

Preserved in Zenodo DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17477122> The authors are responsible for the information in this article.**Mental health management in university students: Challenges and recommendations for support programs**Jaime Alberto Carmona Parra ^{1*} Carlos Andrés Urrego Zuluaga ¹ ¹ University of Manizales, Manizales, Colombia*Correspondence contact: revistatempuspsicologico@umanizales.edu.co

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Abstract: Addressing mental health among university students is crucial, requiring identification of challenges and recommendations for effective support programs. **Objective:** To examine the relationship between perceived need and actual help-seeking behavior. **Method:** A total of 2,425 university students from Manizales, Colombia, completed an online self-administered survey assessing psychological help-seeking. Data were analyzed using SPSS v27 with descriptive statistics and chi-square tests ($p \leq 0.05$), within the *Building the Future* macroproject. **Results:** Students showed limited awareness of institutional wellness services, relied mainly on close personal networks, and tended to manage difficulties independently. **Conclusions:** Not all individuals in need of help actively seek or accept it. Understanding the contextual factors underlying this paradox is essential for designing culturally relevant and effective preventive strategies. The results indicate that the emphasis was on the need and does not imply seeking help.

Keywords: mental health, search, help, university students, well-being

Gestión de la salud mental en estudiantes universitarios: Retos y recomendaciones para programas de ayuda

Resumen: Es preponderante gestionar la salud mental en estudiantes universitarios identificando retos y recomendaciones para programas de ayuda. **Objetivo:** Determinar relación entre necesidad y búsqueda efectiva de ayuda. **Método:** La muestra incluyó 2425 estudiantes universitarios de Manizales, Colombia. Se aplicó una encuesta auto-administrada en línea para evaluar la relación entre necesidad y búsqueda de ayuda psicológica. Los datos se analizaron con SPSS Versión 27 mediante estadísticos descriptivos y chi-cuadrado ($p \leq 0,05$), siguiendo el macroproyecto Construyendo Futuro. **Resultados:** Los estudiantes desconocen servicios de bienestar institucional, prefieren apoyo de círculo cercano y tienden a resolver dificultades solos. **Conclusiones/Aporte:** No todos los que necesitan ayuda la buscan ni aceptan; urge contextualizar razones de esta paradoja para diseñar estrategias preventivas eficaces. Hubo alta congruencia con literatura revisada; no asumir que necesidad implica búsqueda.

Palabras clave: salud mental, búsqueda, ayuda, estudiantes universitarios, bienestar

Gestão da saúde mental em estudantes universitários: Desafios e recomendações para programas de apoio

Resumo: A promoção da saúde mental entre estudantes universitários é essencial, exigindo a identificação de desafios e recomendações para programas de apoio eficazes. **Objetivo:** Examinar a relação entre a necessidade percebida e a busca efetiva de ajuda. **Método:** Participaram 2.425 estudantes universitários de Manizales, Colômbia, que responderam a um questionário online autoaplicado sobre busca de ajuda psicológica. Os dados foram analisados no SPSS v27, por meio de estatísticas descritivas e teste do qui-quadrado ($p \leq 0,05$), no âmbito do macroprojeto *Construindo o Futuro*. **Resultados:** Os estudantes mostraram pouco conhecimento sobre serviços institucionais de bem-estar, preferiram apoio de pessoas próximas e tendem a enfrentar sozinhos suas dificuldades. **Conclusões:** Nem todos os que precisam de ajuda a buscam ou aceitam. Compreender os fatores contextuais desse paradoxo é fundamental para desenvolver estratégias preventivas eficazes.

Palavras-chave: saúde mental, busca, ajuda, estudantes universitários, bem-estar

Gestion de la santé mentale chez les étudiants universitaires: Défis et recommandations pour les programmes de soutien

Résumé : La prise en charge de la santé mentale des étudiants universitaires est essentielle afin d'identifier les défis et de formuler des recommandations. **Objectif :** Examiner la relation entre le besoin perçu et la recherche effective d'aide. **Méthode :** Un total de 2 425 étudiants de Manizales (Colombie) ont rempli un questionnaire auto-administré en ligne évaluant la recherche d'aide psychologique. Les données ont été analysées avec SPSS v27 à l'aide de statistiques descriptives et du test du khi carré ($p \leq 0,05$), dans le cadre du macroprojet *Construire l'Avenir*. **Résultats :** Les étudiants connaissent peu les services de bien-être institutionnels, privilégient le soutien de leurs proches et gèrent souvent leurs difficultés seuls. **Conclusions :** Tous ceux qui expriment un besoin ne recherchent ni n'acceptent d'aide. Comprendre ce paradoxe est essentiel pour concevoir des stratégies préventives adaptées. **Mots-clés :** santé mentale, recherche d'aide, aide, étudiants universitaires, bien-être





