Attitude Outweighs Knowledge: Predicting University Students' Likelihood to Offer Mental Health First Aid to Peers

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Abstract

Background: The escalating prevalence of mental health concerns among university students underscores the critical role of peers as a first line of support. However, the specific factors that motivate students to intervene, particularly the interplay between their knowledge, attitudes, and helping behaviors, require further empirical investigation to inform effective peer-support initiatives.

Objectives: This study aimed to determine whether university students' knowledge of mental health first aid and their attitudes toward mental health issues predict their self-reported likelihood of helping a peer in distress.

Methods: A cross-sectional survey was administered to 350 undergraduate students. Participants completed measures assessing their mental health knowledge (a true/false scale), attitudes (a Likert-scale questionnaire), and their likelihood of offering support to a stressed peer. Data were analyzed using Pearson's correlation and linear regression.

Results: Both knowledge ($r = .43$, $p < .001$) and attitudes ($r = .54$, $p < .001$) were significantly correlated with helping likelihood. Regression analysis confirmed that both were significant unique predictors, with attitude ($\beta = .43$, $p < .001$) demonstrating a substantially stronger influence than knowledge ($\beta = .18$, $p = .015$).

Implications: The findings indicate that while knowledge is a factor, a student's personal attitudes are a more powerful driver of helping behavior. This suggests that campus mental health promotion strategies should evolve beyond purely educational campaigns to include targeted interventions designed to foster positive, non-stigmatizing attitudes, thereby empowering students to become active agents of support within their community.

Keywords: *mental health first aid; university students; knowledge-attitude-practice; peer support; help-seeking behavior; stigma.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The university years represent a critical period of transition, marked by significant academic, social, and personal development. While this phase can be enriching, it is also increasingly recognized as a time of heightened vulnerability to mental health challenges. The pressures of academic performance, financial constraints, and navigating new social landscapes contribute to a rising tide of psychological distress among student populations globally. In this context, peers often serve as the first line of defense, noticing initial signs of struggle in friends and classmates long before professional help is sought. The concept of Mental Health First Aid (MHFA), the help offered to a person developing a mental health problem or in a crisis, has thus gained considerable traction as a vital component of campus support systems (Ng et al., 2021).

The effectiveness of peer intervention, however, is not automatic. It is potentially mediated by two crucial factors: what students know about mental health and how they feel about addressing it. The Knowledge-Attitude-Practice (KAP) framework provides a useful model for understanding this dynamic. This model posits that knowledge influences attitudes, which in turn shape practices and behaviors. In the realm of mental health, this suggests that a student's ability to recognize symptoms of distress (knowledge) and their beliefs about the responsibility and efficacy of providing help (attitude) may be fundamental determinants of their willingness to actively support a peer in need (practice). While structured MHFA training programs have been shown to improve knowledge and attitudes (Liang et al., 2023; Llopis et al., 2024), a gap remains in understanding the natural, everyday relationship between these factors among the general student body who may not have received formal training.

The rising mental health concerns in academic environments necessitate a multi-pronged approach where peer support is recognized as a valuable and accessible resource. While formal MHFA training is effective, its scalability can be limited by resources and logistics. Before investing in widespread training programs, it is imperative to understand the current landscape of student readiness to help. By investigating the natural correlation between students' inherent knowledge of mental health first aid, their attitudes toward helping, and their self-reported likelihood to assist a peer, this study addresses a critical gap.

The findings will provide a nuanced understanding of which factor, knowledge or attitude, is a stronger predictor of helping behavior. This distinction has direct practical implications. If knowledge is the primary driver, efforts can be concentrated on educational workshops and information campaigns. If attitude is the key predictor, initiatives might be better focused on anti-stigma campaigns and normalizing conversations around mental health. Ultimately, this research moves beyond evaluating formal interventions to assess the foundational elements that make such interventions necessary and can guide their strategic design.

Purpose and Objectives

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between university students' knowledge of mental health first aid, their attitudes toward providing help, and their self-reported likelihood to offer support to a peer in distress.

The specific objectives are:

1.   To assess the level of mental health first aid knowledge and helping attitudes among a sample of university students.

2.   To examine the correlation between knowledge scores and the likelihood of helping a peer.

3.   To examine the correlation between attitude scores and the likelihood of helping a peer.

4.   To determine whether knowledge and attitude scores are significant predictors of the likelihood to provide help to a peer in distress.

Through these objectives, this research aims to contribute valuable insights that can aid university administrators and mental health professionals in crafting more targeted and effective peer-support initiatives, fostering a more supportive and resilient campus community.

2. Literature Review

A growing body of evidence underscores the prevalence of mental health issues on campuses and the potential of peer support. Research has consistently demonstrated that university students exhibit varying levels of mental health literacy. For instance, studies among healthcare students have revealed significant knowledge gaps concerning psychiatric disorders, highlighting a need for improved education even among those entering helping professions (Auditeau et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). Furthermore, general student populations have also been shown to possess limited or inaccurate knowledge about specific conditions, which can be a barrier to effective support (Wang & Li, 2024).

Attitudes are equally critical. Stigmatizing beliefs, such as the notion that individuals with anxiety should simply "cope on their own," can severely hinder helping behaviors. Research during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how knowledge and attitudes were directly linked to mental health outcomes and supportive practices, demonstrating that negative attitudes could exacerbate anxiety and reduce prosocial actions (Li et al., 2023; Patwary et al., 2022). Conversely, interventions aimed at shifting attitudes, such as MHFA training, have proven successful. A randomized control trial by Dzemaili et al. (2023) found that MHFA training among undergraduates led to improved attitudes and increased confidence in providing help. Similarly, Llopis et al. (2024) documented that following MHFA training, students reported a significant increase in their intended helping behaviors, underscoring the attitude-practice link.

