
Mental Health Literacy and Its Association with Help-Seeking Intention among Filipino College Students

Emmarlone Ravago¹ and Beverly Ravago²

^{1,2}*Saint Joseph College, Maasin City, Southern Leyte, Philippines*

Corresponding Author: Emmarlone Ravago **E-mail:** emmarlone96@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Received: November 28th, 2025

Accepted: January 06th 2026

Published: January, 19th 2026

Volume: 4

Issue: 1

DOI: 10.61424/issej.v4i1.661

KEYWORDS

Mental health, mental health literacy, help-seeking intention, college students, higher education

ABSTRACT

Mental health concerns among college students have worsened globally, yet help-seeking remains low, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Mental health literacy (MHL) has been widely identified as a key factor influencing individuals' willingness to seek help; however, evidence examining its role among Filipino college students remains limited. This study aimed to determine the level of MHL among Filipino college students and to examine whether it is significantly associated with their help-seeking intention. A descriptive correlational cross-sectional design was employed among 112 college students from a private higher education institution in Southern Leyte, Philippines. MHL was measured using the Mental Health Literacy Scale, while help-seeking intention was assessed using the General Help-Seeking Questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize participants' characteristics and study variables. Due to the non-normal distribution of help-seeking intention scores, Spearman's rho was conducted to examine the relationship between MHL and help-seeking intention. Participants demonstrated a generally moderate level of MHL, with higher competence in recognizing mental disorders and accessing mental health information, and comparatively lower knowledge of self-treatment and professional help available. Help-seeking intention was also moderate, with greater willingness to seek help from formal sources than informal ones. Correlation analysis revealed a very weak and statistically non-significant association between MHL and help-seeking intention. The findings suggest that while Filipino college students possess foundational mental health knowledge, MHL alone may not be sufficient to translate into stronger help-seeking intentions. These results highlight the need for comprehensive and culturally responsive mental health programs within higher education institutions that address not only knowledge gaps but also psychosocial and contextual barriers to help-seeking.

1. Introduction

The mental health of college students has become a growing global concern. Academic demands, social pressures, and economic uncertainty coincide with critical changes in development, making this population particularly vulnerable to mental health problems (Cuijpers et al., 2019; World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). International

studies conducted across several countries consistently indicate that a high percentage of college students experience clinically significant mental health symptoms, yet many do not seek timely or appropriate help (Auerbach et al., 2018; Cuijpers et al., 2019; Duffy et al., 2020). More recent research further suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened mental health challenges among young people and compounded barriers to help-seeking within educational settings (Santomauro et al., 2021; WHO, 2022). These unmet mental health needs have been associated with adverse academic outcomes, impaired psychosocial functioning, and long-term consequences for well-being, highlighting the urgency of examining how mental health concerns develop and are addressed among college populations worldwide (Bruffaerts et al., 2018; Lipson et al., 2022). Within this broader international context, understanding how these challenges manifest in specific national settings—particularly in low- and middle-income countries—remains a critical area of research.

In the Philippines, the mental health of college students has declined markedly in recent years. Nationwide surveys reveal that depressive symptoms and suicidal experiences among Filipino youth aged 15–24 more than doubled from 2013 to 2021 (Kabamalan, 2022; Puyat et al., 2025). In addition, research indicates that Filipino college students are two to three times more at risk for depression and anxiety compared to the general population (Alibudbud, 2021). These mental health concerns have been associated with poor academic performance, lower self-efficacy, and reduced overall quality of life (Cleofas, 2020; Munar et al., 2023). Despite the prevalence and impact of these issues, Filipino college students remain reluctant to seek help from mental health professionals and, in many cases, even from family members and friends (Kabamalan, 2022; Pantaleon et al., 2022).

One factor contributing to the gap between mental health needs and help-seeking behavior among Filipino college students is insufficient mental health literacy (MHL) (Ines, 2019). Mental health literacy refers to the “knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders which aid in their recognition, management, and prevention” (Jorm et al., 1997, p. 182). Recent studies consistently report that Filipino college students demonstrate poor to average levels of MHL (Argao et al., 2021; Gariando et al., 2025; Ines, 2019; Salacut et al., 2025). While many students are able to recognize common mental health symptoms and identify certain disorders, their understanding of causes, available sources of help, and treatment options remains limited. Misconceptions persist, including beliefs that mental health problems have supernatural causes, are contagious, or that prescribed psychiatric medications are harmful (Ines, 2019; Gariando et al., 2025; Salacut et al., 2025). These knowledge gaps may partly explain why many Filipino college students exhibit poor help-seeking behaviors (Kabamalan, 2022; Martinez et al., 2020; Tuliao, 2014).

