia Region of Turkey in the fall semester of the 2020–2021 academic year.

Sample

The population of this study consisted of 400 undergraduate nursing students. The entire population was included in the research. According to the inclusion criteria of the study, students who (a) were studying undergraduate nursing at the university where the research was conducted, (b) volunteered to participate in the research, (c) were attending classes actively, (d) had Internet access, and (e) were users of one of the social media tools, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, or Instagram, were included in the study. A total of 306 students were reached by snowball sampling method. The participation rate in the research was 76.5%.

Data Collection Tools

The *Personal Information Form* was prepared by the researchers in line with the literature.^[4,5] It consists of five items about the students, such as age, gender, and presence of a physical, mental, or chronic disease. The answers were based on the self-reports of the participants.

The *MHL Scale* was developed by Jung et al.^[14] The scale was adapted to Turkish by Göktaş et al.^[15] It consists of 22 items in three subdimensions: knowledge-oriented MHL, belief-oriented MHL, and resource-oriented MHL. Knowledge-oriented MHL and belief-oriented MHL subdimensions are evaluated on a 6-point Likert-type scale. "Strongly agree" and "agree," responses are assigned "1 point," and other responses are assigned "0 point." However, items in the belief-oriented MHL sub-dimension are reverse-coded. Four questions on the resource-oriented MHL subdimension are yes/no type questions. "Yes" responses are "1 point" and "no" responses are "0 point." The scale produces scores between 0 and 22. High scores indicate a high level of MHL. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.71 for the Turkish version.^[15] In the present study, this value was 0.76.

The *Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale-Short Form (ATSPPHS-SF)* was developed by Fischer et al.^[16] and adapted to Turkish by Topkaya.^[17] It consists of nine items. The items on the scale are evaluated using a 4-point Likert-type scale with options ranging between "strongly agree (1 point)" and "strongly disagree (0 point)." Items 2, 7, 8, and 9 are reverse-scored. Scores on the scale range between 0 and 27. The minimum score is 0 and the maximum score is 27, with higher scores indicating a positive attitude regarding psychological help-seeking. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.76 for the Turkish version.^[17] In the present study, this value was 0.70.

Data Collection Process

Data collection forms were delivered to students through e-mail, WhatsApp, Facebook, and other social media tools. Data were collected online through Google Forms as universities switched to distance education due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ethical Responsibilities

This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical permission was obtained from the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Çankırı Karatekin University (Protocol Number: 16, Date: July 05, 2020). On the first page of the data collection form, the purpose of the research was explained and an informed consent statement to participate in the research was included.

Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Science for Windows 23.0 was used for data analysis. The fit of the variables to the normal distribution was examined by visual (histogram and probability charts) and analytical methods (Skewness, Kurtosis, and Shapiro–Wilk tests). In addition to descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis was used to determine the relationship between the two scales. Linear regression analysis was used to predict how much the MHL (independent variable) of nursing students changed or affected the level of their attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help (dependent variable). The significance level was accepted as 0.05.

Results

The mean age of the nursing students in the study was 20.87 ± 2.41 (min=17, max=40) years, the majority of them were female (82.1%), 6% had at least one chronic disease, 3% had a physical illness, and 2.6% had a mental illness (Table 1). According to the students' reports, the most common chronic disease was allergic asthma (2%). Of the students in the study, three had been diagnosed with anxiety disorder, two with obsessive-compulsive disorder, one with bipolar disorder, and one with bulimia nervosa.

Students' scores from the MHL Scale and ATSPPHS-SF are presented in Table 2. As seen in the table, students' scores from the overall MHL Scale were 12.44 ± 3.22 . Their scores from the subdimensions of the scale were 8.24 ± 1.90 from the knowledge-oriented MHL subdimension, 1.47 ± 1.67 from the belief-oriented MHL subdimension, and 2.72 ± 1.21 from the resource-oriented MHL subdimension. The score of the students from the overall ATSPPHS-SF was 9.29 ± 2.69 .

Table 3 shows the correlation between the mean scores obtained from the overall MHL Scale and ATSPPHS-SF and their subdimensions. A positive low correlation was found between the resource-oriented MHL subdimension score of the MHL scale and the overall score obtained from the ATSPPHS-SF ($r=0.180$, $p<0.001$). As resource-oriented MHL scores increased, the psychological help-seeking attitudes increased, as well.

Table 4 shows the effect of MHL on attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help. While resource-oriented MHL explained 3.2% ($R^2=0.032$) of the increase in attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help, having resource-oriented MHL was found the increased attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help by 40% ($\beta=0.400$) ($p<0.05$). The MHL of the nursing students was determined to not significantly affect the factors in other models except for this model ($p>0.05$).

