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The Influence of Mental Health Literacy and Self-Stigma on the Attitude of Seeking Professional Help Among High School Students

Irma Desylia Maharani [1], Desie Rahmawati [2], Muhamad Zakki Saefurrohim[3]
[1]Poltekkes Kemenkes Kalimantan Timur, [2]Universitas Mulawarman
Corresponding Author: Irma Desylia Maharani, Maharani, e-mail: irmadesyliam@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The study purpose was to examine the influence of mental health literacy and self-stigma on the attitude of seeking professional help among Senior High School students in Sanga-sanga. The number of mental health sufferers among high school students in Indonesia continues to increase significantly from year to year. However, those in lower middle-income countries, including Indonesia, are less likely to seek professional help. It is therefore important to increase mental health literacy and promote help-seeking behavior among high school students in Indonesia to tackle this problem.

Materials and methods. The research sample consisted of 250 students. The sample selection technique used the Lemeshow formula through calculations from previous research's RR (Risk Relative) values. Data collection was carried out using questionnaires, and data analysis used multiple linear regression techniques.

Results. The results of the linear regression analysis show that stigma has a significant effect on the attitude of seeking professional help in senior high school students in Sanga-sanga (B = 0.129; p. value = 0.053), and mental health literacy has a significant effect on the attitude of seeking professional help in senior high school students in Sanga-sanga (B = 0.262; p. value = 0.000).

Conclusions. Efforts are needed to increase understanding and knowledge about mental health among high school students, as well as to increase the accessibility and availability of quality mental health services for those who need them.

Keywords: mental health literacy, stigm, attitude to seek professional help, help-seeking behavior, senior high school students

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INTRODUCTION

Campaigns to address mental health problems are becoming a priority for the World Health Organization (WHO) in achieving public health standards (Kågström et al., 2023). This is also done in response to the low attention of developing countries in dealing with mental health problems in their countries. This condition is also found in developing countries, particularly in the ASEAN region, where mental health remains a low priority despite the increasing burden of mental disorders among its population (GBD 2021 ASEAN Mental Disorders Collaborators, 2025). The low attention of developing countries to mental health problems makes it a contributor to the global burden of diseases by 16%, which is also one of the challenges for achieving WHO health standards (Arias & Saxena, 2022; GBD 2019 Mental Disorders Collaborators, 2022).

The World Health Organization reports prevalence data for mental disorders in children and Students in Southeast Asia by 4.9% (Arias & Saxena, 2022; GBD 2019 Mental Disorders Collaborators, 2022). Meanwhile, Indonesia is also one of the developing countries that does not prioritize handling mental health problems. Indonesia has not integrated mental health issues as part of primary health services (Munira et al., 2023). Indonesia itself occupies the 6th position in the world in terms of mental and psychiatric health disorders, while the rate of people with depressive disorders is in 4th position in the world (WHO, 2022). This is characterized by the increasing prevalence of people with mental emotional disorders significant in 2018 reaching 9.8% (Ministry of Health, 2018). Based on data from Riskesdas (2018), the majority of contributors to mental emotional disorders and depression in Indonesia are adolescents aged 15-24 years as many as 157,695 people (Ministry of

Health, 2018). This condition is directly proportional to the rate of adolescent suicide which increased to 3.4 per 100,000 population in 2016, where the suicide rate of adolescent boys is higher than that of women (WHO, 2022).

Mental health in high school students can affect learning achievement that is not optimal. WHO notes that as many as 16% of mental health problems at the age of 14 years and above are partially unaddressed. It is also supported that the statement National Alliance of Mental Health stating that 50% of permanent mental health disorders experienced by many students are depression (Awan et al., 2025). The student group is a group at risk of experiencing mental health disorders, but most of these groups do not seek help from professionals in the field of mental health and psychiatric problems, such as psychologists or other professionals around them (Radez et al., 2022). Other research reports report Students who seek professional help is still less than 10%, especially in the lower middle class in developing countries (Westberg et al., 2022). Low desire Students to seek help from professionals (psychologists and psychiatrists) in Indonesia due to the lack of mental health literacy coupled with the stigma against these professionals.

Mental health literacy is a person's knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders that help in recognition, management, and prevention (Sampaio et al., 2022). Stigma is a negative assumption or assessment aimed at sufferers and professionals with mental disorders. People with mental disorders will find it difficult to recover from negative judgments from others. With the assumption that they should be shunned, considered crazy, and the like when going to a psychologist, so that the sufferer will decide not to do therapy (Lesmana & Chung, 2024). This condition is very concerning, where people with mental disorders who should get quick and appropriate treatment will actually experience the opposite. Based on Survey data Global Health Data Exchange 2017 shows that 27.3 million people with mental disorders in Indonesia do not receive proper prevention and treatment. Indonesia is one of the countries that has the prevention and handling of the problem of poor mental disorders, which has an impact on the high suicide rate in adolescents aged 15-24 years with a percentage of up to 90% due to depression and anxiety (Maya, 2021).