1. Introduction

The efforts being made by many countries around the world to improve youth enrollment rates in higher education are encountering an unexpected problem: mental health issues among university students have become a significant factor in prolonged studies, disruptions to academic progress, dropout rates, and even suicide. The precarious state of mental health among university students worldwide is a cause for concern for governments, the WHO, and the academic community, as it is a multifaceted phenomenon involving a confluence of cultural, social, familial, and personal factors. One of the measures aimed at preventing mental health disorders and problems among students and promoting their overall well-being worldwide has been the strengthening of university welfare services. However, this effort has faced several unexpected drawbacks, namely that many students who need help do not access these services. This renders the institutions' efforts to strengthen their services fruitless, leading them to not only provide these services but also identify innovative strategies to reach their target audience. This has resulted in the international academic community developing the concept of "help-seeking," which can be translated as "seeking help," is the subject of numerous research projects across all continents. There is an idealized view of youth as a particularly happy period of life, a "divine treasure," in which human beings enjoy greater health and well-being than at any other time. While statistics in the field of physical health support this idea, the same cannot be said for mental health. Studies conducted worldwide indicate a growing concern about the mental health of university students, such as one from Jordan that states that "university students have a high prevalence rate of mental illness" (Aldalaykeh MA-H, 2019), another from Singapore that notes that "young adults in Singapore had the highest prevalence of mental disorders over 12 months, with depression being the most prevalent condition" (Al Hadid, 2021), and yet another from Australia that affirms that "university students experience common mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and stress along with poor sleep quality" (Zochil MT, 2018); in Europe, researchers also express their concern, finding in a study on the mental health of university students in the United Kingdom that "78 percent of participants indicated symptoms of mild or more severe distress" (Gorczyński, 2020) and in Ireland that university students "often report low levels of mental well-being" (Goodwin, 2016), while in Africa the situation is no better, as research conducted in Ethiopia shows that the precarious mental health of students "is associated with prolonged disability and poor mental health outcomes, including suicide" (Gebreegziabher, 2019) and in America, specifically in the United States, the situation is similar since "suicide is the leading cause of death for young adults, and university students are at high risk of suicide" (Thompson, EC, et al., 2021). When researchers try to investigate the factors that influence this phenomenon, they find it is not obvious that if someone needs help, they will seek it; moreover, it is not even obvious that if a university student needs mental health help and their institution is willing to offer it, they will go and request it, it even happens that the decision to seek specialized help is among the last options, after talking with friends, family, and even facing the situation alone; 087 researchers from African universities in different countries have confirmed that it is not an episodic phenomenon, since a study carried out in Ethiopia "reports that the mental health help-seeking behavior of university students is deficient; Less than a third of university students with common mental disorders report having sought help from formal sources. (...) The majority (83.8%) of participants who sought help did so from informal sources" (Gebreegziabher, 2019). Research conducted in Ghana suggests that the underutilization of mental health resources is a well-documented problem among adolescents and young adults (Andoh-Arthur, 2015). European research has also documented this phenomenon, indicating that "university students demonstrate poor help-seeking behaviors for their mental health, even though they often report low levels of mental well-being (...) Very few students reported having made use of online university support" (Goodwin, 2016). Research conducted with university students in countries belonging to different continents found that "a third of the Chinese and Australian





