

FROM STIGMA TO LITERACY: EXAMINING THE UNDERLYING FORCES SHAPING MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract: *This study investigates the factors influencing mental health awareness among students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Kelantan. With increasing concerns over mental health issues in higher education, understanding the determinants of awareness is crucial for developing effective interventions. A quantitative research design was employed, and data were collected from 109 students across various programme using a structured questionnaire. The study examined three independent variables: attitude towards mental health, knowledge of mental health issues, and media exposure. Data were analyzed using multiple regression analysis via SPSS, and the findings revealed that all three variables significantly influence students' awareness of mental health. Among them, attitude towards mental health emerged as the strongest predictor, followed by knowledge and media exposure. These results suggest that fostering positive attitudes, improving mental health literacy, and promoting responsible media engagement can enhance awareness among university students. The study provides valuable insights for educators, mental health practitioners, and policymakers in designing targeted mental health promotion strategies within university settings.*

Keywords: *Mental health awareness, attitude, knowledge, media exposure, university students, multiple regression*

Introduction

In recent years, mental health has emerged as a critical issue globally, particularly among university students who are often exposed to high levels of academic, social, and emotional stress. The transition from adolescence to adulthood, coupled with the demands of higher education, has placed students at greater risk of developing mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and burnout. Despite the growing recognition of mental health as an essential component of overall well-being, awareness and understanding of these issues remain limited among many young adults, especially in developing countries.

In the context of Malaysia, mental health awareness among university students is gaining attention, but challenges such as stigma, lack of knowledge, and inadequate support systems still hinder effective intervention. Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Kelantan, like many other institutions of higher learning, hosts a diverse student population that may face various psychological stressors. However, there is limited empirical data that specifically investigates the level of awareness, perception, and attitudes of these students towards mental health issues.

This study aims to investigate the awareness of mental health issues among students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Kelantan. It seeks to identify their level of understanding, the sources of their knowledge, and the factors that influence their perception and openness towards mental health discussions and support services. By examining students' awareness, the research hopes to provide valuable insights that can inform the development of effective mental health education programs and policies within the university.

Ultimately, enhancing awareness is a critical step toward reducing stigma, encouraging help-seeking behavior, and fostering a supportive academic environment where students can thrive both mentally and emotionally.

Problem Statement

Recently, mental health issues among university students in Malaysia have become increasingly alarming, with high rates of anxiety, depression, and stress being reported (Universiti Putra Malaysia, 2021; Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2022). Despite the availability of counselling services and mental health support at universities, student engagement with these resources remains very low (Ibrahim et al., 2019). This raises concern about whether students are truly aware of mental health issues, the support systems available to them, and how to access help. Factors such as cultural stigma, fear of being judged, and a general lack of understanding continue to prevent students from acknowledging or addressing their mental health needs (Loong et al., 2024; Khairin Amin, 2024).

At Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Kelantan, no comprehensive study has yet explored how aware students are of mental health issues and the extent to which they are influenced by stigma, societal pressure, or digital stressors such as cyberbullying and social comparison on social media (Selamat et al., 2024; Thangaveloo & Chetiyar, 2024). As the mental well-being of students directly affects their academic performance and overall quality of life, it is essential to examine their awareness levels, perceptions, and help-seeking behaviour (Siddique et al., 2022). This study aims to fill that gap by investigating students' awareness of mental health issues and the factors that shape their attitudes towards mental health support.

Literature Review

Attitude and Stigma Towards Mental Health

Attitudes play a critical role in shaping how individuals perceive mental health and whether they are willing to seek help when experiencing psychological distress. Positive attitudes are associated with openness, acceptance, and greater willingness to utilize counseling services and participate in awareness initiatives (Ibrahim et al., 2019; Siddique et al., 2022). Conversely, negative attitudes often shaped by stigma reinforce misconceptions that mental illness is a personal weakness or a sign of madness. Such stigma has been widely documented as one of the strongest barriers to help-seeking behavior among young adults (Khairin Amin, 2024).

