

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

**PREDICTORS ASSOCIATED WITH
MENTAL HELP SEEKING
ATTITUDE AMONG MALAYSIAN
COLLEGE FOUNDATION
STUDENTS IN THE MIDST OF
COVID-19 PANDEMIC:
A CROSS SECTIONAL STUDY**

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Globally, the Coronavirus Disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic results in major psychological sequelae across age groups including adolescents. Mental illness rates are high, yet mental help seeking attitude (MHSA) among adolescents is evidently low in developed countries during the pandemic. However, data is scarce in developing countries, hence, this study aimed to determine the prevalence of psychological distressed students and the mean of MHSA total score; to compare the mean of MHSA total score between psychologically distressed and non-psychologically distressed students and to determine the predictors of MHSA during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods: A cross sectional study was conducted among Malaysian private college foundation students, aged 18 to 19 years old, from a private college in Klang Valley from 1st December 2021 until 30th March 2022. All college foundation students were invited, and eligible students completed self-administered online questionnaires. Data on psychological distress level, MHSA, sociodemographic, clinical factors, availability, accessibility and affordability of mental health service, mental health literacy and self-stigma of seeking help were collected. An independent T-test analysis was performed to compare the mean of MHSA total score between students who were psychologically distressed and non-psychologically distressed. Multiple linear regression analysis was done to identify predictors of MHSA.

Results: 650 students were invited to participate in the study, 409 students responded with response rate of 62.9%. In the end, 345 students completed the questionnaires and included into final analysis. The mean age was 18.7 (\pm 0.75) years old. More than half were female (64.3%, n=222) and a majority had no past history of mental health illness (95.1%, n=328). Almost half had personal history of COVID-19 infection (49.3%, n=170). The mean of MHSA total score was 50.98 \pm 10.39. The prevalence of psychologically distressed was 23.2%, (95%CI: 20.4, 26.1), in which those who were psychologically distressed students had a higher mean of MHSA total score than those who were non-psychologically distressed students (53.29 \pm 10.48 vs. 50.29 \pm 10.29; t (343) = -2.277 p= 0.023). The predictors of MHSA were; self-stigma of help seeking (β =-0.59 (95% CI: -0.76, -0.42) p<0.01); mental health literacy (β =0.22 (95% CI: 0.13, 0.30) p<0.01); and affordability of mental health service facility (β =3.29 (95% CI: 1.42, 5.16) p<0.01).

Conclusion: Mental help seeking attitude among Malaysian college foundation students was low during the COVID-19 pandemic, with those who were psychologically distressed had better MHSA than those who were not distressed. Low MHSA may result in lost opportunities for early diagnosis and treatment on mental health problems. Strategies to reduce self-stigma of seeking help for mental illness is vital, while educating college students about mental health and make mental health services affordable are warranted.

Keywords: Mental health seeking attitude; adolescent; Coronavirus disease-2019; (COVID-19); self-stigma; Malaysia

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BACKGROUND

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared Coronavirus Disease-2019 (COVID-19) as a public health emergency of international concern and a global pandemic in March 2020. Strict safety and quarantine measures to avoid virus spread and to protect public health, was urged worldwide and had resulted in lockdown in many countries (1). Malaysia has taken unprecedented steps to respond to this public health threat by commencing the Movement Control Order (MCO) from 18th March 2020 until 1st November 2021 (2). Physical restrictions encompassed restriction on movement, assembly, international travel and multiple institutional closure like education, business and industries were implemented. This had brought major impact on economic, social, environmental and mental health.

Psychological impact due to lockdowns was profoundly seen in all communities including among healthcare workers, elderly, working adults, young adults and adolescents during the pandemic (3, 4). There are various definitions available on adolescent. The recent one by Susan Sawyer *et. al*, defined adolescent as the age ranged between 10 to 24 years old (5). According to the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2017, adolescence sub-categories used in Malaysia consists of early adolescence (10-14 years), middle adolescence (15-17 years) and late adolescence (18-19 years) (6, 7). Late adolescents which is also young adults, specifically the university students are vulnerable groups as they are stormed with numerous stressors that may lead to depression and anxiety while facing significant cognitive, social, emotional development and adjustment to physical changes (8, 9). In China, an increased incidence of depression, anxiety and trauma was seen among university students, with 14.4% exhibited post-traumatic stress disorders during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic (10). Meanwhile, in Malaysia more than half of undergraduate university students were psychologically distressed during the pandemic due to the MCO (11). In