



At-Tarbawi: Jurnal Pendidikan, Sosial dan Kebudayaan
e-ISSN: 2086-9754/p-ISSN: 2086-9754
Volume 11 Number 2 2024
doi: 10.32505/tarbawi.v11i2.9912

Communication as Therapy: The Role of Interpersonal Interaction in Reducing Stress Among College Students

Received:
November 25, 2025

Accepted:
December 6, 2024

Published:
December 22, 2024

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Abstract

This study examines the therapeutic role of interpersonal communication in addressing mental health challenges faced by college students. The purpose of the research is to explore how communication with peers and family functions as a primary support mechanism for alleviating stress and anxiety. Using qualitative interviews with students, the study identifies emotional relief and social connectedness as key outcomes of these interactions, which help students manage academic and personal pressures. However, privacy concerns present significant barriers to the use of interpersonal communication as a support tool. The study concludes that fostering supportive communication environments can enhance the therapeutic potential of interpersonal communication in addressing mental health issues among students.

Keywords: *Interpersonal Communication, Mental Health, Social Support, Stress, Students*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji peran terapeutik komunikasi interpersonal dalam mengatasi tantangan kesehatan mental yang dihadapi mahasiswa. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana komunikasi dengan teman sebaya dan keluarga berfungsi sebagai mekanisme dukungan utama dalam mengurangi stres dan kecemasan. Dengan menggunakan wawancara kualitatif pada mahasiswa, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi kelegaan emosional dan keterhubungan sosial sebagai hasil utama dari interaksi ini, yang membantu mahasiswa mengelola tekanan akademik dan pribadi. Namun, kekhawatiran tentang privasi menjadi hambatan signifikan dalam pemanfaatan komunikasi interpersonal sebagai alat dukungan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa menciptakan lingkungan komunikasi yang mendukung dapat meningkatkan potensi terapeutik komunikasi interpersonal dalam mengatasi masalah kesehatan mental di kalangan mahasiswa.

Kata Kunci: *Dukungan Sosial, Komunikasi Interpersonal, Mahasiswa, Kesehatan Mental, Stres.*

Introduction

Mental health disorders or depression are psychiatric problems that are prone to occur in adolescents, as many as 16% of world health problems are related to mental health conditions in adolescents aged 10-19 years (Agusthia et al., 2023). Data obtained through sehatnegeriku.kemkes.go.id indicates that 6.1% of Indonesians aged 15 and above suffer from mental health conditions (Rokom, 2022). Based on research conducted, the prevalence of students in the world who experience stress is found to be 38-71%, while in Asia it is 39.6-61.3% (Rizdanti et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the prevalence of students experiencing stress in Indonesia itself was found to be 36.7-71.6% (Ambarwati et al., 2019). The Indonesia National Adolescent Mental Health Survey (I-NAMHS), the first national mental health survey to measure the incidence of mental disorders among adolescents 10 - 17 years old in Indonesia, shows that one in three Indonesian adolescents has a mental health problem (I-NAMHS: Indonesia-National Adolescent Mental Health Survey, 2023). Adolescent mental health disorders, particularly stress and depression, are a serious problem in Indonesia and globally, with a high prevalence of one in three Indonesian adolescents experiencing mental health problems. The phenomenon of mental health disorders is illustrated in the figure given below, which describes the prevalence of mental health problems among adolescents in Indonesia with an age range of 10-17 years.

Figure 1 shows that anxiety is the most prevalent mental health problem for both adolescent boys (25.4%) and adolescent girls (28.2%). Female adolescents (6.7%) had a higher prevalence of depression than male adolescents (4.0%), while male adolescents had a higher prevalence of behavioral problems (3.5% vs 1.2%) and problems related to attention and/or hyperactivity (12.3% vs 8.8%) than female adolescents. (I-NAMHS: Indonesia-National Adolescent Mental Health Survey, 2023). The I-NAMHS data reveals that anxiety is the most prevalent mental health issue among adolescents, with significant gender-based variations in depression, behavioral problems, and attention or hyperactivity issues. These results highlight the necessity of specialized peer communication techniques in college environments in order to effectively address these unique difficulties and offer emotional support.

