

MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY INTERVENTIONS IN YOUNG PEOPLE: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

Antonella Litta^{1,2}, Elena Amelio³, Cira Papari³, Marina De Benedittis³, Francesco Pastore⁴

¹Department of Precision and Regenerative Medicine and Ionian Area (DiMePRe-J), University of Bari "Aldo Moro", Bari, Italy

²Mental Health Department, ASL Taranto, Taranto, Italy

³Department of Translation Biomedicine and Neuroscience (DiBraiN), University of Bari "Aldo Moro", Bari, Italy

⁴Department of Biomedicine and Prevention, University of Rome "Tor Vergata", Rome, Italy

SUMMARY

Introduction: Health literacy is defined as the "ability to obtain, process and understand basic health information and to access health services in order to make informed choices". The concept of Mental Health Literacy (MHL) has been introduced in recent years in order to promote mental health. MHL refers to knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders that facilitate their recognition, management, and prevention. A low level of MHL represents a fundamental barrier to seeking mental health care.

Methods: For this review we followed a narrative approach. Papers published between 2013 and 2024 were screened for inclusion. Only 24 articles met the inclusion criteria, all of them were included in the review.

Results: Among the 24 articles included, schools represented a particularly important context for interventions, as adolescents spend much of their time in school and school staff are often the point of reference for young people seeking help and advice. School-based interventions aimed at improving MHL and reducing stigma have the potential to prevent mental disorders and promote mental well-being, ultimately reducing their health, social, and economic burden.

Conclusions: Schools are a key setting for mental health interventions, given the significant time adolescents spend there and their reliance on school staff for support. Enhancing MHL and reducing stigma through school-based programs can prevent mental disorders and promote well-being. Both live and digital interventions have shown effectiveness, though long-term impacts need more study.

Key words: mental health - health literacy - stigma

* * * * *

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade the World Health Organization (WHO) has emphasized the critical importance of mental health, stating that there can be no health without mental health (WHO 2023). Health literacy is defined as the "ability to obtain, process and understand basic health information and to access health services in order to make informed choices" (Ratzan & Parker 2000). The concept of Mental Health Literacy (MHL) has been introduced in recent years in order to promote mental health. MHL refers to knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders that facilitate their recognition, management, and prevention (Jorm et al. 1997). Today, knowing how to improve MHL is necessary to understand the variables that influence it, starting from schools and the places where the minds of future men and women are shaped.

Data from the "Headway 2023 – Mental Health Index" research report estimates that 84 million people (1 in 6) are suffering from a mental disorder and attribute 165,000 deaths per year to mental illness or suicide. Suicide is the sixth greatest cause of death in the European Union in the aged population (<70 years of age) and the fourth greatest cause of death in the population under 20 years of age (The European House-Ambrosetti and Angelini Pharma 2023). The

concept of MHL is pivotal. By assessing the knowledge and beliefs which shape attitudes, it becomes possible to identify and address the stigma associated with mental health issues; a significant barrier to early recognition and intervention (Schulze & Angermeyer 2003). Identifying gaps in knowledge and misconceptions enables the development of interventions aimed at enhancing MHL and subsequently evaluating their effectiveness (Link et al. 2004).

Kelly et al. (2007) identified four categories of interventions to improve MHL: 1) comprehensive community campaigns, 2) community campaigns aimed at youth audiences, 3) school-based interventions that include teaching help-seeking skills, mental health literacy or resilience, 4) specific programs that provide information on how to best intervene in a time of mental health crisis. In order to successfully improve MHL, interventions should be context-specific (developed and applied for everyday life situations), developmentally appropriate (tailored to their application across the lifespan) and effectively integrated into social structures and existing organizations (such as schools and communities). Furthermore, when applying interventions, all components of MHL should be assessed to determine whether the intervention can improve all components of the construct: mental health knowledge, attitudes or stigma and effectiveness in

seeking help (Seedaket et al. 2020). The objective of this narrative review is to highlight MHL and how this topic has been studied in the literature.