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of the students (n=306)

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Female	252	82.4
Male	54	17.6
Presence of chronic disorders		
Yes	18	5.9
No	288	94.1
Presence of physical disorders		
Yes	7	2.3
No	299	97.7
Presence of mental disorders		
Yes	7	2.9
No	299	97.1
Age, mean±SD	20.87±2.41 (min=17 max=40)	

SD: Standard deviation

Table 2. The mean scores of the students from the overall MHL Scale and ATSPPHS-SF and their sub-dimensions (n=306)

The scales and sub-dimensions	Mean±SD	Min-max
Overall MHL	12.44±3.22	0–22
Knowledge-oriented MHL	8.24±1.90	0–10
Belief-oriented MHL	1.47±1.67	0–8
Resource-oriented MHL	2.72±1.21	0–4
ATSPPHS-SF	9.29±2.69	0–27

MHL: Mental health literacy; ATSPPHS-SF: Attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help scale-short form; SD: Standard deviation

Discussion

This study was conducted to determine the relationship between nursing undergraduate students' MHL and their psychological help-seeking attitudes. In this study, the MHL of the students is below a moderate level (Table 2). Some studies have shown that university students have a relatively weak MHL level, but that students in health-related departments have higher MHL levels than students in other programs.^[18,19] Studies examining the MHL level in nursing students are limited. Saito et al.^[20] determined that 3rd-year nursing students reported higher levels of MHL compared to 1st- and 2nd-year students but that approximately 40% of the students did not have adequate MHL levels. Unlike the finding of this study, Marwood et al.^[21] reported that medical students had a high level of MHL, which may be related to the fact that these students have a more direct or indirect experience with mental disorders. Considering the nature of nursing education, a low level of MHL in nursing students is an unexpected finding. A low level of MHL may cause nursing students to be unaware of the symptoms of mental problems in themselves and their relatives, delays in their professional

Table 3. The relationship between students' scores from the MHL scale and ATSPPHS-SF

The scales and sub-dimensions	MHL scale	Knowledge-oriented MHL	Belief-oriented MHL	Resource-oriented MHL
ATSPPHS-SF	r 0.075	0.096	-0.095	0.180**
	p 0.193	0.093	0.095	0.002*
	n 306	306	306	306

*: p<0.05; **: p<0.001. MHL: Mental health literacy; ATSPPHS-SF: Attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help scale-short form

Table 4. The effect of MHL levels on ATSPPHS-SF

MHL scale*	ATSPPHS-SF			
	Model 1 β	Model 2 β	Model 3 β	Model 4 β
Knowledge-oriented MHL	0.136			
Belief-oriented MHL		-0.153		
Resource-oriented MHL			0.400	
Overall MHL				0.062
R	0.096	0.095	0.180	0.075
R ²	0.009	0.009	0.032	0.006
F	2.846	2.797	10.136	1.704
p	0.093	0.095	0.002**	0.193
DW (1.5–2.5)	1.729	1.771	1.772	1.734

*: Independent variable; **: Significant at p<0.05. MHL: Mental health literacy; ATSPPHS-SF: Attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help scale-short form; DW: Durbin-Watson

help-seeking behaviors, and/or disposition toward seeking inappropriate help, thus delaying the treatment of mental disorders. At the same time, the fact that nursing students will directly or indirectly provide health services to individuals with mental disorders shows the importance of raising their MHL levels. To do this, nursing education should involve education and intervention programs to increase students' awareness of MHL and to develop their skills to manage mental health problems.

Another finding of this study was that nursing students' scores from the overall ATSPPHS-SF were quite low (Table 2). Cankaya et al.^[22] compared nursing students' psychological help-seeking attitudes according to their school years and determined that the higher the students' school years were, the more positive their professional psychological help-seeking attitudes were. In a study conducted with university students, it was determined that the level of psychological help-seeking attitudes was high in non-health university students, unlike the finding of this study.^[23] This difference between studies may be associated with factors affecting the attitudes and behaviors of students in seeking psychological help in the university envi-

ronment and their difficulties in benefiting from mental health services. University students seeking help for mental health problems have face barriers, such as self-stigma, lack of knowledge of the current treatments, and the benefit expected from psychological help.^[24,25] Students with a low level of psychological help-seeking attitudes may delay diagnosis and treatment even if they notice the symptoms of their mental problems in time. Adolescence is a period when mental health problems occur most frequently. The consequences of not addressing adolescent mental conditions extend to adulthood, impairing both physical and mental health and limiting opportunities to lead fulfilling lives as adults.^[26] Accordingly, the university years are the best time to detect and treat mental health problems. Interventions to help nursing students use their knowledge in the effective management of mental disorders will both help them make a healthy transition to adulthood and improve the clinical outcomes of the individuals they will serve in the future.