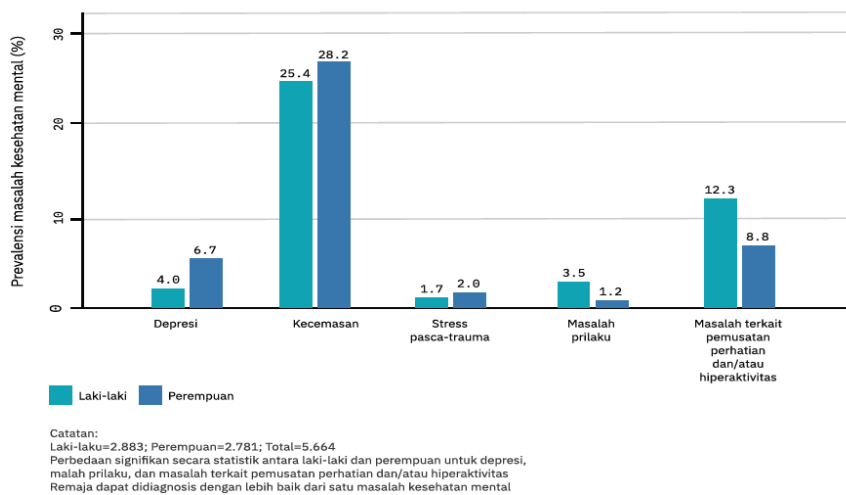


Figure 1. Prevalence of mental health problems among adolescents 10-17 years old by age group in 12 months (I-NAMHS, 2023)

Mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and self-harm, account for a disproportionate number of cases among college students. In a study of thousands of college students, 32% reported symptoms consistent with at least one of the health problems (Eisenberg et al., 2013). Students with mental disorders have a lower likelihood of graduating high school, going on to college, and graduating from university in a nationwide study conducted in the United States (Mojtabai et al., 2015). The American College Health Association (2015) reported that 11.9% of college students felt so depressed that it was difficult to function in the past two weeks; 34.5% reported the same in the past 12 months (Smith & Applegate, 2018). A total of 43.8% of Indonesian adolescents reported that they did not pursue help because they preferred to handle their problems on their own or get support from their friends and family (I-NAMHS: Indonesia-National Adolescent Mental Health Survey, 2023).

The data from I-NAMHS, which shows that 43.8% of Indonesian adolescents prefer to handle their mental health problems independently or with support from friends and family, aligns with the critical role of peer and family communication in maintaining mental well-being. This preference for informal support highlights the importance of social encouragement from peers and family as primary resources for improving psychological resilience and fostering emotional well-being among students. Communication among peers and family members plays a significant role in maintaining student mental health. Social encouragement from friends and family communication were the two elements most closely linked to improved well-being

(Yubero et al., 2018). Family relationships have been shown to be important for social, cognitive, and emotional adjustment and are one of the elements that are more strongly associated with adolescent quality of life (Gómez-Bustamante et al., 2010; Lima-Serrano et al., 2018). Adolescent communication relationship with family, with dinner having a positive impact on communication relationship with parents and mental health by 13%-30% (Elgar et al., 2013). Parent-child communications quality and adolescent mental health are still closely related (Sari & Jelita, 2021; Zapf et al., 2024), even while the parent-child bond becomes less significant in comparison to the peer group (Manczak et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2020). Supportive peer environments are essential for mutual mental health support (Roach, 2018), highlighting the importance of open, empathetic communication (Watson, 2019). Peer support was shown to be very significant, and schools play a critical role in creating supportive teacher-student connections and healthy peer relationships to improve mental health and resilience in all children (Butler et al., 2022). There was a strong correlation between family communication styles and mental health, and the conversational dimension was a reliable indicator of mental health (Zarnaghash et al., 2013).