International research highlights the importance of MHL in shaping help-seeking intention among adolescents and university students. Higher levels of MHL have been consistently identified as a significant factor facilitating individuals’ willingness to seek help for mental health problems (Barrow & Thomas, 2022; Özparlak et al., 2023). Help-seeking intention refers to an individual’s likelihood of seeking help from informal sources (family or friends) or formal sources (mental health professionals) when experiencing a mental health concern (Rickwood et al., 2005). This association is theoretically supported by the Health Belief Model (HBM), which posits that individuals are more likely to engage in health-promoting behaviors when they possess sufficient knowledge, perceive themselves as susceptible to a condition, and believe that taking action—such as seeking help—will be beneficial (Rosenstock, 1974; Champion & Skinner, 2008). In this framework, higher MHL may improve individuals’ understanding of mental health problems and confidence in the effectiveness of treatment, thereby strengthening help-seeking intentions. Conversely, limited knowledge, stigma, and negative attitudes associated with poor MHL may hinder help-seeking behaviors among young people (Barrow & Thomas, 2022).

Despite the documented decline in mental health among Filipino college students and growing international evidence linking MHL to help-seeking intention, research examining these constructs within the Philippine context remains limited. To address this gap, the present study aims to determine the level of MHL among Filipino college students and to examine whether MHL is significantly associated with their help-seeking intention. Guided by the Health Belief Model, this study hypothesizes that higher levels of MHL are significantly related to stronger help-seeking intentions. This study aligns with the policy goals of the Philippine Mental Health Act of 2018 and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and Goal 4 (Quality Education).

The findings of this study are intended to inform the development of MHL programs within higher education institutions, with the aim of strengthening help-seeking behaviors among college students.

1.1 Purpose

This study aimed to determine the level of MHL among college students at a private higher education institution in Southern Leyte, Philippines, and to examine whether MHL is significantly associated with their help-seeking intention. By examining these constructs, this study seeks to inform the development of MHL programs within higher education institutions that aim to strengthen college students' help-seeking behaviors.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a descriptive correlational cross-sectional design to determine Filipino college students' level of MHL and to examine its relationship with their help-seeking intention. This design was appropriate for describing the research variables without manipulation and for assessing their relationship using data collected at a single point in time.

2.2 Population and Sampling

The participants consisted of 112 college students from a private higher education institution in Southern Leyte, Philippines. Convenience sampling was used, wherein respondents were recruited based on their availability and willingness to participate. This method was appropriate given the accessibility of the target population and the study's limited timeframe.

2.3 Instrumentation

Data were collected through a self-administered questionnaire composed of three parts. The first part gathered the respondents' sociodemographic profile, including age, sex, course, year level, and prior experience of a mental health problem.

The second part assessed the respondents' level of MHL through the Mental Health Literacy Scale (MHLS). The scale consists of 35 items measuring recognition of disorders; knowledge of risk factors, causes, treatments, available help, and information sources; and attitudes towards help-seeking. Items are rated on a Likert-type scale. Total scores range from 35 to 160, where higher scores indicate greater MHL. The MHLS has demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.873$) and test-retest reliability ($r = .797, p < .001$) (O'Connor & Casey, 2015).

The third part measured the respondents' help-seeking intention using the General Help-Seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ). Respondents rate their likelihood of seeking help from various informal and formal sources using a 7-point Likert scale, where higher scores reflect stronger help-seeking intentions. The GHSQ has shown significant correlation with seeking access to counselling ($r_s = .17, p < .05$) and strong test-retest reliability ($r = .92$) (Wilson et al., 2007). For the purposes of this study, the following question was used: "If you were having a mental health problem (anxiety, depression, or suicidal thoughts), how likely is it that you would seek help from the following people?"

2.4 Data Collection

Data were collected on October 2025. Participants were recruited through class announcements and asked to participate at their most convenient time. Before participating, they were informed about the purpose of the study and asked to provide consent. Once consent was obtained, printed questionnaires were distributed and completed by the participants in their classrooms.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Jamovi. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were computed to summarize participants' sociodemographic characteristics and important study variables. Assumption checks indicated that both MHL and help-seeking intention scores were continuous and demonstrated linearity. While MHL scores were approximately normally distributed, help-seeking intention scores violated normality assumptions. Accordingly, Spearman's rho was used to examine the relationship between the two variables. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

3. Results

3.1 Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Participants

As shown in Table 1, 112 Filipino college students participated in this study. The participants' mean age was 21.84 (SD = 3.07). Most of the participants were male (n = 60, 54%), in their fourth year of study (n = 38, 34%), and had prior experience of a mental health problem (n = 98, 88%).