students surveyed expressed their reluctance to seek professional help. Self-reliance was endorsed by university students in both countries as a significant barrier” (Han JB, 2018). The preceding lines highlight some factors that contribute to understanding why this occurs, such as the “self-reliance” characteristic of youth mentioned in some of the cited studies, students' preference for relying on informal rather than more formal resources, and some students' reluctance to take advantage of the online or physical resources offered by their institutions. Other factors mentioned include a lack of knowledge about mental illness and the resources offered by institutions (Tan, 2021; Raman BK, 2019; Shahwan , 2020), students' lack of trust in services (Al Hadid, 2021), and cultural factors identified in research conducted in China, which indicates that “the results indicated four domains for categorizing culture-influenced factors: attitudes toward speaking, relational concerns, nature of the problem, and assumptions about counseling.” Hong Kong students are not averse to receiving help, but they are reluctant to seek help from outsiders. They expect to receive help from those within their social network” (Busiol D., 2016). Psychological and psychosocial factors associated with interaction contexts and developmental stage in Australian research indicate that “students' sociodemographic barriers to seeking help and moods can create a psychological barrier and how psychological barriers can further inhibit students” (Sanagavarapu , 2019). Personal factors related to privacy concerns and fear of exclusion are also relevant, as “perceived concerns about seeking web-based help included privacy and confidentiality, difficulty communicating online, and the quality of web-based resources.” Potential benefits included anonymity, avoiding stigma, and accessibility” (Chan JF, 2016), and the tendency of students to prioritize the family sphere when seeking help, as shown in European research where “participants indicated that they were more likely to seek support from their intimate partners and less likely to seek support from religious leaders” (Gorczyński , 2020). Below are some interventions tested in different contexts to try to reduce this phenomenon that prevents university students from taking advantage of their institutions' efforts to contribute to improving their mental health. Peer-based exercises were identified to demystify access to university wellness services. Mental health researchers at a Hong Kong university found that the importance of horizontal relationships with peers of the same age can be key to addressing this problem, as “peer-led intervention provided a positive impact through increased awareness of mental health and knowledge of coping strategies in Self-help and helping others among university students” (Ahorsu , 2021), while in the United Kingdom a group of researchers identified the reduction of fear of stigmatization as a key element in promoting help Seeking help among university students, the study showed that “brief anti-stigma intervention was associated with improvements in help-seeking attitudes among university students with differential effects between certain subgroups. As the beneficial results appeared to diminish over time, booster sessions or opportunities to participate in mental health-related activities may be required after the intervention to maintain the desired changes in help-seeking attitudes” (Shahwan , 2020). Despite the importance of this issue, the literature on interventions is not as abundant as that on diagnoses, although the reviewed research contains important recommendations, which will be summarized below, on possible courses of action that universities can follow to strengthen help-seeking. seeking in their students.

2. Methodology

This study on the *help Seeking* among Colombian university students is part of the research project “ ICTs , Positive Psychology and the promotion of mental health in the university setting,” which is one of the five projects that make up the research program called “ Building the Future in the Coffee Region,” which began its development in 2020. This research program is, in turn, linked to the international macro-project “Building the Future,” in which more than 100 universities from 24 countries across five continents participate.





a. Participants

This study was conducted to understand the relationship or interdependence between variables, which were measured simultaneously for grouping and comparison. The sample consisted of 2,425 university students from the city of Manizales, Colombia, enrolled in various degree programs.

b. Tools

General description of the instrument: survey. **Purpose of the instrument:** to determine the relationship between the need for psychological help and the active search for it, in university students. **Application mode:** Self-administered via the internet, with a complex hopping logic to minimize administration time. **Indicators of validity and reliability:** The survey included scales previously used and validated and currently in use in the other participating countries of the international macro-project “Building the Future”

c. Procedure

With the support of the directors and professors of the undergraduate programs, the students were taken to the computer labs that serve all faculties. After the explanation of the project and the completion of the informed consent, the students proceeded to answer the survey on the computers. The following items were included in the e-survey: How likely are you to go to the counseling or medical support center at your university for help? (H6), and How likely are you to consider seeking help somewhere else, such as your doctor, a mental health professional, or a spiritual counselor? (H7)

d. Data analysis

Data analysis in Colombia was performed using *SPSS software*. A descriptive analysis was conducted using frequency distributions and percentages; the chi-square (χ^2) test was also used with IBM *Statistical software. Package for Social Sciences (SPSS)* version 27.0, where the significance level is equal to or less than 0.05. This analysis was carried out by the team of the University Center for Health Studies CES, in accordance with the parameters of the International Macroproject “Building the Future” within the framework of which this project was developed.

e. Ethical considerations

An informed consent form was designed and approved by the bioethics committee of the University of Manizales. The form was completed with each participant prior to the evaluation process to inform them about the general aspects of the research, address their concerns, and ensure their voluntary and informed participation.

