

## Mental health literacy in adolescents: A systematic literature review

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### Abstract

Adolescent mental health literacy (MHL) plays a critical role in equipping young individuals to make informed health decisions and seek appropriate care. This study aimed to explore the level of adolescent MHL worldwide, its influencing factors, and effective strategies to improve it through a systematic review of 10 selected studies published between 2000 and 2024. Using PRISMA guidelines, relevant articles were identified from databases including Scopus, PubMed, and Google Scholar. Key findings indicate significant variability in MHL among adolescents globally, influenced by factors such as education, culture, and access to information. While adolescents are generally better at recognizing common conditions like depression, less than 50% can identify it accurately. Gender disparities were observed, with females more likely to recommend professional help. Effective interventions, such as school-based programs, show promise in enhancing MHL, particularly in improving knowledge and reducing stigma. Instruments like the Mental Health Literacy Questionnaire and The Friend in Need Questionnaire were commonly used for assessment, although reliance on self-reported data highlights the need for more objective tools. The findings underscore the importance of comprehensive health education programs in schools, covering topics such as mental health, nutrition, and healthy lifestyles, to bridge knowledge gaps and foster help-seeking behaviors. This study concludes that addressing disparities in adolescent MHL through tailored, multi-sectoral approaches, including education, community engagement, and policy reforms, is essential to empower adolescents globally and improve public mental health outcomes.

**Keywords:** *mental health literacy, adolescent, professional help, help-seeking.*



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## **Introduction**

Comprehensive mental health literacy (MHL) is essential for recognizing, managing, and preventing mental disorders, promoting early intervention, and reducing prevalence (Kutcher, Wei, & Coniglio, 2016; Jorm, 2000). Ideally, individuals should possess knowledge of symptoms, preventive strategies, and appropriate help-seeking behaviors. However, misconceptions and stigma remain significant barriers. For instance, adolescents often label individuals with mental disorders as dangerous, perpetuating stigma and inhibiting formal help-seeking (Rachmayani & Kurniawati, 2017). Existing research highlights various aspects of mental health literacy and its challenges among adolescents. For example, Kutcher et al. (2016) emphasize the importance of mental health education programs in schools for improving adolescents' understanding of mental health. Similarly, O'Connor, Casey, and Clough (2014) found that adolescents with higher levels of MHL were more likely to recognize symptoms of depression and anxiety and seek professional help. However, Fox et al. (2001) and Andersson et al. (2013) identified significant knowledge gaps among adolescents, such as misconceptions about mental disorders and reliance on informal support systems. Mehta and Thornicroft (2014) showed that stigma significantly affects adolescents' willingness to seek help, with many fearing judgment or discrimination. A recent study by Mansfield, Patalay, and Humphrey (2020) critiques the inconsistency in research on adolescent mental health literacy. They argue that the focus has predominantly been on "mental disorder literacy," rather than a holistic understanding of mental health, which includes promoting resilience and coping strategies. This limitation has led to an incomplete understanding of how MHL can influence stigma reduction and help-seeking behaviors. Adolescence is a critical developmental period marked by significant psychological and social changes, during which individuals are particularly vulnerable to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. Mental health literacy in adolescents encompasses the ability to recognize symptoms of mental disorders, understand their causes and treatments, and seek appropriate professional help (O'Connor, Casey, & Clough, 2014). However, many adolescents lack sufficient knowledge about mental health, often leading to delayed help-seeking, misconceptions, or reliance on informal support systems (Fox et al., 2001; Andersson et al., 2013; Mehta & Thornicroft, 2014). Mental health literacy in adolescent research is currently unclear and inconsistent, requiring a shift from 'mental disorder literacy' to a more comprehensive understanding of mental health (Mansfield, Patalay, & Humphrey, 2020).

