

Psychological distress and socio-demographics as predictors of seeking professional psychological counseling among university students in Jordan

Omymah Z Al-Rajabi¹, Lourance A Al Hadid², Ayman M Hamdan-Mansour³, Imad N Thultheen^{4*}

¹Nurse and Midwife lecturer, Al- Balqa' Applied University, Rufaidah Al-Aslamiyah College for Nursing and Midwifery. Ministry of Health, P.O.BOX (926117), Amman 11190, Jordan.

²Associate Professor, Department of Nursing, Aisha Bint Al Hussein College of Nursing and Health Sciences Al Hussein Bin Talal University, Jordan.

³Professor, Mental Health Nursing, School of Nursing, The University of Jordan, Jordan.

⁴Department of Nursing, Faculty of Medicine and Health sciences, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine.

*Correspondence to: Imad N. Thultheen RN, PhD, Assistant professor, Department of Nursing, Faculty of Medicine and Health sciences, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine, E-mail: Imad.t@najah.edu

Orcid: 0000-0002-3624-1012

Introduction

Youth mental health problems are relatively high in the latest few decades due to overwhelming social and psychological burdens (Hamdan-Mansour, Mahmoud, Al Shibi, & Arabiat, 2018). In particular, mental health of university students is compromised because of academic and social burden (Hamaideh & Hamdan Mansour, 2014). Previous reports showed that university students are suffering psychological problems such as depressive feelings, thinking of suicide, impulsivity, substance use, personality problems, academic anxiety at various rates and severity levels (Nawafleh, et al., 2018; Shehadeh, et al., 2020; Shehadeh, et al., 2018; Hamdan-Mansour, et al., 2018). While such problems are warranting mental health professionals towards immediate intervention, the literature have not adequately investigated whether university students are receiving appropriate psychological counseling and preventive interventions. In general, it has been observed that an increased number of people with psychological and mental conditions are seeking professional assistance; however, number of people not seeking help is greater (Picco et al., 2016). In addition, lack of treatment guidelines, thinking that symptoms of psychological disturbances can be handled personally or will resolve soon, apprehension of leaving study, and being on psychotropic medications have been reported to influence seeking mental health care (Dardas, Silva, Noonan & Simmons, 2016; Wilson & Deane, 2012). This evoked attention towards the connection between attitudes towards seeking professional psychological help and the increased prevalence of psychological problems and mental illnesses.

The literature have introduced the significant impact of mental health problems of university students on their academic and psychosocial functioning (Hamaideh & Hamdan Mansour, 2014), while less emphasis observed on reasons behind not seeking psychological counseling. Delay in seeking appropriate counseling found to associate with more serious and severe forms of the problems (Alfoukha, et al., 2019; Arabiat, et al, 2018; Hamdan-Mansour et al., 2018a). Lack of counseling services in addition to stigma and lack of psychological counseling services at the higher institutions is widely observed in Jordan (Hamdan-Mansour, et al., 2018b). Moreover, reasons behind not seeking psychological counseling among university students have not been addressed. Nowadays, while the whole world is experiencing the outbreak of COVID-19, more than a quarter million university students in Jordan were forced to stay at home and adhere to online teaching that overwhelm students speculating of more psychological disturbance due to quarantines and curfew (Usher, Bhullar, & Jackson,

2020). This could increase worries about the mental health status of the university students and urging addressing factors that may hinder and predict psychological counseling once lockdown ends. The latest reports show that mental health of young population has been compromised and largely dependent upon early detection and intervention (Hamdan Mansour, Shehadeh, Hamdan-Mansour, 2020). Therefore, counseling is crucial to improve early identification and provide management and addressing attitudes towards seeking professional psychological help would enable procedures that motivate university students to seek psychological counseling, and consequently, lessening psychological problems. This study is addressing such topic by examining students' attitudes towards seeking psychological counseling, and the socio-demographic and psychological predictors of seeking professional psychological counseling among university students.

Materials and methods

Design

A, cross-sectional descriptive correlational design was used. Data collected in relation to attitudes toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale and stress using self-administered questionnaire.

Sample and setting

A convenience sampling technique used to recruit 363 university students from 12 university level colleges in Jordan. The students represent various social and cultural background of Jordan university students. Inclusion criteria included: 1) being registered as a regular student, 2) 18 years or more, 3) able to read and write in Arabic. Exclusion criteria included those who are diagnosed with mental or cognitive disorder as these students will be on mental health treatment protocols, which would necessarily influence the results of the study.

Data collection

Ethical approval was obtained from the targeted universities. Students were approach through research assistants and announcement boards where students who are interested are asked to reach out research assistants. Purpose and significance of the study have been presented to students interested to participate. In addition, students were assured of privacy, confidentiality, anonymity and voluntary participation and asked to sign the consent form prior filling out the questionnaire. Students also had all their questions answered. The questionnaire was provided in self-stamped envelope and students were directed to drop

the sealed envelope. All data kept in closed cabinet at the PI office and electronic forms kept as password-secured PI computer.