Good communication is essential for mental and emotional health because it influences how people express themselves, form relationships, and interact with others (Shahi, 2024). Effective interpersonal communication can influence how individuals process and react to emotional challenges. Developing good interpersonal communication skills will make it easier for a student to express ideas, thoughts, or opinions in their daily life (Chan et al., 2020; Solomon & Theiss, 2022). Peer support was found to be particularly important, crucial context schools provide in fostering positive peer relationships and supportive teacher-student relationships to promote mental health and resilience (Chan et al., 2020).

Support for the importance of peer communication in mental health can be found in several studies. Research emphasizes that peer relationships offer crucial emotional support and social bonding, which positively impact mental health (Mitic et al., 2021). During adolescence and young adulthood, individuals increasingly rely on their peers for the emotional support, transitioning from parental dependency. These supportive environments foster openness, empathy, and shared understanding, which are essential in mitigating mental health challenges like stress and anxiety (Panhwar et al., 2023)

This study explores the therapeutic role of interpersonal communication in addressing the mental health challenges faced by college student. Peer communication becomes essential in addressing the growing number of mental health problems, which are mostly caused by personal challenges, lack of social support, and academic pressure. The research aims to examine how interpersonal interactions, such as open conversation, emotional support, and empathy, contribute to alleviating stress and enhancing students' mental well-being. Effective communication among students offers a sense of relief and eases psychological burdens, among students offers a sense of relief and eases psychological burdens, establishing it as an informal yet impactful means of managing mental health.

This study is grounded in communication and psychological theories that highlight the role of interpersonal interaction in mental health management. The framework integrates concept from interpersonal communication theory, social support theory, and cognitive-behavioral models, which together provide a comprehensive lens to understand how communication serves as a therapeutic mechanism in reducing stress among college student.

According to the interpersonal communication theory, meaningful interaction between individuals involves sharing thoughts, emotions, and experiences, contributing to psychological well-being (DeVito, 2019). The theory posits that effective communication foster trust, empathy, and emotional connection, which are essential in building supportive relationships. Peer discussions that are open and sympathetic can offer emotional relief and facilitate better problem-solving for student who are under stress from their studies and personal lives. Social support theory emphasizes that support from social networks, such as friends, family, or peers, plays a critical role in managing stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Emotional support, such as active listening and reassurance from peers, can enhance individuals' coping abilities by reducing feelings of isolation. This theory aligns with the idea that peer communication in a university setting can serve as a buffer against stress by creating a sense of belonging and community among students. Cognitive-behavioral models suggest that thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are interconnected, and effective communication can influence mental health by reshaping cognitive processes (Beck, 2020). Student who freely talk about their concerns with others acquire fresh viewpoints that can help them reframe pessimistic ideas and decrease stress. Peer communication, therefore, act as a

cognitive intervention, helping student shift maladaptive thought patterns toward healthier coping mechanisms.

By integrating social bonding, cognitive restructuring, and emotional support, this study suggest that interpersonal engagement can be used as an informal therapeutic method to reduce stress and improve students' psychological health. Based on the theoretical framework, the study assumes that interpersonal communication among college student plays a dual role: (1) reducing stress through emotional sharing and empathy, and (2) promoting mental well-being by fostering a sense of social belonging. Communication with peers, therefore, acts as both preventive measure and an intervention tool in addressing mental health challenges. This framework provides the foundation for investigating the nuanced ways in which interpersonal interaction contributes to the mental health of students, emphasizing the therapeutic potential of communication beyond formal interventions.

Similar research that has been published, the first research was conducted by Butler et al, shows peer relationships are very important as evidenced by the prevalence of mental wellbeing with high peer support (Butler et al., 2022). The second study revealed Supportive Peer Relationships, are essential for both physical and mental well-being, findings suggest the central importance of identity and social-emotional skills in SPR (Roach, 2018). Interpersonal communication is necessary for realizing one's mental health because it involves the role of both parties is a research conducted by Rosmalia (Rosmalina, 2018).