Exploring this topic is essential because early intervention in adolescence can significantly impact long-term mental health outcomes. Enhanced MHL reduces stigma, encourages timely help-seeking, and fosters resilience, equipping adolescents with tools to navigate stress and mental health challenges effectively (Mason & Hart, 2015). Additionally, community trust and involvement play critical roles in reducing stigma. Social capital, including trust and cooperation, fosters positive attitudes and acceptance of individuals with mental disorders (Kido et al., 2013). Integrating community support with mental health literacy can transform stigma and encourage the use of primary healthcare services. Adolescents face unique challenges that can significantly impact their mental health, including academic pressures, social expectations, and the ongoing development of identity and self-concept (Stear, Muñoz, Sullivan, & Lewis, 2023). During this critical stage, the ability to recognize and address mental health issues is often hampered by a lack of awareness and deeply ingrained stigma. Despite efforts to integrate mental health education into school curriculums, there is limited evidence on how these interventions translate into practical outcomes, such as reduced stigma or increased help-seeking behavior (Lanfredi, et al., 2019). Furthermore, cultural and societal factors, including the role of family and community support, remain underexplored in the context of adolescent mental health literacy (Kusaka, Yamaguchi, Foo, Togo, & T, 2022). By focusing on the intersection of individual knowledge, societal attitudes, and community involvement, this research seeks to bridge the gap between

theoretical understanding and real-world applications, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive and actionable framework for adolescent mental health promotion.

**Method**

This study employs the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to systematically identify and analyse relevant literature. The SLR process follows a structured approach, including identification, selection, data extraction, and synthesis. Inclusion criteria encompass articles published between 2000 and 2024, written in English, based on empirical research or meta-analyses, and relevant to the topic of mental health literacy among adolescents. Literature searches were conducted through several databases such as Scopus, PubMed, SpringerLink, and Google Scholar, using keyword combinations like "mental health literacy", "mental health adolescent", and "mental health". Articles retrieved during the initial search were further screened following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. The initial search yielded 920 articles. The selection process began with a review of titles and abstracts to ensure relevance, resulting in 40 articles, followed by a full-text assessment based on predefined criteria, narrowing the selection to 10 articles.

Data from the selected articles were extracted and organised into tables, including information on the authors, year of publication, methodology, key findings, and conclusions. This data was then analysed descriptively to identify research trends and thematically synthesised to present an empirical overview of mental health literacy among adolescents. The analysis aims to draw conclusions that can inform further research on mental health literacy, contributing to the formulation of a hypothetical framework for enhancing mental health literacy among adolescents.

**Findings**

The studies collectively explore mental health literacy (MHL) across diverse populations, primarily focusing on adolescents and young adults, particularly in educational settings. Using tools such as DSM-IV-based questionnaires, Mental Health Literacy Questionnaires, and scenario-based vignettes, the research identifies recurring themes, including gender disparities, with women generally exhibiting higher emotional intelligence and greater openness to seeking professional help. Awareness levels are moderate, with common conditions like depression being more easily recognized than others such as social anxiety. Intervention programs demonstrate positive impacts, notably in enhancing knowledge and reducing stigma, though reliance on self-reported measures highlights the need for more objective, validated tools to evaluate MHL interventions effectively.

**Tabel 1. Findings**

Reference	Research Design	Sample	Procedure	Form of Assessment	Result
(Furnham, Cook, Martin, & Batey, 2011)	Descriptive	A total of 426 students in the United Kingdom, with 20 students having been diagnosed with mental health disorders.	Students were asked to fill out a questionnaire.	Given questions based on DSM-IV criteria	On average, participants have heard a little more than a third of various existing illnesses. Those who perceive these conditions as more common tend to believe they have more known causes and are more treatable. Women with emotional intelligence, openness to experience, and relevant academic

Reference	Research Design	Sample	Procedure	Form of Assessment	Result
					subjects claim to be more informed. The age and personality of participants, as well as whether they have studied clinical psychology, are related to their awareness.
(Dias, Campos, Almeida, Helena, & Palha, 2018)	Instrument Development	159 participants with an age range of 18-25 years.	1.Adaptation of MHLq for the Population 2.Instrument Dissemination	<i>Mental Health Literacy Questionnaire</i>	The findings of the research suggest that the MHLq-Young Adult form serves as a practical, valid, and reliable screening tool for pinpointing deficiencies in knowledge, beliefs, and behavioral intentions associated with mental health and mental disorders. This tool proves valuable for designing promotional programs and assessing the efficacy of interventions.
(Fitri, 2019)	Descriptive	377 undergraduate students at the State University of Yogyakarta.	Students were asked to fill out the MHL instrument.	<i>Mental Health Literacy Questionnaire</i>	(1) Gender disparity is evident in the realm of mental health literacy, particularly in the positive disposition towards seeking professional help. Notably, a higher proportion of male respondents express reluctance to endorse the idea of seeking professional help for depression.  (2) Discrepancies in mental health literacy are observed across various dimensions, encompassing knowledge about the causes of mental disorders and a favorable outlook on professional help, as influenced by the gender-specific character vignette depicting depression.
(Nobre, Oliveira, Monteiro, Sequeira, & Ferre-Grau, 2021)	Research scoping review	-	A study on programs/interventions promoting at least one component of Mental Health	-	The majority of programs and interventions focus on addressing one or more of the four components of Mental Health Literacy (MHL), with particular emphasis