METHODS

This review was conducted following a narrative approach. Prisma Statement guided the narrative review. A literature search was carried out using the biomedical databases of Pubmed, MedLine, Google Scholar; combining the following keywords: "mental health literacy" AND "school" AND "digital literacy" AND "health literacy".

RESULTS

24 articles met the inclusion criteria and were included in the review. A low level of MHL represents a fundamental barrier to seeking mental health care. In this regard, various figures have recognized the importance of MHL to increase global understanding and address mental health issues (Yeo et al. 2024). MHL encourages help-seeking behaviour and the ability to help others promptly and reduces stigma (Francis-Oliviero et al. 2023). Schools represent a particularly important environment for interventions (Abdinasir 2019). School-based interventions aimed at improving MHL and reducing stigma have the potential to prevent mental disorders and promote mental well-being, ultimately reducing their health, social, and economic burden. Ma et al. (2023) analyzed several studies that address knowledge and awareness of mental disorders and applicable interventions. The interventions adopted in some of these studies involved live contact with individuals who have experience with mental disorders, accompanied by educational content; other studies incorporated digital content. The results of this review demonstrated that the means of contact, whether live or digital, are not correlated to the effectiveness of the intervention, which has important implications for the development of digital interventions. The review by Ma et al. (2023) revealed that more than half of the studies reported statistically significant improvements; however, there is little evidence regarding their long-term effectiveness. In recent years, there has been an increase in conditions such as depression and anxiety, especially among young people. It is therefore necessary to provide them with advantageous and easily accessible tools to prevent, recognize, and treat mental illnesses. The onset of mental health problems is significant between adolescence and young adulthood; however, young people encounter barriers to treatment and are often reluctant to seek professional help. They often seek support on the web, particularly through social media, which could therefore be a good opportunity to provide or integrate online mental health interventions focused on young people (Ridout &

Campbell 2018). Currently, there is growing interest in digital mental health literacy (DMHL) interventions, which have been shown to positively influence mental health (Yeo et al. 2024). DMHL interventions are easily accessible at any place and time, combining cost-efficiency and overcoming the shortcomings of traditional in-person MHL interventions, namely low availability, and substantial delivery costs. DMHL interventions are highly accessible to young people, who typically have lives closely connected with digital media and are the primary users of web-based mental health resources. Another advantage of DMHL is that they ensure anonymity, which is important to avoid stigmatization. However, studies have not demonstrated the effectiveness of DMHL compared to traditional in-person MHL interventions in enhancing mental health (Yeo et al. 2024). Digital approaches to mental health have generally been associated with high levels of user access and initial engagement (Fleming et al. 2018). However, there are concerns about long-term user engagement. It is necessary to identify factors that can increase user engagement with digital mental health technologies. A recently developed measure is the eTAP (eTherapy Attitudes and Process) questionnaire (Clough et al. 2022). Long-term user engagement is important because, for digital interventions to be effective, users must complete the treatment or use it for an extended period, receiving a "beneficial dose" (Fleming et al. 2018). For digital mental health approaches to reach their full potential in supporting population-level service delivery, a greater understanding of the factors influencing user engagement is needed (Clough et al. 2022). Another method to improve young people's MHL is the use of digital interventions such as documentaries, informative videos, and films (Ito-Jaeger et al. 2022). Digital interventions have proven to be effective and suitable for young people, mainly because they rely on a mode of consumption that is very familiar to them. Indeed, following digital video interventions, participants have shown increased mental health knowledge and recognition of mental illness, along with reduced stigma and reduced desire for social isolation (Ito-Jaeger et al. 2022). Digital media are effective tools for promoting mental health; however, there must be direct user involvement in the creation process, known as co-creation, meaning users should be involved in creating the resources offered. Additionally, the production must meet high-quality standards, and the information must be accessible and relevant (Curran et al. 2023). In this direction, the digital media campaign "What's Up With Everyone?" fits well. This campaign features several digital animations co-created by young people and focuses on various mental health themes. It is proving to be an effective tool for improving young people's mental health literacy, their approach to mental illness, and their tendency to seek help (Curran et al. 2023).