In the present study, the investigation of whether there was a significant relationship between MHL and psychological help-seeking attitudes revealed that there was no significant relationship between the total scores obtained from the MHL and the ATSPPHS-SF. However, as the resource-oriented MHL subdimension score of the MHL scale of the research group increased, the scores obtained from ATSPPHS-SF were determined to increase, as well. In other words, as the level of resource-oriented MHL increased, psychological help-seeking attitudes increased, as well (Table 3). As a result of the Linear regression analysis, it was determined that the resource-oriented MHL had a positive effect on the psychological help-seeking attitudes, which supports this finding (Table 4). Resource-oriented MHL includes information on reference and treatment resources of mental health services, such as where to obtain useful information about mental health diseases, where to present to get mental health services, and how to contact the service unit. In the literature, it has been stated that individuals who have enough knowledge about treatment resources can help other people with mental illnesses.^[3,27,28] The literature knowledge and the findings of the current research show the importance of resource-oriented MHL, which is a significant component of MHL. Therefore, having MHL is important for nursing students, who will take part in preventive and curative mental health services so that they can recognize mental problems that both they and the groups they will serve may have earlier, provide early treatment, and improve recovery and quality of life. According to Jorm, one of the components of MHL is the individual's knowledge of help-seeking options.^[3] Increasing the MHL level directly may contribute to increasing help-seeking attitudes indirectly. As a matter of fact, it was determined that the education given to university students about MHL provided significant improvements in help-seeking attitudes.^[29] Therefore, increasing the MHL levels of young people can help them reach an optimal level of well-being. Thus, the psychological help-seeking skills of young people and their

peers can be developed. However, Gorczynski et al.^[30] determined that there was a positive relationship between MHL and psychological help-seeking behaviors in university students in the United Kingdom. Furthermore, Almanasef determined that pharmacy students' help-seeking behaviors were significantly associated with their MHL levels.^[31] No study has been found in the literature examining the relationship between nursing students' MHL levels and their attitudes toward seeking psychological help. It is important to carry out studies to determine and develop the MHL and help-seeking behaviors of nursing students who will work in the services to be provided to protect and maintain individuals' health. This is because nurses are expected to primarily protect their own mental health, identify mental disorders, take precautions when necessary, and provide support and counseling for patients in need.

Limitations

The results of this study should be evaluated in the context of the COVID-19 period of the study since it was based on a cross-sectional research design. This study is limited to undergraduate nursing students of the university where the research was conducted. Another limitation was that the research data were based on self-report.

Conclusion

The findings of this study showed that nursing students participating in the study had low levels of MHL and attitudes toward seeking psychological help and that their attitudes toward seeking psychological help were positively affected by resource-oriented MHL, which is an important component of MHL. In light of these findings, considering the significance of having MHL for nursing students, who will take part in preventive and curative health services, in providing early diagnosis and treatment of mental problems both they and the groups they will serve may have, it is recommended that education programs on the subject should be included in both the education curricula and added to subsequent in-service training programs after graduation. Because information activities in institutions that have sustainability in society such as schools can be effective in changing the attitudes of individuals toward mental health problems and seeking psychological help in a positive way. Thus, nursing students can develop their ability to care for themselves at the micro level and the population they will serve at the macro level. In addition, nursing students should be provided with information about where they can receive mental health services in the university environment and the health professionals they can contact. Due to the limited number of studies specifically on this subject in the literature, it is thought that the current study will contribute to the field, but it is recommended to investigate the subject in different and large sample groups in terms of different variables.

Ethics Committee Approval: The study was approved by the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Çankırı Karatekin University (No: 16, Date: 05/07/2020).

Authorship Contributions: Concept – S.A., İ.G.; Design – S.A., İ.G.; Supervision – S.A., İ.G.; Fundings - S.A., İ.G.; Materials – S.A., İ.G.; Data collection &/or processing – S.A., İ.G.; Analysis and/or interpretation – S.A., İ.G.; Literature search – S.A., İ.G.; Writing – S.A., İ.G.; Critical review – S.A., İ.G.

Conflict of Interest: There are no relevant conflicts of interest to disclose.

Use of AI for Writing Assistance: No AI technologies utilized.

Financial Disclosure: The authors declared that this study has received no financial support.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

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