3. Results

The following table describes the behavior, by gender, of the responses provided by students of the University of Manizales to the following questions:



**Table 1**
Seeking help from university students

Likelihood that they will seek psychological or medical support at the University or outside of it		Consult with professionals from the University		Seek professional help outside of the University	
		Man	Women	Man	Women
I would definitely go	Count	384	541	373	620
	% within sex	39.0%	37.5%	37.9%	43.0%
I would probably go	Count	226	403	237	414
	% within sex	23.0%	28.0%	24.1%	28.7%
Maybe yes, maybe no	Count	186	261	180	233
	% within sex	18.9%	18.1%	18.3%	16.2%
I probably wouldn't go.	Count	108	166	113	110
	% within sex	11.0%	11.5%	11.5%	7.6%
I definitely wouldn't go	Count	80	70	81	64
	% within sex	8.1%	4.9%	8.2%	4.4%
Total	Count	984	1.441	984	1.441
	Percentage	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

It can be seen that in the case of the university consultation, 62% of men are grouped into those who would definitely or probably go (39.0+23.0), while 8.1% would definitely not go. In the case of women, the percentages are 65.5% (37.5+28.0) grouped into those who would definitely or probably go, and 4.9% who would definitely not go.

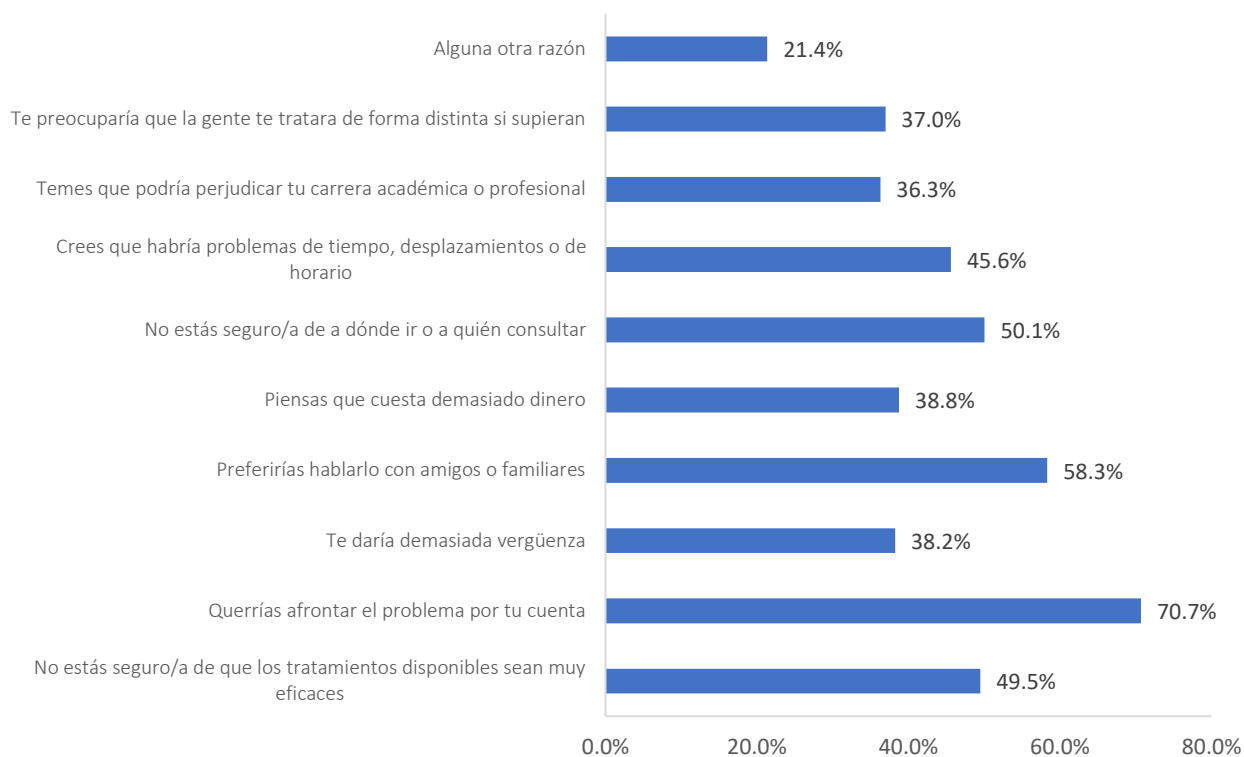
When asked if they would seek help elsewhere, 62% of men said they would definitely or probably go, while 8.2% said they definitely would not. For women, the percentages were 71.7% and 4.4%, respectively.