Reference	Research Design	Sample	Procedure	Form of Assessment	Result
			Literacy (MHL) in adolescents, written in Portuguese, English, or Spanish, published between 2013 and 2020, within the databases medline, cinahl plus with full text, scielo, scopus, opengrey, rcaap, and reference lists of articles. This review encompasses 29 articles.		on knowledge about mental disorders and reducing stigma. Typically led by regular teenage teachers, these interventions employ face-to-face strategies, vary in duration, utilize non-validated instruments, and are implemented within classroom settings. Importantly, these initiatives demonstrate statistically significant enhancements in adolescents' MHL levels. However, further research is essential to develop and implement programs that specifically target adolescent MHL related to comprehending the strategies for attaining and sustaining good mental health.
(Lam, 2014)	Descriptive	1678 student in Australia	Students were asked to fill out the instrument.	The National Survey of Mental Health Literacy and Stigma for Adolescents in Australia, focusing solely on depression vignettes.	The research results indicate that the level of mental health literacy is associated with mental health status, particularly depression in young people. These findings have significant implications, both clinically and at the population level, in preventing mental health issues and improving the mental health status of adolescents.
(Bjornsen, Eilertsen, Ringdal, Espenes, & Moksnes, 2017)	Instrument development	High school students in Norway aged 15–21 years old.	Students filled out the developed instrument.	Developed based on the theory of Mental Health Promoting Knowledge.	This instrument has the potential to complement existing measurements of Mental Health Literacy and can be valuable in planning mental health promotion activities and evaluating community mental health education initiatives for adolescents.
(Burns & Rapee, 2006)	Descriptive	202 Australian teenagers aged 15-17	Filling out a questionnaire that presents five scenarios about young	<i>The Friend in Need Questionnaire</i>	Respondents demonstrated varying abilities in correctly recognizing and labeling depression, although they

Reference	Research Design	Sample	Procedure	Form of Assessment	Result
		years old.	individuals.		could distinguish scenarios depicting depressive and non-depressive conditions based on severity levels and estimated recovery time.
(Coles, Ravid, Gibb, Bronstein, & McLeod, 2016)	Descriptive	1104 respondents who are teenagers in the United States.	Filling out the provided questionnaire.	<i>The Friend in Need Questionnaire</i>	Adolescents exhibit a higher proficiency in recognizing depression compared to social anxiety disorders, and they are more inclined to endorse seeking help for depression. Despite this, it is noteworthy that less than 50% of adolescents can accurately identify depression. Recommendations for sources of assistance predominantly include family, friends, and counselors. The study also highlights gender differences among respondents and individuals in the vignette as noteworthy factors in the findings.
(Fisher & Goldney, 2003)	Comparative Study	300 respondents aged 65-74 years, and 521 respondents aged 15-24 years.	Respondents filled out the provided instrument.	<i>the Primary Care Evaluation of Mental Disorders (PRIME-MD) instrument</i>	Compared to the younger group, older subjects did not report higher current levels of depression, even though they were more likely to have consulted with a medical practitioner in the last 12 months and taken antidepressant medication. However, their mental health literacy in terms of recognizing mental health issues in a vignette was slightly lower, and the number recommending treatment from a counselor, helpline, or psychologist was fewer, while more considered a psychiatrist to be potentially harmful. They also more frequently regarded religious clergy as a useful source of assistance.