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Participants (n = 112)

Sociodemographic Characteristics		Frequency	% of Total
Age		Mean = 21.84 (SD = 3.07)	
Sex	Male	60	54
	Female	52	46
Year level	1	19	17
	2	26	23
	3	29	26
	4	38	34
Prior experience of mental health problem	Yes	98	88
	No	14	12

3.2 Mental Health Literacy of the Participants

MHL was measured using the Mental Health Literacy Scale (MHLS). Table 2 shows that the participants' mean overall MHLS score was 113.12 (SD = 11.15). Subscale means indicated varying levels of knowledge across MHLS components, with generally higher scores in Recognition of Disorders (76%) and Knowledge of How to Seek Mental Health Information (73%), and relatively lower scores in Knowledge of Professional Help Available (68%) and Self-Treatment Knowledge (66%). Because the MHLS subscales were not designed for direct comparison, these values are interpreted descriptively to highlight general patterns in participants' knowledge rather than to rank subscale performance.

Table 2. MHLS Scores of the Participants (n = 112)

MHLS Subscales (min.–max. score)	Mean (% of Subscale)	SD
Recognition of Disorders (8-32)	24.29 (76)	4.12
Knowledge of Risk Factors and Causes (2-8)	5.53 (69)	1.20
Self-Treatment Knowledge (2-8)	5.27 (66)	1.25
Knowledge of Professional Help Available (3-12)	8.19 (68)	1.44
Knowledge of How to Seek Mental Health Information (4-20)	14.61 (73)	2.93
Attitudes that Promote Recognition and Appropriate Help-Seeking (16-80)	55.23 (69)	7.98
Total MHLS Score (35-160)	113.12 (71)	11.15

Note: Percentages of subscales are descriptive only and not for direct comparison.

3.3 Help-Seeking Intention of the Participants

The General Help-Seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ) was used to measure help-seeking intention. As shown in Table 3, the participants' mean overall GHSQ score was 40.25 (SD = 10.76). Participants reported being most likely to seek help for mental health problems from formal sources (Mean = 18.08, SD = 6.31), particularly from a mental health professional (Mean = 4.91, SD = 1.93), and least likely to seek help from individuals not included among the listed help sources (Mean = 3.66, SD = 1.98).

Table 3. GHSQ Scores of the Participants (n=112)

Help Sources		Mean	SD
Informal	Intimate partner	4.62	2.01
	Friend	4.57	1.68
	Parent	4.70	2.14
	Other relative/family member	3.66	1.98
Total informal sources score		17.54	5.54
Formal	Mental health professional	4.91	1.93
	Phone helpline	3.76	1.77
	Doctor	4.67	1.78
	Minister or religious leader	4.74	1.95
Total formal sources score		18.08	6.31
I would not seek help from anyone		2.82	1.79
I would seek help from another not listed above		1.80	2.24
Total GHSQ Score		40.25	10.76

3.4 Correlation between Mental Health Literacy and Help-Seeking Intention

Because scores for help-seeking intention did not meet the assumption of normality ($S-W p = .017$), a Spearman's rho correlation test was conducted to examine the association between MHL and help-seeking intention. The analysis indicated that MHL was not significantly correlated with help-seeking intention ($\rho[110] = .03, p = .747$). The correlation coefficient was positive yet very small, indicating almost no association between the two variables. This suggests that, among Filipino college students in the present sample, higher MHL does not correspond to a greater likelihood of seeking help from any source, whether formal or informal.

4. Discussion

The present study determined the level of MHL among Filipino college students and examined its association with help-seeking intention using a descriptive correlational cross-sectional design. MHL was measured using the Mental Health Literacy Scale, while help-seeking intention was assessed through the General Help-Seeking Questionnaire. Descriptive findings indicated that participants demonstrated a generally moderate level of MHL, with relatively higher competence in recognizing mental disorders and seeking mental health information, and comparatively lower knowledge of self-treatment and professional help available. Due to the non-normal distribution of help-seeking scores, Spearman's Rho was used to determine the correlation between MHL and help-seeking intention. Results revealed a very weak and statistically non-significant correlation between the two variables, suggesting that higher MHL did not correspond to stronger help-seeking intention among the sampled Filipino college students.