A systematic review highlights that peer support plays a significant role in various mental health contexts by promoting hope, empowerment, and emotional well-being. These interactions create a safe space for sharing experiences, thereby reducing isolation, and enhancing recovery outcomes in both adolescents and young adults. This aligns with the premise of *Communication as Therapy: The Role of Interpersonal Interaction in Reducing Stress Among College Students*, which underscores the therapeutic power of peer communication.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore how interpersonal communication influenced mental health among college students. The qualitative descriptive approach used in this study had several key characteristics. It employed inductive analysis (Creswell, 2012), where researchers identified patterns

and themes from participants' responses without relying on predefined hypotheses (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Through naturalistic inquiry, data were gathered from real-world contexts, such as universities, using in-depth interviews. The focus was on understanding what students experienced and how they engaged in interpersonal communication to manage mental stress. This approach emphasized capturing participants' subjective experiences authentically, avoiding overly abstract frameworks, and staying grounded in their realities.

Samples in this study were taken using non-probability sampling techniques, namely by not giving equal opportunities to each element or population to be selected as samples (Dewi, 2022). At the same time, purposive sampling was used; informants were selected based on specific predetermined criteria. The informant criteria in this study were students who had received training in the design and production of mental health campaign media held by the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Muhammadiyah Klaten (FISHUM UMKLA).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews to obtain answers and information to fulfill research objectives using a direct question-and-answer process through face-to-face interviews conducted by researchers with informants (Moleong, 2016). Data were collected using the documentation method, which confirmed the information and observed all views or physical evidence in text, images/photos, audiovisuals, and so on (Kriyantono et al, 2014).

Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman model, as Sugiyono (2020) outlined, which involves three key stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The data reduction stage reviewed the interview transcripts to identify core themes and patterns. Irrelevant or redundant data were removed to ensure the analysis focused on the research objectives. The data display stage involved organizing the data into meaningful formats, such as tables and diagrams, to visualize patterns and relationships. Finally, conclusion drawing and verification were undertaken to synthesize the findings and ensure their accuracy.

This study employed triangulation and peer debriefing to ensure the credibility and validity of the findings (Sugiyono; 2020). Triangulation was conducted by comparing data from two distinct sources: in-depth interviews and questionnaires. This process allowed for cross-verification of the data, enhancing the robustness of the results by ensuring consistency across different data sources. Additionally, peer debriefing was used, where the research team consulted with colleagues and experts in qualitative research to review the data analysis and

interpretations. The use of peer debriefing helped to identify any potential biases. It ensured that the conclusions drawn were firmly grounded in the data, enhancing the study's overall trustworthiness.

Result

This study highlights critical insights into students' mental health challenges and the therapeutic role that interpersonal communication plays in alleviating these challenges. The data gathered through in-depth interviews revealed that mental health struggles were predominantly marked by stress (85%), anxiety (65%), and attention issues (40%). These patterns illustrate the significant impact of academic and personal pressures on student well-being and underscore how students rely on communication as a form of informal therapy. These findings align with national data, such as the Indonesia National Adolescent Mental Health Survey (I-NAMHS), which highlights stress and anxiety as dominant mental health concerns among adolescents (I-NAMHS: Indonesia-National Adolescent Mental Health Survey, 2023).

Stress emerged as a persistent issue for most students (85%), often intensifying during exams or heavy assignment deadlines. Anxiety was also frequently reported (65%), especially when students faced personal or familial challenges alongside academic responsibilities. Furthermore, 40% of students identified difficulties maintaining focus due to academic pressure and stress from social or family-related concerns. This data is visually represented in Table 1, which provides an overview of the primary mental health symptoms encountered among the participants.

Table 1. Overview of the primary mental health symptoms

No.	Mental Health Symptom	Prevalence (%)	Remarks
1	Stress	85%	Most frequently reported
2	Anxiety	65%	Often reported alongside stress
3	Attention problems	40%	Associated with academic pressure

For many students, this combination of pressures creates a challenging environment where balancing academic responsibilities with personal well-being becomes difficult. One participant shared their experience, noting how the overwhelming nature of academic tasks affects their ability to focus, which subsequently triggers feelings of anxiety and affects their sleep patterns.