Reference	Research Design	Sample	Procedure	Form of Assessment	Result
(Olyani, Aval, Tehrani, & Mahdiadeh, 2021)	Literature Review	-	For this study, a comprehensive search was performed across various databases, including Scopus, PubMed, Web of Science, Google Scholar, Irandoc, Magiran, and SID, encompassing studies published in both Persian and English languages from 2011 to 2021. From an initial pool of 191 articles identified, a thorough selection process led to the inclusion of six articles in the final analysis.	-	The evidence suggests that school-based interventions for adolescent mental health literacy, employing diverse methods, consistently demonstrated positive effects on mental health literacy. It is important to note, however, that these studies relied on self-report assessments to measure mental health literacy outcomes. Despite the positive results, there is a need for further validation and confirmation of these findings using objective tools to ensure the reliability and accuracy of the reported improvements in mental health literacy..

The findings underscore the importance of improving mental health literacy through educational interventions and tailored approaches. Gender, age, and educational background play significant roles in shaping awareness and attitudes toward mental health. Although interventions show promising results, advancing MHL further requires addressing the challenges of measurement and focusing on holistic, culturally appropriate programs that equip individuals with actionable knowledge for sustaining mental health.

**Discussion**

Based on the aforementioned studies, it is explained that the level of adolescent health literacy worldwide can vary significantly (Quinlan-Davidson, et al., 2021) . Adolescent health literacy is influenced by a range of factors, including socioeconomic status, cultural context, and the availability of educational resources. Efforts to improve health literacy must be tailored to the specific needs and contexts of different populations, with a focus on developing validated measurement tools and effective interventions (Strømstad, Skarpaas, Wiik, Haslerud, & Aas, 2022). Addressing these disparities is crucial for improving health outcomes and reducing health inequities among adolescents globally (Mansfield, Patalay, & Humphrey, 2020). Adolescent health literacy refers to the knowledge, understanding, and skills possessed by teenagers to make informed decisions regarding their own health. It is crucial to enhance adolescent health literacy because it empowers them to make healthy

decisions, prevent diseases, and manage their health conditions effectively. The level of mental health literacy is associated with mental health status, particularly depression in teenagers (Lam, 2014).

Mental health literacy (MHL) refers to an individual's knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders, which are essential for recognizing, managing, and preventing these conditions (Jorm, 2000). Mental health literacy includes understanding how to maintain positive mental health, mental disorders and their treatments, reducing the stigma around mental illness, and improving the effectiveness of seeking help (Seedaket et al., 2020). The higher the level of health literacy, the lower the likelihood of students experiencing mental health disorders and contribute to the high mental health awareness among teenager (Mayangsari et al., 2020; Rudianto, 2022). For adolescents, MHL involves understanding symptoms, causes, and treatments for mental disorders, the ability to seek professional help, and maintaining a positive approach toward mental health (O'Connor, Casey, & Clough, 2014; Yulianti & Surjaningrum, 2021). This foundational knowledge is critical for empowering young individuals to address their mental health challenges effectively, make informed decisions, and reduce reliance on informal or ineffective support systems (Andersson et al., 2013; Singh et al., 2022). The exploration of MHL in adolescence is crucial because this developmental stage is marked by significant psychological, emotional, and social transitions (Ng et al., 2021; Brooks et al., 2021). Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to mental health issues, with many disorders such as depression and anxiety often emerging during this period. Adolescents often lack understanding of mental health and have difficulty identifying mental problems or asking for professional help when necessary (Mohammadi et al, 2020). However, a lack of MHL often leads to delayed help-seeking behaviors, misconceptions about mental illnesses, and reliance on unverified or informal sources of help (Fox et al., 2001; Mehta & Thornicroft, 2014). Research highlights that improving MHL can reduce stigma, encourage professional help-seeking, and enable early intervention, all of which are critical for mitigating the long-term effects of untreated mental disorders (Mason & Hart, 2015; Tissera & Tairi, 2020). Addressing this gap not only benefits individuals but also contributes to public health by fostering a culture of mental health awareness and resilience among adolescents. Furthermore, it is essential to build a society where individuals feel confident and comfortable seeking help, which supports mental well-being and removes obstacles to accessing care (Mori et al., 2022). Therefore, understanding and enhancing adolescent MHL is vital for creating supportive environments that promote mental well-being and empower young individuals to thrive.