In the Malaysian context, stigma toward mental health is deeply rooted in cultural and familial norms. Many students avoid disclosing their struggles out of fear of being judged or discriminated against, leading to silence and untreated conditions (Loong et al., 2024). This silence not only perpetuates stigma but also limits the effectiveness of existing mental health support services in universities. Students who perceive mental illness negatively are less likely to recognize symptoms in themselves or others, thereby hindering awareness and reinforcing cycles of stigma (Selamat et al., 2024).

Thus, addressing attitudes and stigma is a necessary first step in transforming mental health awareness among university students. By challenging cultural misconceptions and promoting acceptance, students can move from a position of denial and silence toward greater openness and understanding, which in turn fosters mental health literacy.

Knowledge as Mental Health Literacy

Knowledge of mental health, often framed as mental health literacy, refers to the ability to recognize disorders, understand causes and risk factors, and identify appropriate sources of help (Jorm, 2012). Adequate knowledge plays a central role in transforming awareness, as it enables students to move from silent suffering to informed action. Students with higher levels of literacy are more likely to detect early symptoms in themselves and others, seek timely intervention, and reject harmful myths about mental illness (Siddique et al., 2022).

In Malaysia, however, studies suggest that mental health literacy remains relatively low among young adults. According to Muniandy (2024) found that while school-based literacy programs significantly improved students' understanding of mental health, many still struggled to apply this knowledge in real-life contexts. Similarly, Loong et al. (2024) noted that university students often lacked awareness of on-campus counseling services, suggesting that knowledge gaps extend beyond clinical understanding to practical awareness of available resources. This limited literacy contributes to stigma and further reduces the likelihood of students seeking professional help.

Globally, mental health literacy has been shown to be a decisive factor in reducing stigma and improving help-seeking behaviors. Research in Western contexts highlights that literacy programs, such as "Mental Health First Aid," have effectively increased knowledge and reduced negative attitudes toward mental illness (Jorm & Kitchener, 2011). By contrast, Asian contexts face additional challenges where even educated students may possess theoretical knowledge but still internalize cultural stigmas that discourage openness (Ng, 2016). This contrast emphasizes that while knowledge is necessary for awareness, it is insufficient unless combined with cultural sensitivity and community-based approaches.

Media Exposure as a Catalyst for Mental Health Awareness

Media plays a dual role in shaping mental health awareness: it can either promote literacy or reinforce stigma. Among university students, social media platforms have become the primary source of information on mental health. In Malaysia, Selamat et al. (2024) reported that 84% of university students relied on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter for mental health information, yet 65% continued to endorse negative stereotypes toward mental illness. This highlights the paradoxical nature of media exposure while access to information is high, misinformation and cultural narratives can perpetuate stigma rather than reduce it.

Media campaigns and digital interventions have been shown to improve mental health literacy. Mohamad and Abd Mubin (2023) found that online awareness campaigns in Malaysia increased students' willingness to engage in peer discussions and access counseling services. Similarly, international studies confirm the positive role of digital media: peer-led initiatives on social platforms in the UK and US have significantly reduced stigma and fostered supportive online communities (Naslund et al., 2016).

However, media can also function as a risk factor. Studies reveal that unregulated exposure to content involving cyberbully, unrealistic social comparison, or misinformation about mental illness exacerbates stress, anxiety, and depression among students (Arora et al., 2025). This reflects to double-edged sword of media: while it provides an accessible platform for awareness and amplifies harmful narratives if left unchecked. Media acts as the catalyst that accelerates or hinders the transition from negative attitudes to informed awareness. Responsible and evidence-based media use can amplify literacy and normalize mental health conversations, whereas irresponsible use risks reinforcing cycles of stigma. Thus, strategic engagement with media is essential for fostering a culture of openness and resilience among university students.

Mental Health Challenges Among University Students

University students face unique stressors that place them at heightened risk of mental health difficulties. Academic pressure, financial burdens, and social adjustment issues often contribute to the development of anxiety, depression, and stress symptoms (Universiti Putra Malaysia, 2021). The transition from adolescence to adulthood further amplifies these challenges, as students must balance personal, academic, and sometimes work responsibilities simultaneously (Ibrahim et al., 2019). These overlapping stressors create a high-risk environment that can compromise students' psychological resilience.

