

BEYOND TRADITIONAL COUNSELING: EXPLORING STUDENTS' PREFERENCES FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL AND DIGITAL CBT SUPPORT

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Abstract: University students often experience psychological difficulties but may not seek professional support. This study examined psychological service awareness, help-seeking attitudes, barriers, and support preferences among 235 students at Uzbekistan State World Languages University. An anonymous online survey was used. Although 73.2% of students were aware of the university psychological service, only 6.8% would seek help from a psychologist. Family (45.5%) and friends (41.3%) were preferred sources of support, while 70.6% would use anonymous online psychological support. Common barriers included self-reliance, embarrassment, fear of judgment, and the belief that professional help was unnecessary. The findings highlight the need for accessible and confidential support, including digital and CBT-informed options.

Key words: Mental health; professional help-seeking; university students; psychological services; psychological support; cognitive behavioral therapy; digital mental health; higher education.

AN'ANAVIY PSIXOLOGIK MASLAHATDAN TASHQARI: TALABALARNING PSIXOLOGIK VA RAQAMLI KXT YORDAMIGA BO'LGAN AFZALLIKLARINI O'RGANISH

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Annotatsiya: Ushbu tadqiqot O'zbekiston davlat jahon tillari universitetining 235 nafar talabasi orasida psixologik xizmatlardan xabardorlik, yordam so'rashga munosabat, mavjud to'siqlar hamda psixologik yordamning afzal ko'riladigan shakllarini o'rganishga qaratilgan. Anonim onlayn so'rovnoma talabalarning 73,2 foizi universitetda psixologik xizmat mavjudligidan xabardor bo'lgan bo'lsa-da, faqat 6,8 foizi psixologga murojaat qilishini bildirgan. Oila a'zolari (45,5%) va do'stlar (41,3%) ko'proq afzal ko'rilgan yordam manbalari bo'lgan, 70,6 foiz talaba esa anonim onlayn psixologik yordamdan foydalanishga tayyorligini bildirgan. Asosiy to'siqlar qatorida psixologik yordamni zarur deb hisoblamaslik, uyaliq va noqulaylik, boshqalarning salbiy bahosidan qo'rqish hamda muammolarni mustaqil hal qilishga intilish qayd etilgan. Natijalar talabalarga mos, qulay va maxfiy psixologik yordam shakllarini, jumladan, raqamli va KXTga asoslangan yondashuvlarni rivojlantirish zarurligini ko'rsatadi.

Kalit so'zlar: ruhiy salomatlik; professional yordam so'rash; universitet talabalari; psixologik xizmatlar; kognitiv-xulq-atvor terapiyasi; raqamli psixologik yordam.

**ЗА ПРЕДЕЛАМИ ТРАДИЦИОННОГО КОНСУЛЬТИРОВАНИЯ:
ИЗУЧЕНИЕ ПРЕДПОЧТЕНИЙ СТУДЕНТОВ В ОТНОШЕНИИ
ПСИХОЛОГИЧЕСКОЙ И ЦИФРОВОЙ ПОМОЩИ НА ОСНОВЕ КПТ**

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Аннотация: Студенты университетов часто сталкиваются с психологическими трудностями, однако не всегда обращаются за профессиональной помощью. Целью настоящего исследования было изучение осведомлённости о психологических услугах, отношения к обращению за помощью, барьеров и предпочтений в отношении психологической поддержки среди 235 студентов Узбекского государственного университета

мировых языков. Был проведён анонимный онлайн-опрос. Несмотря на то, что 73,2% студентов знали о наличии психологической службы в университете, только 6,8% указали, что обратились бы к психологу. Наиболее предпочтительными источниками поддержки оказались члены семьи (45,5%) и друзья (41,3%), тогда как 70,6% студентов выразили готовность воспользоваться анонимной онлайн-психологической поддержкой. Среди основных барьеров были отмечены представление о ненужности психологической помощи, чувство неловкости или стыда, страх негативной оценки со стороны окружающих и стремление самостоятельно справляться с возникающими трудностями. Полученные результаты подчёркивают необходимость развития доступных, конфиденциальных и ориентированных на потребности студентов форм психологической поддержки, включая цифровые и основанные на КПТ подходы.