"I often find it difficult to focus, especially when many college assignments pile up. It makes me anxious and unable to sleep, especially before exams." (N, 20, personal interview, 9 July 2024)

This statement underscores the significant toll that academic stress can have on students' mental health, illustrating how mental health struggles are often not isolated incidents but rather cumulative experiences shaped by ongoing pressures. Recognizing the impact of these challenges, many students have turned to interpersonal communication as a primary coping mechanism. Sharing their concerns with close friends or family members has provided substantial emotional relief, allowing them to alleviate feelings of isolation and anxiety. Through these interactions, students find an understanding and empathy that supports them emotionally, even if professional mental health services are not actively utilized. As one student explained, discussing their anxieties with trusted friends is a vital support system, offering comfort and reassurance in times of stress.

"I usually talk to my closest friends when I feel anxious. They can make me feel better." (A, 21, personal interview, 9 July 2024)

This reliance on friends and family demonstrates the essential role those interpersonal relationships play in the emotional lives of students, acting as informal therapeutic networks that help them process their struggles. However, it is also essential to recognize that not all students feel comfortable opening to others. Privacy concerns, along with doubts about whether others can truly understand their situations, lead some students to adopt a more reserved approach to handling their mental health challenges. One participant, for instance, preferred to keep their issues private, revealing that fears about confidentiality often deter them from discussing personal problems with others.

"I often feel better keeping my problems to myself rather than telling others because I worry that my story will be spread or they will not understand my situation." (V, 20, personal interview, 9 July 2024)

This cautious stance reflects a critical aspect of interpersonal communication: balancing the benefits of openness with the desire to protect personal privacy. It highlights a common challenge among students, who must navigate their need for emotional support while managing concerns over trust and confidentiality. Figure 2 illustrates the coping strategies adopted by students to manage their mental health challenges. Talking to friends or family was the most common strategy employed by 70% of participants. This reliance on interpersonal communication highlights its role as a primary mechanism for emotional support.

Professional help was sought by 20% of students, while 10% relied on self-coping mechanisms, such as meditation or journaling.

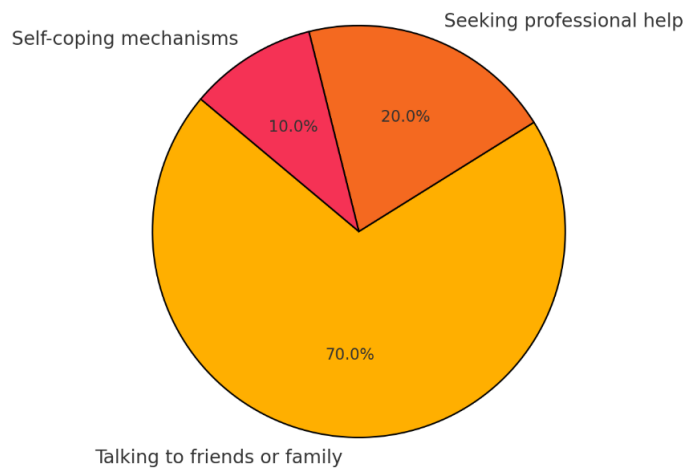


Figure 2. Preferred Coping Mechanisms among Students

Beyond personal sharing, empathy within social circles is equally significant in supporting students' mental health. Many students seek comfort from their friends and serve as sources of support, creating an environment of mutual understanding. One participant shared how they often lend a listening ear to their friends, recognizing the importance of being heard during times of stress. This reciprocal empathy strengthens social bonds and contributes to a supportive peer community.

"When I feel too stressed, I usually share my story with a close friend I trust. After talking, I feel relieved." (A, 22, personal interview, 9 July 2024)

The diversity of students' responses to different stressors further illustrates the complexity of their mental health experiences. For academic stress, sharing with friends was the most common response (60%), reflecting the shared understanding among peers of academic challenges. Personal stressors elicited mixed responses, with 30% of students opting to share and others choosing to keep their struggles private. Familial stressors, however, were predominantly met with reserved responses, as 10% of students felt unable to discuss such matters openly. The distribution of these responses is summarized in Table 2, highlighting the predominant coping strategies students employ in response to different stressors.