A research report in Semarang stated that individuals with high mental health literacy tend to use mental health services compared to those with low literacy. The results of the study show that the low mental health literacy in adolescent students in seeking professional help in Counseling Guidance services, is influenced by the factors of needs, motivation, perception, attitudes, peers, teachers and counselors. Where the peer factor in giving advice to seek counselor help is one of the most influential factors at 72% (Subu et al., 2024).A research report in Australia says negative stigma and misconceptions about mental disorders hinder individuals from seeking professional help (Sampaio et al., 2022). The results of research in Indonesia reported that there was a negative influence of stigma and the desire to seek psychological help in professional services. The higher the stigma about mental disorders, the lower the individual's desire to seek psychological help in professional services (Lesmana & Chung, 2024).

The research report above indicates that there is still an influence of mental health literacy and stigma on adolescents' attitudes in seeking psychological help in professional services. However, the results of previous studies have not looked specifically at aspects of certain zones or regions, such as at the district or city level that have a low level of mental health literacy. In fact, this is very important to find out how mental health literacy and stigma affect the attitude of seeking professional worker help in adolescents who live in areas that are thick with socio-cultural elements, such as East Kalimantan. The results of a preliminary study conducted on 38 high school students in East Kalimantan showed that 46% of adolescents experienced mental health disorders, and 41% of them had a poor attitude in seeking professional help. Based on the above background description, it is necessary to conduct research on the Influence of Mental Health Literacy and Self-Stigma on the Attitude of Seeking Professional Help in High School Students in Sanga-sanga, east Kalimantan.

METHOD

The research method used in this study is quantitative research. The population in this study was all high school students in East Kalimantan, while the sample was high school students at a high school in Sanga-sanga, who were randomly selected from all secondary schools in East Kalimantan.

The sampling technique used in this study is lemeshow, which determines the minimum sample size required in the population. This study used four variables, consisting of two independent variables, namely mental health literacy (X1) and stigma (X2), and one dependent variable, namely students' attitudes towards seeking professional help (Y1). Data was collected using a questionnaire that included three instruments, namely the mental health literacy instrument, the self-stigma instrument, and the attitude instrument seeking professional help. Mental health literacy was measured by asking respondents to read two short sketches about a girl with bulimia nervosa and a girl with depression and then choose a potential mental health problem that they perceived as a "major problem." Stigma was measured using a scale adapted from Skre et al. (2013), which included seven statements associated with mental illness stigma. Attitudes toward seeking professional help were measured by assessing whether respondents trusted various individuals in seeking professional help.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Univariate Analysis

Mental health literacy refers to individuals' knowledge and understanding of mental health issues, including their ability to recognize signs and symptoms, identify risk factors, and seek help when needed. Mental health literacy has many components, including prevention through good mental health behaviors, symptom recognition, self-care, stigma reduction, and health promotion. There has been growing recognition of the importance of mental health literacy, especially among high school students, who are often at high risk of experiencing mental health problems. Mental health literacy interventions are effective in increasing mental health knowledge, but not in reducing stigma or improving help-seeking. However, mental health literacy programs have been proven beneficial, including increasing student productivity and reducing suicidal ideation (Amado-Rodríguez et al., 2022; Renwick et al., 2024).

Table 1. The Influence of Mental Health Literacy and Self-Stigma on the Attitude of Seeking Professional Help Among Senior High School Students in Sanga-sanga, East Kalimantan

Variable	*Mean*	SD	95% CI	t	df	*p.value*
Age – Attitude	11.288	5.134	10.648 ─ 11.928	34.764	249	0.000
Stigma – Attitude	3.700	6.079	2.943 ─ 4.457	9.623	249	0.000
Literacy – Attitude	3.204	6.368	2.411 ─ 3.997	7.956	249	0.000

The independent t-test in this study was used to determine the influence of mental health literacy, stigma, and help-seeking attitude. Evidence suggests that good mental health literacy helps senior high school students in Sanga-sanga recognize mental health difficulties in themselves and others and seek help. A literature review reveals that there is a significant influence between mental health literacy and attitudes toward seeking professional help. Poor knowledge of mental health disorders and their treatment is likely to contribute to the large treatment gap reported for mental health (Asplund et al., 2025; Bu et al., 2023; Ma et al., 2022; Osman et al., 2023; G. Sun et al., 2025).

The Influence of Mental Health Literacy on Help-Seeking Attitude

Senior high school students with greater mental health literacy are more likely to seek professional help for mental health problems. Evidence suggests that good mental health literacy helps high school students identify and seek help for mental health problems (Le et al., 2024; Osman et al., 2023). Senior high school students who have greater mental health literacy tend to have positive attitudes toward seeking professional help. These students are more likely to believe that seeking professional help is an effective way to deal with mental health problems and tend to have less stigmatizing attitudes toward mental illness (Bu et al., 2023; Perveen, 2022; Samar & Perveen, 2021).