Recent statistics reveal the severity of this issue in Malaysia, where nearly 27% of adolescents reported symptoms of depression and more than 13% admitted to experiencing suicidal thoughts (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2022). Such figures highlight the urgent need to prioritize mental health within higher education institutions, as unaddressed challenges not only diminish students' emotional well-being but also disrupt their academic performance, reduce retention rates, and negatively impact their long-term quality of life. Addressing these challenges through comprehensive awareness, literacy programs, and stigma reduction initiatives is therefore essential to ensure that students are supported in both their academic and personal development.

Initiatives to Promote Mental Health Awareness

Universities and policymakers have introduced various initiatives to promote mental health awareness and reduce stigma among students. In school and campus-based programs, such as mental health literacy workshops and awareness campaigns, have been effective in reshaping

attitudes by reducing stigma and encouraging openness in mental health discussions (Muniandy, 2024). Similarly, peer-support programs and structured interventions like Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) emphasize the knowledge-building, equipping students and staff with the skills to recognize symptoms and provide support (WHO, 2021). These initiatives highlight how improving attitudes and knowledge are central to fostering mental health awareness within university settings.

In Malaysia, universities have begun implementing innovative programs that also leverage media exposure as a catalyst for awareness. Social media has been actively utilized to spread accurate information and challenge stigma (Selamat et al., 2024), illustrating how digital platforms can reinforce both positive attitudes and literacy. These efforts demonstrate that initiatives addressing attitudes, knowledge, and media simultaneously are most effective in shaping a supportive culture where students feel encouraged to seek help and maintain their mental well-being.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey method to examine the relationship between several independent variables (attitude towards mental health, knowledge of mental health issues, and media exposure) and the dependent variable (mental health awareness) among students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Kelantan. This approach was chosen as it allows for statistical analysis of relationships between variables using inferential methods such as multiple regression analysis.

Population and Sample

The population of this study consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in various programmes at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Kelantan. Using convenience sampling, a total of 109 students from different faculties and academic programmes voluntarily participated in the survey. The sample size was deemed adequate for multiple regression analysis, following the general rule of thumb (minimum 15–20 cases per predictor variable). (Hair et al., 2019; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019).

Through the participation of 109 respondents from various courses and programs, this study was able to capture a diverse range of perspectives on mental health awareness. This enhances the reliability of the findings despite the relatively smaller sample size. According to Creswell (2018) and similar methodological references, a sample size of around 100 respondents is generally acceptable for social science research, particularly when the study aims to explore perceptions, attitudes, or awareness levels. Therefore, the number of respondents in this study meets the minimum requirement for statistical analysis and meaningful interpretation. Lastly, while the sample represents only a fraction of the total student population, it provides valuable insights into the level of awareness of mental health issues among students in UiTM Kelantan and can serve as a foundation for larger-scale studies in the future.

Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising five sections:

Section A: Demographic information include gender, age, programme of study, level of education, year of study and also fundamental information about mental health issues.

Section B: Knowledge of mental health issues.

Section C: Media exposure questions.

Section D: Attitude towards mental health.

Section E: Student's Awareness Towards Mental Health Issue in University.

All measurement items were adapted from previous validated studies and modified to suit the local university context. A 5-point Likert scale was used to measure levels of agreement or frequency where applicable.

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, and consent was obtained prior to participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the process.

Data Analysis

Collected data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic profile and key variables. Multiple regression analysis was conducted to identify the influence of the three independent variables that is attitude towards mental health, knowledge of mental health issues, and media exposure towards the dependent variable, mental health awareness.

$$Y = b_0 + b_1X_1 + b_2X_2 + b_3X_3 + \dots + b_nX_n \dots \dots (Model 1.1)$$

Y = dependant variable (Student's awareness towards mental health issues in university)

b₀ = Intercept

X₁ = Independent variable 1 (knowledge towards mental health)

X₂ = Independent variable 2 (media exposure)

X₃ = Independent variable 3 (attitudes towards mental health)

The assumptions of reliability test were tested and met before the regression analysis was performed.