Measurement

Data were collected using the Arabic version of the scales. The scales have been translated using the WHO (2019) guide of translation and tool adaptation. Initially, the tool was translated by a professional psychologist who has the knowledge and proficiency in English-speaking culture and whose mother tongue is Arabic. Then, a bilingual (in English and Arabic languages) expert used to identify and resolve the inadequate expressions/concepts of the translation, as well as any discrepancies between the forward translation and the existing or comparable previous versions of the questions. Then, the instrument translated back to English by an independent translator, whose mother tongue is English and who has no knowledge of the questionnaire. Emphasis in the back-translation was on conceptual and cultural equivalence and not linguistic equivalence. Discrepancies discussed and no further work needed. The tools were:

Seeking psychological help behavior was measured by Attitudes toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (ASPPH) (Fischer & Turner, 1970). ASPPH comprised of four subscales; recognition, stigma, openness and confidence. The scale is formed of 29 items rated from 1 (disagree) to 4 (agree), with five items reversed scored so that higher scores reflect more positive attitudes. The revised scale strongly correlated with the longer version (.87), suggesting that the two are measuring the same construct (Fischer & Farina, 1995). In this study, the internal consistency was .83.

Psychological distress was measured using the Hopkins Symptom Checklist (HSCL-21; Green, Walkey, McCormick, & Taylor, 1988). HSCL-21 includes three subscales: performance, general, and somatic. The scale aims at assessing distress related to circumstances other than the sudden death. The students were asked to make their responses on a 5-point scale of 0 = *not at all* to 4 = *extremely* in the past 7 days, including today. The scale has good reliability with Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$ (Cepeda-Benito & Short, 1998). In this study, the Cronbach's α was .88.

In addition, sociodemographic information such as age, gender, academic level, and type of school were collected.

Data analysis plan

Data has been analyzed utilizing the software package (IBM-SPSS V 24). The variables were described using frequency tables and the central tendency measures (Mean and Median) and dispersion measures (SD, variance and range). To examine prediction power of psychological distress and demographic characteristics of students, multiple regression analysis have been conducted. To assess the correlation between the variables, Pearson correlation coefficient (r) has been used and t-test for independent sample and ANOVA have been used to test the differences related to demographic and personal characteristics. Alpha was set to .05.

Results

Descriptive characteristics

About 500 students approached and 363 agreed to participate and returned the survey with response rate of 73%. The majority of students were less than 22 years, and 77% ($n = 278$). The students were almost equally representing the type of specialty distributed on the specializations on the academic years. See table 1.

Table 1. The demographic characteristics of the participants ($n=363$)

Factor	Category	n (%)
Age	18-21	304 (83.7)
	22-27	56 (15.5)
	28-36	3 (0.8)
Sex	Male	85 (23.4)
	Female	278 (76.6)
Type of school	Health sciences	259 (71.3)
	Scientific sciences	104 (28.7)
Academic Year	First	111 (30.6)
	Second	122 (33.6)
	Third	71 (19.6)
	Fourth	59 (16.2)
Marital Status	Single	346 (95.3)
	Married	13 (3.6)
	Divorced	4 (1.1)

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of attitudes toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help and psychological distress ($n = 363$).

Scale	Mean	SD
Total ASPPH	74.4	11.0
Recognition	22.6	4.3
Stigma	20.0	2.8
Openness	18.7	4.1
Confidence	21.8	4.2
Total HSCL-21	43.4	10.9
Performance	18.6	4.5
General	11.7	4.1
Somatic	13.1	5.2

Attitudes toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help

The analysis (see table 2) showed that students had a mean total score of 74.3 (SD = 11.0) with scores ranging from 29 to 106. About 75% of the students (P_{75}) had a score between 81 or less indicating negative attitude toward seeking professional help when having psychological concerns or problems. Students scored higher in Confidence subscale ($M = 12.7$, $SD = 2.9$) than all other subscales.

Regarding psychological distress, the analysis showed that students a total mean score of 43.4 (SD = 10.9) with scores ranging from 23 to 79. About 75% (P_{75}) of students had a score of 50 or less indicating moderate level of psychological distress. The highest means score observed in performance subscale ($M = 22.6$, $SD = 4.3$).

Bivariate Analysis

Attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help found to be positively and significantly associated with psychological distress ($r = .28$, $p < .001$), while not statistically significant with age ($r = -.07$, $p = .21$). Also, there were no statistically significant differences in attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help and psychological distress in relation to gender, type of school, and academic year ($p > .05$).

Predicting attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help

To examine prediction power of psychological distress and demographic characteristics of students, multiple regression analysis have been conducted. Initially all assumption of regression model tested and confirmed. The analysis (see table 4) showed that in model that contained psychological distress, age, gender, academic year, type

Table 3. Differences in Attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help in relation to selected demographic characteristics (N= 363).