Table 2. The Influence of Mental Health Literacy on the Attitude of Seeking Professional Help Among Senior High School Students in Sanga-sanga, East Kalimantan

Variable	B	Beta	t	*p.value*	95% CI
Literacy	0.129	0.119	1.947	0.053	-0.001 ─ 0.260
Stigma	0.262	0.258	4.206	0.000	0.140 ─ 0.385
(Constant)	2.094		2.523	0.012	0.460 ─ 3.729

The results of the simple linear regression test show that there is a significant contribution given by mental health literacy to the attitude of seeking professional help ($p < 0.05$). The contribution

is positive, meaning that an increase in the mental health literacy score among high school students also influences an increase in the attitude of seeking professional help.

The results of this study are in line with research conducted by (Soria-Martínez & Martí-García, 2023), which found that mental health literacy is a predictor variable of the attitude of seeking professional help. The findings support (Jorm, 2000) theory which states that mental health literacy can support the ability to recognize, manage, and prevent mental health problems (Sampaio et al., 2022). Knowledge related to mental health and symptoms of mental disorders was found to have a significant influence in providing understanding of the importance of recognizing certain mental health symptoms, thus leading to preventive actions in the form of a behavioral tendency to seek professional help (Iswanto & Ayubi, 2023; Zeng et al., 2025).

The significance of mental health literacy on help-seeking attitudes can also be influenced by the higher percentage of female respondents in this study. Research by (Arnold et al., 2025) and (Zehra et al., 2022) shows that women tend to have high mental health literacy and are more open about their personal problems. A systematic review of mental health literacy in women found that women have a better understanding of mental health problems and are more likely to seek help when needed. Research by (Jorm, 2000) and (Osman et al., 2023) also found that individuals with high-level mental health literacy are more often engaged in help-seeking for mental health problems. Therefore, it is important to ensure that young people, including young women, are able to identify signs of psychological distress and identify appropriate support and resources when needed.

The Influence of Self-Stigma on Help-Seeking Attitude

The results of this study show that there is a significant influence between self-stigma and the attitude of seeking professional help among high school students. Self-stigma toward mental health refers to the negative attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes that individuals hold toward people with mental health problems, which can have a significant negative impact on their willingness to seek professional help. Self-stigma includes stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination against people with mental health challenges, and can prevent students from receiving the services they need. Research conducted by Iswanto & Ayubi (2023), and Simões de Almeida et al. (2023) states that students who have higher mental health literacy and lower stigma are more likely to seek help.

(Bismar & Wang, 2021; Kiptulon et al., 2024; J. Sun et al., 2022) found that high levels of self-stigma are associated with negative attitudes toward seeking help for mental health problems. The relationship between perceived prevalence of mental illness, self-stigma, and attitudes toward help-seeking has been shown to be interrelated (Evans et al., 2023; Kiptulon et al., 2024; J. Sun et al., 2022).

Self-stigma becomes a barrier to help-seeking among high school students for several reasons. Self-stigma can cause feelings of shame and fear of being judged or rejected, making individuals reluctant to seek help. In addition, self-stigma can lead to a lack of understanding about mental health problems, making individuals believe that seeking help is unnecessary or ineffective. Many people hold stigmatizing views about people with mental illness, including the idea that they are dangerous, incompetent, and unpredictable (Evans et al., 2023; Habeb et al., 2025; Lemmer et al., 2025; Simões de Almeida et al., 2023).

The results of this study are in line with the research by (Awan et al., 2025), which found a significant contribution of self-stigma to the attitude of seeking professional help. Individuals who delay or refuse to seek mental health help do so because they fear receiving devaluation and discrimination from those closest to them, as well as from mental health practitioners. Nevertheless, research by (Villatoro et al., 2023) specifies that personal attitude has a greater influence compared to the perception of self-stigma about mental disorders. The level of self-stigma perception among high school students in this study is in line with high mental health knowledge and literacy, meaning that self-stigma directly influences the attitude of seeking professional help (Bu et al., 2023; Maya, 2021).

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, the research instrument used to measure mental health literacy is considered risky as it may prompt respondents to self-diagnose their mental health condition. The research questionnaire also did not provide contact information for mental health service providers that respondents could contact if they felt they needed help, which may have prevented some respondents from seeking professional help. Second, the study focused only on

investigating the direct influence of self-stigma perception and mental health literacy on the attitude of seeking professional help. Further studies are needed to establish mediating variables between these two variables in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing help-seeking attitudes among high school students.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of linear regression analysis showed that stigma had a significant influence on the attitude of seeking professional help in high school students in Sanga-sanga (B = 0.129; p. value = 0.053), and mental health literacy had a significant influence on the attitude of seeking professional help in high school students in Sanga-sanga (B = 0.262; p. value = 0.000). The practical implications of this study are that there is a need to make efforts to increase the understanding and knowledge of mental health among high school students, as well as to increase the accessibility and availability of quality mental health services for those in need

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