Ключевые слова: психическое здоровье; обращение за профессиональной помощью; студенты университетов; психологические услуги; когнитивно-поведенческая терапия; цифровая психологическая поддержка.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health among university students has become an increasingly significant concern in higher education worldwide. The transition from late adolescence to emerging adulthood involves considerable academic, social, and personal changes that can influence students' psychological well-being. Although this developmental stage is commonly associated with identity exploration, increasing independence, and new opportunities, it may also create greater vulnerability to stress, emotional difficulties, and mental health problems (Arnett, 2000; Sussman & Arnett, 2014).

Research has consistently shown that the university years overlap with the period when many common mental disorders are most likely to emerge, particularly depression, anxiety disorders, and substance use disorders (Auerbach et al., 2018;

Kessler et al., 2007). At the same time, many students begin higher education with mental health conditions that developed before university enrollment, indicating that these difficulties cannot always be attributed solely to academic life. Data from the World Mental Health International College Student Initiative indicate that approximately one-third of university students experience at least one common mental disorder within a 12-month period, demonstrating the considerable scale of mental health concerns in student populations across countries (Auerbach et al., 2018).

The consequences of student mental health difficulties extend beyond psychological well-being. Mental health problems have been linked to poorer academic performance, reduced educational attainment, greater risk of university attrition, and difficulties in social functioning (Auerbach et al., 2016; Bruffaerts et al., 2018). When psychological difficulties remain unaddressed, they may persist or become more severe and consequently affect students' quality of life and future development. For this reason, supporting university students' mental health should be considered not only a healthcare concern but also an important component of successful higher education.

Alongside broader mental health concerns, university students are frequently exposed to substantial academic stress. Heavy workloads, examinations, academic competition, financial difficulties, family expectations, and challenges associated with adapting to new educational environments are among the factors commonly reported as sources of stress (Misra & Castillo, 2004; Reddy et al., 2018). Academic stress may contribute to emotional exhaustion, reduced motivation, poorer psychological well-being, and difficulties in academic functioning. In contrast, social support and adaptive coping strategies can help students manage academic demands and maintain psychological well-being.

In response to these challenges, many universities have developed psychological support systems that include counseling services, peer-support programmes, mental health awareness activities, and, increasingly, digital forms of

psychological assistance. However, the availability of such services does not necessarily result in their use. Despite experiencing psychological difficulties, many students do not seek professional support. Although students may report an intention to seek help, considerably fewer ultimately engage in actual help-seeking behavior, demonstrating a gap between willingness and professional service utilization (Zhao et al., 2025).

Several factors may contribute to this gap. Students may prefer to deal with psychological difficulties independently, underestimate the seriousness of their problems, or have insufficient knowledge about where and how to obtain professional assistance. Lack of time, concerns about privacy, perceived stigma, and doubts about the usefulness of psychological services have also been identified as important barriers to help-seeking (Gulliver et al., 2010; Zhao et al., 2025). Thus, increasing the availability of psychological services alone may not be sufficient if students continue to experience personal, social, or practical barriers to accessing them.

Digital psychological interventions may provide an additional way of addressing some of these difficulties. In particular, internet-delivered cognitive behavioral therapy (iCBT) has received increasing attention as an accessible approach for university students experiencing anxiety and other psychological difficulties. CBT focuses on the relationship between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors and can be delivered through structured online programmes, making it potentially suitable for students who prefer greater autonomy, confidentiality, and flexibility. Research has demonstrated beneficial effects of internet-delivered CBT for anxiety among university students, while broader reviews of digital mental health interventions have also highlighted their potential to improve access to psychological support (Harrer et al., 2019; Oliveira et al., 2023). At the same time, understanding students' actual preferences, awareness of available services, and barriers to professional help-seeking remains important for determining how such interventions can be effectively incorporated into university mental health systems.