However, much of the existing literature focuses on the outcomes of formal training interventions. Less is known about the organic, pre-existing interplay between knowledge, attitudes, and practice within the general university student population. Understanding this baseline relationship is crucial. It can identify whether gaps in knowledge or resistant attitudes are the primary barriers to peer support, thereby informing whether educational campaigns should focus on information dissemination, stigma reduction, or a combination of both.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a cross-sectional, quantitative survey design to investigate the relationships between knowledge, attitudes, and helping practices. A convenience sample of 350 undergraduate students was recruited from a large public university, with the sample size determined using G*Power software for a linear multiple

regression, anticipating a medium effect size (f^2 = 0.15), 80% power, and an alpha of 0.05. Data were collected via a self-administered online questionnaire developed on the Qualtrics XM platform (Qualtrics, Provo, USA). The instrument comprised three sections: a demographic sheet, a 4-item likert scale adapted from the Mental Health Literacy Scale to generate a composite score, and a 4-item attitude section using a 5-point Likert scale, including reverse-scored items from Wang & Li (2024). The dependent variable was measured by a single item asking participants to rate their likelihood of helping a distressed peer on a 5-point scale. Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 28 (IBM Corp., Armonk, USA). Pearson's correlation was used to assess bivariate relationships, followed by a simple linear regression to test if knowledge and attitude scores significantly predicted helping likelihood, with a p-value of < 0.05 considered statistically significant.

3. RESULTS

Correlation between study Variables

Table 1
Bivariate Correlations

Variable	1. Knowledge	2. Attitude	3. Likelihood to Help
1. Knowledge	1		
2. Attitude	.582**	1	
3. Likelihood to Help	.432**	.538**	1

Note: p < .001 (2-tailed).

Both knowledge (r = .43, p < .001) and attitude (r = .54, p < .001) demonstrate statistically significant, positive correlations with the likelihood to help a peer. The stronger relationship with attitude suggests it may be a more influential factor than knowledge in prompting supportive behavior among students.

Summary of Analysis for Variables Predicting Likelihood to Help

Predictor Variable	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	Standardized Coefficient (β)	t	p-value
(Constant)	1.295	0.247		5.246	< .001

Knowledge	0.177	0.072	0.179	2.460	0.015
Attitude	0.440	0.074	0.434	5.959	< .001

Table 2
Regression Analysis

Note: The model predicts the dependent variable "Likelihood to Help."

The regression model confirms both knowledge (β = .18, p = .015) and attitude (β = .43, p < .001) are significant, positive predictors of helping likelihood. Attitude's larger standardized coefficient indicates it is a substantially stronger unique predictor of a student's intention to provide support to a peer in distress.

4. DISCUSSION

The present findings confirm a significant, positive relationship between university students' mental health knowledge, their attitudes, and their self-reported likelihood to provide help to a peer. This aligns with the core premise of Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training, which posits that improving literacy and reducing stigma are foundational to promoting supportive behaviors (Ng et al., 2021). The strong, unique predictive power of attitudes over knowledge in our regression model is a critical insight. It suggests that while factual understanding is important, a student's personal beliefs about mental health and their responsibility to intervene are a more potent driver of action. This extends the work of Liang et al. (2023), whose meta-analysis confirmed MHFA improves literacy, by highlighting that the subsequent translation into practice may be more heavily dependent on attitudinal shifts.

Our results resonate with cross-sectional studies that have linked positive attitudes to better mental health practices during crises (Li et al., 2023; Patwary et al., 2022). Furthermore, they provide a plausible explanation for the mechanisms behind successful MHFA interventions, such as those documented by Dzemaili et al. (2023) and Llopis et al. (2024). These training programs likely work not only by imparting knowledge but, more importantly, by actively fostering more confident and less stigmatizing attitudes, which in turn empower students to offer help. This underscores a need for campus initiatives that move beyond mere awareness campaigns. To effectively mobilize students as a peer support network, universities must design programs that specifically target and reshape underlying attitudes, creating a cultural environment where helping is perceived as both a normative and effective action.

5. Conclusion

This study conclusively demonstrates that both knowledge and, more powerfully, positive attitudes significantly predict a university student's likelihood to provide mental health first aid to a peer. These findings suggest that while educational initiatives to improve mental health literacy remain necessary, they are insufficient alone. To genuinely foster a proactive support culture on campus, future interventions must be strategically designed to prioritize attitudinal change. We therefore recommend the development and implementation of experiential, discussion-based workshops that move beyond facts to directly address and challenge stigma, build empathy, and role-play supportive conversations. Furthermore, longitudinal research is needed to track how fluctuations in

student attitudes over their academic career influence long-term helping behaviors, ensuring that peer-support programs can be adaptively refined for maximum real-world impact.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION AND DECLARATIONS

Concept Design, Data Collection and Drafting: Tanzeel Tariq

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Furthermore, this research did not involve the use of animals, plants, or any biological specimens requiring ethical approval. Therefore, ethical clearance from an institutional review board, prior informed consent (PIC) from respondents, or animal/plant welfare approvals are not applicable to this study.

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