Table 2. Predominant coping strategies

No.	Stressor	Primary Response	Percentage (%)
1	Academic	Share with friends	60%
2	Personal	Mixed response	30%
3	Familial	Mostly reserved	10%

One respondent, for example, described how familial stress disrupts their focus on academic responsibilities but noted that discussing these issues is not always an option due to their nature.

"Family problems at home often disrupt my concentration on campus. It feels like there is no safe place to escape from those issues." (H, 19, personal interview, 9 July 2024)

The academic expectations themselves are substantial stressors for many students. The pressure to perform well academically and meet high standards often leads to feelings of anxiety and fatigue, especially when assignments and exams coincide. A participant articulated the weight of these expectations, describing how the cumulative demands of university life can feel overwhelming. In addition to the type of stressors, the frequency with which students experience mental health challenges also varies widely. While some students report occasional episodes, particularly during high-stress periods, others experience these challenges weekly or daily. Figure 3 depicts this frequency distribution, underscoring how the intensity and regularity of these issues differ based on individual circumstances and stress management strategies.

The figure highlights that 60% of students reported occasional challenges, suggesting that stressors are often event-driven, such as during exams or assignment deadlines. In contrast, 30% of students experienced these issues weekly, and 10% struggled with them daily, emphasizing the chronic nature of their mental health difficulties. The data indicate that while most students experience mental health challenges sporadically, a significant portion faces frequent or even daily struggles. The variation in the frequency of mental health challenges among students underscores the need for tailored interventions to address students' diverse experiences and coping capacities.

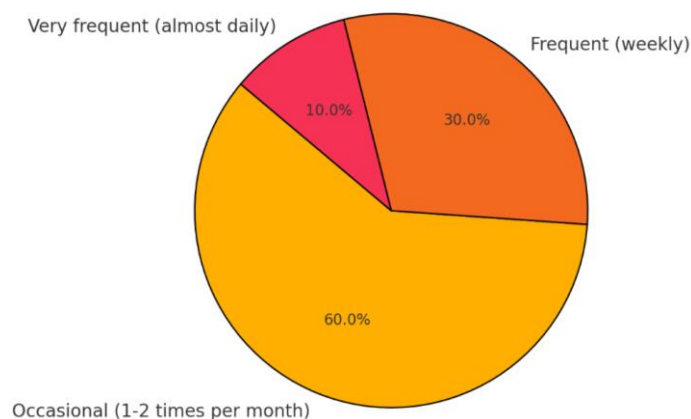


Figure 3. Frequency of Mental Health Issues

The findings demonstrate the multifaceted challenges students face in managing mental health, shaped by a combination of academic, personal, and familial pressures. Interpersonal communication emerges as a crucial factor, with many students relying on close friends and family members as primary sources of emotional support. Despite its benefits, this mechanism is only sometimes effective, as privacy concerns and reluctance to share personal matters create barriers for some individuals. The patterns observed in this study provide a comprehensive view of how students navigate their mental health challenges and highlight the variability in coping strategies and support mechanisms. These insights set the stage for a deeper examination of these findings' implications and broader context, which will be addressed in the *Discussion* section.

Discussion

This study contributes to the understanding of how interpersonal communication functions as a support mechanism for students grappling with mental health challenges, particularly stress and anxiety. The findings emphasize that peer and family communication serve as a means for emotional sharing and a critical tool for stress regulation and emotional well-being. The study, grounded in theoretical frameworks such as interpersonal communication theory and social support theory, highlights the dual role of communication: reducing stress through emotional sharing and fostering psychological resilience by creating a sense of belonging.

The results align with the premise of interpersonal communication theory, which posits those meaningful exchanges characterized by trust, empathy, and emotional openness are foundational for emotional regulation. As observed in the study, students who engage in supportive peer discussions often experience relief from academic and personal stress. This finding supports the idea that communication fosters a safe space for emotional expression, echoing the findings of (Mitic et al., 2021), which emphasize the therapeutic role of peer relationships in managing mental health. Similarly, the cognitive-behavioral perspective reinforces this narrative by suggesting that open communication facilitates cognitive restructuring, helping students shift from maladaptive thought patterns to more constructive coping mechanisms. The importance of effective communication in influencing how individuals process and respond to emotional challenges is further supported by (Shahi, 2024), who highlights its critical role in promoting mental and emotional health.