According to research by Furnham et al., on average, teenagers have heard of more than a third of existing mental illnesses (Furnham, Cook, Martin, & Batey, 2011). Australian teenagers can recognize and label depression, describing it based on severity levels and estimated recovery time. (Burns & Rapee, 2006). Teens are better at recognizing depression than social anxiety disorders and are more likely to recommend seeking help for depression. However, less than 50% of teenagers recognize depression (Coles, Ravid, Gibb, Bronstein, & McLeod, 2016). Female teenagers tend to recommend seeking professional help for mental health disorders more than male teenagers. (Fitri, 2019). Some instruments that can measure the level of mental health literacy in teenagers include The Friend in Need Questionnaire and the Mental Health Literacy Questionnaire.

Several factors influencing the level of adolescent health literacy worldwide include education, access to health information, culture, and social environment (Nobre, et al., 2022). In countries with high levels of education and access to health information, the level of adolescent health literacy tends to be higher. Conversely, in countries with limited education and access to health information, the level of adolescent health literacy may be lower. Several studies have been conducted to measure the level of adolescent health literacy in various countries. The results of these studies indicate that there are still deficiencies in the level of adolescent health literacy in many countries (Quinlan-Davidson, et al., 2021). To improve the level of adolescent health literacy worldwide, several steps can be taken. First, it is crucial to provide easy access to accurate and reliable health information. This can be achieved through health education campaigns in schools, social media, and widely accessible health information sources. Promoting mental health literacy can increase public awareness regarding mental health issues among adolescents and help build adolescent mental health capacity through global communities of



practice (Clauss-Ehlers, Carpio, & Weist, 2020).

Moreover, comprehensive health education programs can be introduced in schools to provide the knowledge and skills needed for teenagers to manage their health (Lee, Tsang, . Lee, & To, 2003). comprehensive health education programs also can be introduced in schools to provide the knowledge and skills needed for teenagers to manage their health (Pulimeno, Piscitelli, Colazzo, Colao, & Miani, 2020). These programs should cover topics such as sexual and reproductive health, prevention of sexually transmitted infections, nutrition, mental health, and the importance of a healthy lifestyle.

Improving adolescent health literacy requires a multi-faceted approach involving educators, parents, healthcare professionals, and communities. The formal education system plays a critical role in providing adolescents with foundational knowledge about physical, mental, and sexual health through well-integrated curricula. However, this effort must be complemented by the active involvement of parents who, as primary caregivers, shape health behaviors at home through guidance, modeling, and open communication. Healthcare professionals also contribute by offering clear, accessible health information during medical visits, fostering a trusting environment where adolescents feel comfortable seeking advice (Florescu, et al., 2019). Communities and peer networks play a vital role in reinforcing health messages through local programs and support systems that promote healthy behaviors. Furthermore, governments must create policies that ensure equitable access to health education, healthcare, and reliable health information, while also addressing social determinants of health. Finally, fostering a culture that values health, supported by digital literacy initiatives, is essential for ensuring that adolescents can critically navigate the vast amount of health information available to them, making informed decisions that lead to lifelong well-being.

## **Conclusion**

The discussion highlights the variability in adolescent health literacy globally and its crucial role in empowering teenagers to make informed decisions about their health. Mental health literacy, particularly regarding depression, is a significant aspect, as evidenced by various studies. While teenagers generally have some awareness of mental illnesses, there are still gaps, with less than 50% recognizing depression. Gender differences are notable, with female teenagers being more inclined to recommend seeking professional help for mental health disorders. Instruments like The Friend in Need Questionnaire and the Mental Health Literacy Questionnaire are valuable for assessing mental health literacy in teenagers. Several factors influence adolescent health literacy, including education, access to information, culture, and social environment. Efforts to improve health literacy should encompass accessible and accurate information sources, education programs in schools covering various health topics, and community involvement. To enhance global adolescent health literacy, a multifaceted approach involving education, community engagement, and government collaboration is necessary. Empowering teenagers with the right knowledge and skills will enable them to lead healthy lives and make informed decisions about their well-being.

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