In both cases, the Chi-square test shows significance at the $\alpha = 0.001$ level, concluding an association between sex and seeking help at the University and between sex and seeking help elsewhere; however, although the association coefficients are significant, their contribution to building a predictive model is very low, and the inclusion of other variables should be considered to increase its predictive capacity.

The 10 reasons students gave for not seeking help are shown in the following table, with the top three reasons standing out (all above 50%): you would like to deal with the problem on your own (70.7%), you would prefer to talk to friends or family (58.3%), and you wouldn't be sure where to go or who to ask (50.1%). This analysis was conducted by grouping the first three categories (very important, important, and moderately important), where students assign a weight to each reason for not seeking help.



Figure 1

Reasons why students might not seek help

4. Discussion

The central element of the discussion in this study is the high congruence of the results with those found in research on help-seeking . Seeking) in recent years across five continents. The consistency in research findings is not only related to the precarious state of mental health among university students, but also to the factors that contribute to understanding why many of them do not access the formal physical and psychological health services offered by their universities. When we consider an average classroom of 40 students, approximately five of them state that they would not seek help, even if they needed it. There is a statistically significant difference between men and women, although not high enough to construct a predictive model. This highlights the need to review existing strategies for promoting and communicating university wellness services and to develop campaigns to encourage their use among students of both sexes. Graph 1 provides references on the reasons given by students of both sexes for not seeking help and can serve as a basis for the construction of strategic actions aimed at improving the use of welfare services by students and motivating them to also consider the option of seeking external help if necessary.

Recent studies reinforce this paradox: in contexts of high exposure to psychosocial risks stemming from climate change, students show greater vulnerability but less willingness to seek formal help (Abu & Achore, 2025); groups with low social mobility face a double disadvantage due to the combination of limited access to green spaces and high exposure to nighttime light pollution, which exacerbates stress and reduces the search for support (Liu et al., 2025);



furthermore, the persistent gender gap in mental health remains even in advanced educational settings, where women report more symptoms but the same or less use of services than men (Abu & Achore, 2025). Previous research confirms that perceived self-sufficiency and a preference for informal networks are cross-cutting barriers: students in Hong Kong prioritize peer and family support over institutional services (Busiol , 2016), while in Australia, reluctance to seek professional help is associated with stigma and a lack of trust in formal systems (Li, 2018). In Africa, less than a third of students with common mental health conditions seek formal help, with informal sources predominating in more than 80% of cases (Gebreegziabher , 2019). In Europe, low levels of mental well-being coexist with limited use of online university support services (Goodwin, 2016), and in Asia, lack of awareness of services and fear of stigma remain key determinants (Tan, 2021; Raman, 2019).

Regarding the first argument presented by the students, which focuses on wanting to address the problem on their own, strategies can be designed to foster a culture of mutual care and the value of others in self-care practices. Regarding the second argument, which focuses on the preference for seeking help from friends and family, messages can be designed to promote a familiar and friendly image of healthcare professionals. Regarding the third argument, which refers to not knowing where to go or whom to consult, students' knowledge of the location of wellness services and their usefulness in relation to their care needs can be strengthened.

5. Conclusions

In response to the students' first argument —wanting to address the problem on their own— programs should be implemented that promote peer support and highlight the value of interdependence in self-care, especially in contexts of psychosocial vulnerability exacerbated by environmental and gender factors. Given the preference for seeking help from friends and family, institutions must humanize the image of mental health professionals through campaigns that present them as accessible, trustworthy, and approachable figures, reducing stigma and perceived distance. Finally, to counteract the lack of awareness about where and whom to turn to, it is essential to intensify the clear, continuous, and contextualized dissemination of information about university wellness services, adapting messages to the specific gender, cultural, and socio-environmental conditions of the students. These strategic actions, based on the evidence in Figure 1 and consistent with international studies, will improve the effective use of wellness services and foster a culture of seeking timely help among university students.

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