Comparing these findings with previous studies underscores the consistency of this research with established literature. Butler et al. (2022) demonstrated that strong peer relationships correlate with improved mental health outcomes, emphasizing peer communication as a central component of student well-being. Furthermore, (Roach, 2018) highlighted the significance of supportive peer relationships (SPR) in fostering emotional and social resilience, findings that mirror this study's conclusions. These parallels validate the broader applicability of interpersonal communication as an informal yet effective mental health intervention across diverse student populations.

Empathy emerged as a critical element in peer and family communication, reinforcing that active listening and emotional presence are instrumental in mitigating stress. Students who frequently experienced empathetic peer interactions described a sense of emotional validation and relief, consistent with the findings of Gómez-Bustamante & Cogollo (2010), which link empathy to improved emotional adjustment. The data also suggest that empathy not only aids the individual seeking support but fosters a reciprocal environment where peers collectively enhance each other's mental well-being. Additionally, communication within families, as highlighted by Zarnaghash et al., (2013), plays a significant role in mental health outcomes. This observation reinforces that the conversational dimension of family communication is a reliable indicator of emotional stability and resilience, supporting the findings that family relationships provide a strong foundation for managing stress.

Despite these positive outcomes, the study also reveals significant challenges in leveraging interpersonal communication as a therapeutic mechanism. Privacy concerns remain a significant barrier, as students often fear judgment or the potential dissemination of their personal stories. This hesitancy reflects findings from the I-NAMHS: Indonesia-National Adolescent Mental Health Survey (2023), which indicated that nearly 43.8% of adolescents prefer to handle their problems independently rather than seeking support. Additionally, the reluctance to share deeply personal issues, particularly those stemming from familial stressors, highlights the need for creating more trustworthy and confidential communication environments.

Barriers to effective communication are further compounded by the lack of structured opportunities for students to engage in meaningful dialogue. Chan et al. (2020) noted that supportive environments, such as peer groups or facilitated

discussions, are critical for fostering open communication. The absence of these settings in some educational contexts may limit how students can utilize interpersonal interactions as a coping strategy. Moreover, differences in individual communication styles and cultural perceptions of mental health further complicate the potential for universal applicability of these findings.

In summary, this discussion underscores the complex interplay between interpersonal communication and mental health, highlighting its therapeutic potential and inherent limitations. This study provides a nuanced understanding of how communication can be leveraged for mental health support by situating these findings within the broader theoretical and empirical context. Future research and practical applications should aim to address the challenges identified, ensuring that interpersonal communication remains an accessible and practical resource for students navigating mental health challenges.

Conclusion

This study highlights that peer relationships are complementary and fundamental in fostering well-being among college students, serving as a reliable resource when formal or family support is limited. Through open and empathetic communication, students found relief from stress and anxiety, demonstrating that interpersonal interactions play a critical role in emotional regulation and resilience. While academic and familial pressures continue to challenge mental health, the availability of supportive peer and family networks provides a buffer, enabling students to navigate these stressors better. Furthermore, the findings underline the importance of addressing barriers such as privacy concerns and the reluctance to share personal issues, limiting interpersonal communication's effectiveness. These challenges can be mitigated by creating environments that promote trust and open dialogue, enhancing the therapeutic potential of peer and family communication.

Universities and policymakers should consider incorporating interpersonal communication strategies into student mental health services. Programs that include peer support groups, workshops on empathy and active listening, and structured opportunities for students to engage in meaningful dialogue can significantly improve mental health outcomes. Additionally, integrating these strategies into broader university mental health policies can create more inclusive and supportive student environments. Future studies could explore how digital communication platforms contribute to or hinder mental health support, mainly as

students increasingly rely on virtual interactions. Longitudinal research is also recommended to examine the long-term effects of interpersonal communication on mental health, providing insights into its sustained impact on stress reduction and emotional resilience over time. These areas of inquiry deepen our understanding of how communication strategies can evolve to meet the needs of modern student populations.

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