Although international research has provided substantial evidence regarding student mental health and help-seeking, research in the context of Uzbekistan remains comparatively limited. Therefore, the present study aims to examine stress, emotional well-being, existential concerns, awareness of psychological services, and help-seeking attitudes among students of Uzbekistan State World Languages University. By exploring students' psychological experiences and their perceptions of available forms of support, the study seeks to contribute to the development of evidence-based recommendations for strengthening accessible and student-centered psychological services within higher education institutions.

METHOD

Participants The study involved 235 students from Uzbekistan State World Languages University who took part in an anonymous online survey. Participation was voluntary, and students were provided with information about the purpose of the study before completing the questionnaire. The survey did not request any personally identifiable information, thereby maintaining participant confidentiality.

Research design and procedure. A cross-sectional quantitative design was used to explore students' psychological experiences, awareness of university psychological services, and attitudes toward seeking psychological support. Data were collected through an online questionnaire created in Google Forms and distributed electronically to university students.

The questionnaire asked participants to consider their experiences over the two weeks preceding the survey. The majority of the items followed a five-point Likert-type response format, ranging from 0 (Never) to 4 (Almost every day). In addition to questions concerning students' psychological experiences, the survey included items addressing awareness of university psychological services, preferred sources of assistance when facing psychological difficulties, willingness to use psychological support, and perceived obstacles to seeking professional help.

Measures. The questionnaire covered five main areas of students' psychological experiences and help-seeking attitudes.

The first area concerned academic stress, including experiences of academic pressure, exhaustion related to coursework, and inadequate time for rest and recovery.

The second area addressed emotional well-being, with items focusing on experiences such as sadness, irritability, and general emotional distress.

The third area examined existential and social experiences, including loneliness, concerns about the future, feelings of meaninglessness, and tendencies toward social withdrawal.

The fourth area focused on awareness and use of psychological support, including students' knowledge of psychological services available at the university and the people they would prefer to approach when experiencing psychological difficulties.

The fifth area explored students' perceptions of mental health difficulties among their peers, their willingness to use anonymous psychological support services, and the factors they perceived as barriers to seeking professional psychological assistance.

Although the questionnaire addressed several dimensions of student mental health, the primary focus of the present study was professional help-seeking. In particular, the analysis concentrated on students' awareness of psychological services, attitudes toward seeking professional assistance, and preferences regarding different forms and sources of psychological support. The measures of stress, emotional well-being, and existential experiences were considered as contextual indicators of the psychological difficulties reported by the participants.

Data Analysis. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, primarily frequencies and percentages. The analysis examined students' awareness of university psychological services, preferred sources of psychological assistance, willingness to seek professional help, and attitudes toward anonymous psychological support.

Responses concerning academic stress, emotional well-being, and existential experiences were additionally considered to describe the broader psychological context in which students' help-seeking attitudes occurred. The findings are presented through frequencies and percentages derived from participants' responses.

RESULTS

Psychological Distress and Emotional Experiences

The responses indicate that psychological difficulties were relatively common among the participating students. Academic demands were particularly evident in the responses, with many students reporting academic pressure, exhaustion related to coursework, and limited opportunities for rest during the two-week period examined. A number of participants also described feeling overwhelmed by their academic responsibilities and experiencing difficulties in maintaining a balance between studying and personal recovery.

The responses concerning emotional well-being showed that students also experienced negative emotional states, including sadness and irritability. Anxiety related to the future was among the most prominent concerns identified in the survey. Loneliness and social withdrawal were reported as well, although these experiences appeared less frequently than concerns related to academic demands and uncertainty about the future. Overall, the responses point to the presence of several psychological challenges that may interfere with students' general well-being and academic functioning.

Awareness of Psychological Services and Help-Seeking Preferences

The results regarding university psychological services revealed a notable difference between awareness and willingness to seek professional assistance. While 73.2% of participants reported being aware that psychological services were available at the university, approximately one-quarter were not aware of their existence.

Despite this relatively high level of awareness, professional psychological support was not among the most preferred sources of assistance. When asked whom

they would turn to in the event of psychological difficulties, 45.5% selected family members and 41.3% selected friends. By comparison, only 6.8% indicated that they would approach a psychologist. In addition, 38.7% reported that they would not seek help from anyone.