Finding and Discussion

Demographics Analysis

This section presents the analysis results that explore the factors influencing mental health awareness among students. The analysis of the results focuses on three sections, namely demographics and basic questions on mental health issues (Part A), and multiple regression analysis (Part B-E). The study employed multiple regression analysis to determine the extent to which three key variables that is attitude towards mental health, knowledge of mental health issues, and media exposure can predict students' awareness levels. The analysis aimed to identify which factors significantly contribute to shaping students' awareness and understanding of mental health, providing insight into the dynamics that could inform future mental health interventions on campus.

Table 1: Profile of Respondents

Profile		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	25	77
	Female	84	23

Age	18-20	54	50
	21-23	36	33
	24-26	12	11
	27 above	7	6
Program	BA111	22	20
	BA132	4	4
	BA262	14	13
	CS110	8	7
	CS241	21	19
	CS249	1	1
	AM110	28	26
	CS111	2	2
	AC220	9	8
Level of Education	Diploma	64	59
	Degree	45	41
Semester	Part 1	24	22
	Part 2	7	6
	Part 3	40	37
	Part 4	11	10
	Part 5	9	8
	Part 6	11	10
	Others	7	6

Source: Online Survey (2025)

Table 1 shows the profile of respondents in this study reflects a diverse group of students from various academic backgrounds at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Kelantan. In terms of gender distribution, the majority of respondents were female (84 respondents, 77%), while males accounted for 25 respondents (23%). With respect to age, half of the respondents (54 students, 50%) were between 18–20 years old, followed by 36 students (33%) aged 21–23, 12 students (11%) aged 24–26, and 7 students (6%) aged 27 and above.

Regarding academic programs, the respondents represented several faculties, with the highest participation from AM110 (28 students, 26%), followed by BA111 (22 students, 20%) and CS241 (21 students, 19%). Other programs such as BA262 (13%), AC220 (8%), CS110 (7%), BA132 (4%), CS111 (2%), and CS249 (1%) were also represented. In terms of educational level, most respondents were diploma students (64 students, 59%), while 45 students (41%) were pursuing a degree.

Distribution by semester showed that the highest proportion of respondents were in Part 3 (40 students, 37%), followed by Part 1 (22%), Part 4 (10%), Part 6 (10%), Part 5 (8%), and Part 2 (6%). A small number of respondents (7 students, 6%) were categorized under "Others." Overall, these demographics indicate that the sample covers a wide range of backgrounds, with a majority being young, female diploma students in the early to middle stages of their academic journey.