Factor		MS	F	p-value
Age groups	HSCL-21	119.141	.941	.495
	ATPPH	34.39	1.106	.357
Specialization	HSCL-21	118.65	1.307	.272
	ATPPH	34.59	.667	.573
Academic Year	HSCL-21	119.220	.169	.681
	ATPPH	34.586	.000	.990

ATPPH = Attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help
HSCL-21 = Psychological distress

Table 4. Predicting psychological distress, age, gender, academic year, type of school on attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help (N = 363)

Predictor	SEM	Beta	P value
Psychological Distress	.152	.613	< .001
General	.288	-.178	.094
Somatic	.208	-.249	.012
Performance	.105	-.110	.081
Gender	1.427	.068	.218
Age	.370	-.109	.052
Type of school	.519	.033	.543
Academic Year	.727	.171	.014
$F = 6.22, p < .001$		$R^2 = .12$	

of school and subscales of psychological distress explained 12.3% ($R^2 = .12$) of the variance in the number of attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help.

The analysis showed also that the model was significant ($F = 6.22, p < .001$). In this model, psychological distress ($\beta = .61, p < .001$), somatic subscale ($\beta = .25, p = .012$), and academic year ($\beta = .17, p = .014$) were significant predictors attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help. While general and performance subscales, type of school, age group, and gender were not significant predictors.

Discussion

Psychological counseling is one significant preventive measure against mental and psychological problems and development of mental illnesses. It provides basic element to early detection and intervention appropriately by professionally-prepared psychological counselors (Lynn, 2019). In particular, university students need to seek psychological counseling given the increased and overwhelming psychological and academic demands (Hamaideh, & Hamdan Mansour, 2014; Hamdan Mansour et al, 2020). We found that students have negative attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help although suffering moderate to high level of psychological distress. Moreover, academic year, psychological distress were the significant predictors of students' attitudes. The results indicate that students with higher level of psychological distress and being older are more likely to seek psychological counseling. One explanation is related to the fact that psychological distress may increase worry among students themselves and being older may contributes to raise concern and seek professional help. The students' scores of attitudes in this study were higher compared to reported levels in the literature among healthy, undiagnosed individuals (Owen, Herrera & Whitesell, 2009). This would evoke attention towards stigma of being diagnosed with mental illness and psychological problems confirmed by the high mean score of stigma subscale of attitudes where students score high and low level of confidence and openness.

The negative attitudes toward seeking professional counseling help among students evokes attention towards students' awareness and knowledge about existence and benefits of counseling. Professionals and academicians are responsible for increasing awareness and correct information towards importance and benefits of psychological counseling. The literature showed that students' knowledge concerning psychological counseling services is limited and corresponds with community negative image and shame (Bathji & Pryor, 2011); therefore, students may overlook seeking counseling. In addition, students' reports of openness and confidence support previous reports (Ammigand, Drexlerd, Williamsonb, & Guerra, 2019) that students may not seek psychological counseling lacking confidence in psychological services and inability to communicate their personal matters and concerns. Another explanation for the poor attitude toward seeking professional psychological help is related to feeling of inferiority. Some students may consider seeking assistance to their psychological problems as weaknesses and may affect their image and self-esteem (Corrigan & Rao, 2012). Studies showed that students with low self-esteem are less likely to seek psychological counseling for their psychological problems fearing negative impression of society and their peers (Karaca, Yildirim, Cangur, Acikgoz, & Akkus, 2019). Therefore, students may hide their problems and try to seek solutions through pathways other than the professional counseling.

Students were not different in attitudes toward seeking psychological counseling in related to their selected demographic characteristics. The reports in the literature regarding gender differences are controversial. While Onabule and Boes (2013) found that male students are more likely to seek professional counseling services as compared to females, Seyfi and colleagues (2013) show that female students have a more positive attitudes than male students. While in our study not differences found. This could be related to the facts that most of the students in this study were females, while in the other studies students were almost equally presented. Another reason could be related to type of school as most students in our study are enrolled in health schools where more harmonized academic streams in education is observed.

One limitation of this study is related to cross sectional approached used where longitudinal one might provide more comprehensive understanding for the real reasons for not seeking psychological counseling among students. Another limitation could be related to using self-reported format of data.

Conclusion

This study showed that university students have negative attitudes, in general, towards seeking professional psychological counselling. This have been connected to psychological distress and academic year. The results have an implication for academics and administrators of higher education institutions that students needs to be informed and receive appropriate education about benefits of psychological counselling. Issues such stigma, discrimination, feeling inferiority have to be addressed and overcome. In particular, students at their first and second year might need psychological counseling; therefore, more orientation toward existence of these services and encouraging students to seek psychological counseling and help once have any psychological concern. More studies using larger and various measures to understand reason behind not seeking psychological counseling.

Conflict of interest: Authors declare no conflict of interest

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