These responses indicate that simply knowing that psychological services are available does not necessarily lead students to consider professional support as their preferred option. Instead, informal support networks appear to play a considerably greater role in students' anticipated responses to psychological difficulties.

Preferences for Anonymous and Alternative Psychological Support

The survey also examined students' attitudes toward a more private and accessible form of psychological assistance. When asked whether they would use an anonymous online psychological support service, 70.6% of participants responded positively. This represents a considerably higher level of willingness than that observed for seeking help directly from a psychologist.

The responses concerning barriers to professional help-seeking provide further insight into this pattern. The most frequently identified reason for avoiding psychological assistance was the perception that professional psychological help was unnecessary. Participants also identified embarrassment or shame, fear of being negatively judged, and discomfort with discussing personal problems with a professional as important barriers.

Taken together, the findings suggest that students' reluctance to seek professional psychological assistance cannot necessarily be interpreted as an absence of psychological need. Rather, the pattern of responses indicates a preference for informal, private, and potentially less stigmatizing forms of support. The substantially higher willingness to use anonymous online assistance also suggests that the format and accessibility of psychological support may influence students' readiness to seek help.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined students' psychological well-being, awareness of psychological services, and help-seeking attitudes at Uzbekistan State World Languages University. The findings suggest that many students experience psychological difficulties, while professional help-seeking remains limited despite relatively high awareness of available services.

Academic pressure, exhaustion, sadness, and concerns about the future were frequently reported by participants. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that emerging adulthood can be accompanied by academic, social, and personal challenges that increase vulnerability to psychological distress (Arnett, 2000; Auerbach et al., 2018). Academic stress has also been associated with emotional exhaustion, reduced well-being, and poorer academic functioning (Pascoe et al., 2020). These findings highlight the importance of making psychological support accessible to students experiencing such difficulties.

A particularly important finding was the difference between awareness of psychological services and willingness to use them. Although 73.2% of students were aware of the university psychological service, only 6.8% reported that they would seek help from a psychologist. Instead, family members (45.5%) and friends (41.3%) were preferred sources of support. This is consistent with research showing that awareness of services does not necessarily lead to professional help-seeking (Zhao et al., 2025).

The fact that 38.7% of students would not seek help from anyone is also noteworthy. Self-reliance is commonly reported as a barrier to professional help-seeking among young people (Gulliver et al., 2010; Zhao et al., 2025). Students may prefer to manage their difficulties independently, particularly during emerging adulthood, when autonomy and independence become increasingly important (Arnett, 2000).

The reported barriers, including embarrassment, fear of negative judgment, and the belief that psychological help is unnecessary, further suggest that simply

increasing the availability of services may not be enough. Universities may also need to focus on mental health literacy, reducing stigma, and helping students better understand when professional support may be useful.

Another important finding was that 70.6% of participants would use an anonymous online psychological support service. This suggests that students may be more comfortable with forms of support that provide greater privacy and flexibility. In this context, digital psychological interventions, including internet-delivered cognitive behavioral therapy (iCBT), may offer a useful additional option. Research has found positive effects of internet-delivered CBT for anxiety among university students and has highlighted the potential of digital interventions to improve access to psychological support (Harrer et al., 2019; Oliveira et al., 2023; Graham et al., 2023).

Based on these findings, universities could combine existing psychological services with psychoeducation, peer support, and confidential online resources. CBT-based digital materials may be particularly useful for students who are hesitant to approach a psychologist directly. However, such approaches should complement rather than replace professional psychological services.

The study has several limitations. It was conducted at a single university and relied on self-reported data, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future studies could include students from several universities and use both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore help-seeking attitudes in greater depth.

Overall, the findings suggest that psychological difficulties are present among students, but awareness of psychological services does not necessarily lead to professional help-seeking. Developing accessible, confidential, and student-centered forms of support, including appropriate digital and CBT-informed options, may help reduce this gap.

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