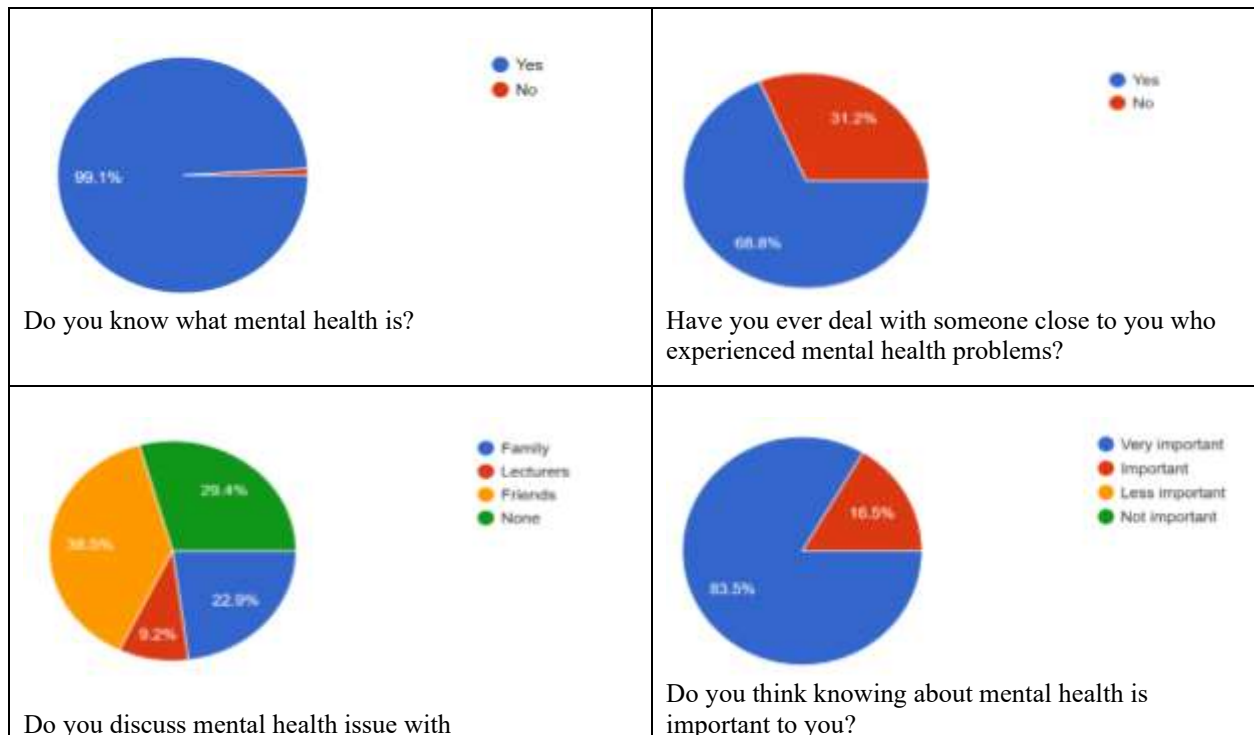


Figure 1: Basic Questions About Awareness Mental Health Among Students.

Source: Online Survey (2025)

Figure 1 presents a set of simple but important survey questions designed to explore student's awareness and perceptions of mental health. It begins by asking whether respondents know what mental health is, aiming to gauge their basic understanding of the concept. About 99.1% respondents understand about what mental health is. This is followed by a question on whether they have ever dealt with someone close who experienced mental health problems, which seeks to capture the influence of personal exposure on attitudes and empathy. Based on analysis found that about 68.8% respondents deal with someone close. Another item asks if respondents discuss mental health issues with others, reflecting their openness to dialogue and the extent to which the topic is normalized in their social circles. Most of them discuss this issue with friends about 38.5%. Finally, the questionnaire asks whether respondents believe that knowing about mental health is important, highlighting their recognition of the relevance of mental health literacy in daily life. Majority respondent says that knowing mental health problem is very important that is contribute about 83.5%. Collectively, these questions are intended to assess general awareness, personal experience, communication practices, and the perceived importance of mental health knowledge among students.

Reliability Test

The consistency of the interval items in the questionnaire for this study was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, a statistic that measures internal consistency, that is, how closely related a set of items are as a group. According to Hair et al. (2019), a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.70 or higher is generally considered acceptable, while values between 0.80 and 0.90 indicate good reliability, and values above 0.95 may suggest redundancy among items (Taber, 2018; Hair et al., 2019).

Table 2: Cronbach Alpha

	Items	Coefficient Value
Cronbach Alpha	29 questions	0.932

Table 2 shows that Cronbach's Alpha coefficient obtained for the 29 items was 0.932. interpretation of this value is classified as excellent. Therefore, these items are reliable for further analysis.

Multiple Linear Regression

Multiple linear regression is an effective statistical technique for determining the relationship between each independent variable and a linear dependent variable. This analysis is used to test all of the hypotheses. Additionally, it allows the researcher to identify which independent variable has the greatest impact on the dependent variable.

Based on the Model 1.1 below, it shows that there are three independent variables, interaction between knowledge, media exposure and attitudes. Student's awareness towards mental health is the dependent variable in this study.

Student's awareness towards mental health = 0.299 + 0.243X1(knowledge about mental health) +0.404X2 (media exposure) + 0.326X3 (attitudes towards mental health)

Based on coefficients in Model 1.1, it shows all the variables are positive relationship with student awareness toward mental health issue. One percent improvement in knowledge about mental health will influence 0.24% increase in student's awareness. One percent increase in media exposure will influence 0.40% in student's awareness. For attitude, if one percent increase in attitude so it will influence 0.32% student's awareness.

According to Table 3, the R Square for the model is 0.547 that indicates 54.7% of the dependent variable (student's awareness) can be explained by the three independent variables (attitude, media exposure and knowledge). The other 45.3% of the variation cannot be explained through this model which means that there are other factors that can be used to explain student's awareness towards mental health issues in university.