DISCUSSION

MHL is a crucial component in the promotion of mental well-being and the prevention of mental disorders. Low levels of MHL form a significant hurdle to seeking mental health care, contributing to delays in treatment and exacerbating mental health issues. Increasing MHL is essential for encouraging help-seeking behaviour, empowering individuals to provide timely assistance to others, and reducing the stigma associated with mental health problems.

School-based interventions aimed at improving MHL and reducing stigma have shown some potential in preventing mental disorders and promoting mental well-being, thereby alleviating health, social, and economic burdens. The interventions included both videos and live contact with individuals who have experienced mental disorders, accompanied by educational content. Interestingly, the mode of contact - live or digital - did not significantly impact the effectiveness of the intervention, which is an important consideration for the development of digital interventions. However, while more than half of the studies reported statistically significant improvements in MHL, there is limited evidence regarding their long-term effectiveness, as follow-up assessments were generally not included. This highlights the need for further research on the sustainability of literacy interventions in schools.

With the increasing prevalence of depression and anxiety among young people, it is imperative to provide them with accessible tools to prevent, recognize, and treat mental illness. Given that the onset of mental health problems often occurs between adolescence and young adulthood and young people frequently encounter barriers to treatment and are hesitant to seek professional help, the web and social media present valuable opportunities for delivering mental health interventions. DMHL interventions are particularly promising due to their accessibility, cost-efficiency, and ability to overcome the limitations of traditional in-person MHL interventions, such as low availability and high delivery costs. Moreover, DMHL interventions ensure anonymity, which is crucial for avoiding stigmatization.

Despite the advantages of DMHL interventions, their effectiveness compared to traditional in-person MHL interventions is yet to be conclusively demonstrated. Digital approaches to mental health have shown high levels of initial user access and engagement. However, there are concerns regarding long-term user engagement, which is essential for the effectiveness of digital interventions. Identifying factors that enhance user engagement with digital mental health technologies is critical. The eTAP (eTherapy Attitudes and Process) questionnaire developed by Clough et al. (2022) is a recent measure aimed at

assessing these factors. Ensuring long-term user engagement is vital for users to receive a "beneficial dose" of the intervention.

Digital interventions, such as documentaries, informative videos, and films, have proven effective and appropriate for young audiences. These interventions capitalize on a mode of consumption familiar to young people, leading to increased mental health knowledge, better recognition of mental illness, and reduced stigma and social isolation. The success of digital media in promoting mental health depends significantly on direct user involvement in the creation process, known as co-creation.

CONCLUSIONS

Schools are key settings for mental health interventions, given the significant time adolescents spend there and their reliance on school staff for support. Enhancing MHL and reducing stigma through school-based programs can prevent mental disorders and promote well-being. Overall, digital interventions have significant potential, but further research is needed to confirm their long-term effectiveness and enhance user engagement to comprehensively support adolescents' and young adults' mental health.

Acknowledgements: None.

Conflict of interest: None to declare.

Contribution of individual authors:

Antonella Litta & Francesco Pastore: conceived, designed the review and supervised all phases of the study design and writing of the manuscript.

Elena Amelio, Cira Papari & Marina De Benedictis: performed the literature search and wrote the first draft of the manuscript.