The absence of a significant correlation between MHL and help-seeking intention indicates that MHL alone may not be sufficient to motivate help-seeking intention among Filipino college students. While participants generally possessed the ability to recognize mental health disorders and the knowledge of how to seek mental health information, these did not translate into an increased likelihood of seeking help for mental health problems. In addition, the very weak correlation coefficient suggests a very small shared variance between MHL and help-seeking intention, supporting the interpretation that these constructs function relatively independently in this context. This finding highlights a critical distinction between knowing about mental health and acting on that knowledge. It may be that other factors such as stigma, fear of judgment, and preference for self-reliance exert greater influence on help-seeking intention than MHL alone.

The descriptive findings on MHL are consistent with prior studies in the Philippines that report poor to moderate MHL among college students. Similar to the present results, Argao et al. (2021), Ines (2019), Gariando et al. (2025), and Dizon (2019) observed that Filipino college students tend to demonstrate stronger abilities in symptom recognition but exhibit gaps in knowledge related to treatment options, self-management, and professional services. The relatively lower scores in knowledge of self-treatment and professional help observed in this study align with earlier findings that misconceptions about treatment efficacy and uneasiness toward mental health services persist among Filipino youth.

In contrast, the non-significant relationship between MHL and help-seeking intention diverges from several international studies that reported a positive association between these variables. Gorczyński et al. (2017), Smith and Shochet (2011), and Özparlak et al. (2023) found that higher MHL was associated with stronger help-seeking intention among adolescents and university students. These studies suggest that knowledge and positive beliefs about mental health facilitate likelihood to seeking help. However, the present findings align more closely with studies indicating that MHL is not an independent predictor of help-seeking. Almanasef (2021) and Goodfellow et al. (2023) reported that contextual factors such as cultural beliefs, stigma, trust in professionals, and prior experiences with mental health services often mediate, or even outweigh, the influence of MHL. Taken together, these findings suggest that while MHL is a necessary foundation, its influence on help-seeking intention depends upon broader psychosocial and cultural factors, particularly in collectivist societies such as the Philippines.

4.1 Practical Value

The results indicate that mental health programs within higher education institutions should extend beyond information dissemination. Although MHL interventions remain important, they must be complemented by stigma-reduction strategies, peer-support systems, and efforts to normalize help-seeking. Higher education institutions should focus on increasing the visibility, approachability, and perceived trustworthiness of mental health services, while addressing fears associated with social judgment and confidentiality.

In addition, the findings highlight the importance of integrating mental health promotion within broader student development programs. MHL campaigns should emphasize not only recognition and knowledge but also emotional readiness, self-efficacy, and culturally-grounded narratives that reframe help-seeking as a strength rather than a weakness.

4.2 Strengths and Limitations

This study features several methodological strengths that reinforce the credibility of its findings. It uses validated and reliable instruments (MHLS and GHSQ) and an appropriate nonparametric statistical analysis (Spearman's rho) that accounted for the violated assumption of normality. Additionally, its focus on Filipino college students addresses an important gap in the local literature and contributes context-specific evidence to an underrepresented field in Southeast Asian research.

Despite these strengths, some limitations should also be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the cross-sectional design prevents causal interpretation. Second, convenience sampling from a single private higher education institution limits the generalizability of the results to broader Filipino college populations. Third, reliance on self-report measures may have introduced social desirability bias, given the sensitivity of mental health topics. Lastly, the instruments may not fully account for culturally-specific beliefs and barriers relevant to Filipino college students. These limitations suggest caution in generalizing the findings and highlight the need for longitudinal and more comprehensive future studies.

5. Conclusions

This study examined the MHL of Filipino college students and its association with help-seeking intention. Although participants demonstrated a generally moderate level of MHL, particularly in recognizing mental disorders and accessing mental health information, MHL was not significantly associated with their help-seeking intention. This finding suggests that mental health knowledge alone may not be sufficient to promote help-seeking among Filipino college students.

The results highlight a gap between MHL and behavioral intention, indicating that help-seeking may be more strongly influenced by cultural norms, stigma, and attitudes toward mental health services. These findings highlight the need for comprehensive and culturally-grounded programs in higher education institutions that address not only mental health knowledge but also psychosocial barriers to help-seeking. Future research should examine these factors using longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to better inform mental health programs for Filipino college students.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to thank the Dean, Fr. Johnrey Sibi, and students of their department for their invaluable support. They would also like to extend their sincerest gratitude to Mons. Oscar Cadayona, Mr. Jhoremar Asis, and Dr. Marvin Daguplo for their insights and guidance.

Funding Statement: The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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