Table 3: Summary Statistics

Regression Statistics	
Multiple R	0.740035475
R Square	0.547652505
Adjusted R Square	0.534728291
Standard Error	0.438853975
Observations	109

Table 4: ANOVA

	df	SS	MS	F	Significance F
Regression	3	24.48287	8.160955	42.37414348	5.01735E-18*
Residual	105	20.22225	0.192593		
Total	108	44.70511			

*Significant at 0.05 significant level

Refer to Table 4 above, this is the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) shows that the significant F value is 5.01735E-18 with a 0.05 significance level. Thus, the regression model for the three predictors (knowledge, media exposure and attitude) have statistically significantly explained the variation in student's awareness towards mental health issue in university.

Table 5: Summary of Regression Coefficient

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value
Intercept	0.299013673	0.364808	0.819647	0.414273783
Knowledge	0.243991737	0.090644	2.691750	0.008273177*
Media Exposure	0.404843792	0.067961	5.957037	3.46311E-08*
Attitude	0.326621329	0.096646	3.379572	4.11756E-08*

*Significant at 0.05 significant level

Refer to Table 5, the individual t test by using p values, all the variables are statistically significant influence towards student's awareness towards mental health issue when all the p values are less than significant level 0.05. besides that, the variable media exposure is the highest influence towards student's awareness. It can be found when the t stat value is the highest 0.4048. Pallant (2020), standardized coefficients (Beta) provide a measure of the relative effect of each independent variable on the dependent variable

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the factors that influence mental health awareness among students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Kelantan, with a specific focus on the role of attitude towards mental health, knowledge of mental health issues, and media exposure. Using multiple regression analysis, the findings revealed that all three variables significantly contribute to the level of mental health awareness among the respondents.

The findings of this study revealed that three key variables that is attitude towards mental health, media exposure, and knowledge of mental health issues are significantly influence students' awareness, with media exposure identified as the most dominant factor. This outcome is consistent with prior literature (Siddique et al., 2022; Arora et al., 2025), which emphasized the role of positive attitudes, sufficient knowledge, and particularly accurate media exposure in shaping mental health awareness among university students. These findings collectively underscore the importance of targeted educational and media-based interventions to enhance mental health awareness, reduce stigma, and promote proactive help-seeking behaviours among university students.

Recommendations

Integrate Mental Health Literacy into Academic Curriculum

Universities should incorporate basic mental health education into general studies or soft skills courses. This can improve students' understanding of common mental health conditions, symptoms, and coping strategies. Research has shown that mental health literacy programs increase awareness and reduce stigma, especially when delivered through structured classroom learning (Muniandy, 2024).

Strengthen Campus-Based Mental Health Services

University should enhance the visibility and accessibility of existing counseling and psychological support services. This includes more proactive outreach, regular mental health screenings, and peer support systems. Services should also be available through online platforms or apps to accommodate students who may feel uncomfortable with face-to-face sessions.

Launch Anti-Stigma Campaigns Tailored to Local Culture

Mental health stigma is deeply tied to Malaysian cultural and religious beliefs. Therefore, campaigns should be culturally sensitive, using local language and norms, and include testimonials from students or alumni to normalize mental health struggles. Collaboration with religious leaders or cultural influencer can further increase acceptance.

Promote Digital Well-Being and Responsible Social Media Use

Given the significant link between digital stress (like bullying, cyberbully, social comparison) and poor mental health, universities should conduct workshops on digital well-being, social media detoxing, and critical media literacy. Partnerships with student bodies or influencer can help deliver these messages effectively.

Empower Peer Support Networks

Students are often more comfortable confiding in peers. Universities should consider training peer mental health ambassadors who are equipped to identify signs of distress and refer peers to professional services. Peer-led support groups have proven effective in reducing isolation and stigma.

Enhance Staff and Lecturer Training on Student Mental Health

Lecturers and academic advisors are often the first point of contact when a student is struggling. Providing them with basic mental health training can help in early detection, appropriate referral, and empathetic engagement with students experiencing distress.

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