References

1. Clough B, Yousif C, Miles S, Stillerova S, Ganapathy A & Casey L: *Understanding client engagement in digital mental health interventions: An investigation of the eTherapy Attitudes and Process Questionnaire*. *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 2022; 78:1785–1805
2. Curran T, Ito-Jaeger S, Perez Vallejos E & Crawford P: *'What's up with everyone?': The effectiveness of a digital media mental health literacy campaign for young people*. *Journal of Mental Health (Abingdon, England)* 2023; 32:612–618
3. Fleming T, Bavin L, Lucassen M, Stasiak K, Hopkins S & Merry S: *Beyond the trial: systematic review of real-world uptake and engagement with digital self-help interventions for depression, low mood, or anxiety*. *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 2018; 20:e199
4. Francis-Oliviero F, Loubières C, Grové C, Marinucci A, Shankland R, Salamon R, Perez E, Garancher L, Galera

- C, Gaillard E, Orri M, González-Caballero JL, Montagni I: *Improving Children's Mental Health Literacy Through the Cocreation of an Intervention and Scale Validation: Protocol for the CHILd-Mental Health Literacy Research Study*. *JMIR Res Protoc* 2023; 12:e51096
5. Ito-Jaeger S, Perez Vallejos E, Curran T, Spors V, Long Y, Liguori A, Warwick M, Wilson M & Crawford P: *Digital video interventions and mental health literacy among young people: a scoping review*. *Journal of Mental Health (Abingdon, England)* 2022; 31:873–883
 6. Jorm AF, Korten AE, Jacomb PA, Christensen H, Rodgers B & Pollitt P: *Mental health literacy: A survey of the public's ability to recognise mental disorders and their beliefs about the effectiveness of treatment*. *The Medical Journal of Australia* 1997; 166:182-186
 7. Kelly CM, Jorm AF, Wright A: *Improving mental health literacy as a strategy to facilitate early intervention for mental disorders*. *Med J Aust* 2007; 187(S 7):S26-30
 8. Link BG, Struening EL, Rahav M, Phelan JC & Nuttbrock: *On stigma and its consequences: Evidence from a longitudinal study of men with dual diagnoses of mental illness and substance abuse*. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 2004; 45:247-258
 9. Ma KKY, Anderson JK & Burn AM: *Review: School-based interventions to improve mental health literacy and reduce mental health stigma - a systematic review*. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health* 2023; 28:230–240
 10. Rainer C, Huong L & Kahdra A: *Behaviour and mental health in school-Children and young people's mental health coalition*. Available from: <https://cypmhc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Behaviour-and-Mental-Health-in-Schools-Full-Report.pdf> (accessed 16 July 2024)
 11. Ratzan SC, Parker RM: *Introduction*. In: *National Library of Medicine Current Bibliographies in Medicine: Health Literacy*. Selden CR, editor; Zorn M, editor; Ratzan SC, editor; Parker RM, editor. Editors. NLM Pub. No. CBM 2000-1. Bethesda, MD: National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000
 12. Ridout B & Campbell A: *The use of social networking sites in mental health interventions for young people: systematic review*. *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 2018; 20:e12244
 13. Schulze B & Angermeyer MC: *Subjective experiences of stigma: A focus group study of schizophrenic patients, their relatives and mental health professionals*. *Social Science & Medicine* 2003; 56:299-312
 14. Seedaket S, Turnbull N, Phajan T, Wanchai A: *Improving mental health literacy in adolescents: systematic review of supporting intervention studies*. *Trop Med Int Health* 2020; 25:1055-1064
 15. *The European House: Ambrosetti and Angelini Pharma, 2023. *Headway 2023 – Mental Health Index: Responsiveness of the Health System to Mental Health Needs**. [online] Available at: <https://www.angelinipharma.com/our-responsibility/headway-a-new-roadmap-in-mental-health/responsiveness-of-the-health-system-to-mental-health-needs/> (accessed 15 July 2024)
 16. World Health Organization: *Promoting mental health*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/>
 17. Yeo G, Reich SM, Liaw NA & Chia EYM: *The effect of digital mental health literacy interventions on mental health: systematic review and meta-analysis*. *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 2024; 26:e51268

Correspondence:

Antonella Litta, MD, PhD

Department of Precision and Regenerative Medicine and Ionian Area (DiMePre-J),

University of Bari "Aldo Moro"

Bari, Italy

E-mail: a.litta@hotmail.it