

TEACHERS' MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY, ATTITUDE, AND STRESS COPING MECHANISMS

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ABSTRACT

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This study examined the mental health literacy, attitudes toward mental illness, and stress coping mechanisms of public elementary school teachers in the Talibon I and Talibon II Districts, Division of Bohol, during the School Year 2022–2023. Using a quantitative descriptive-correlational design, data were collected from 292 teachers selected through stratified random sampling. Standardized instruments were used to assess mental health literacy, attitudes toward mental illness, and

stress-coping mechanisms. Descriptive statistics, Spearman's rank-order correlation, and Chi-square tests were employed for data analysis. Findings revealed that respondents were generally moderately literate in mental health, with the highest competency observed in knowledge of how to seek mental health information and the lowest in knowledge of risk factors and causes of mental illness. Respondents generally exhibited positive attitudes toward mental illness, although some stigmatizing perceptions remained. Problem-focused coping was the most frequently utilized stress management strategy. Mental health literacy demonstrated a strong positive relationship with attitudes toward mental illness, indicating that greater mental health knowledge is associated with more favorable attitudes. However, mental health literacy and attitudes toward mental illness were not significantly



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related to stress coping mechanisms. The findings highlight the importance of strengthening teachers' mental health literacy through targeted professional development initiatives to promote positive attitudes toward mental illness and support mentally healthy school environments.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is a renowned profession that has considerable psychological and emotional demands. In addition to teaching, instructors must undertake administrative work, adapt to the diverse needs of learners, communicate with parents and the community, and respond to rapidly changing educational contexts. These roles may expose teachers to chronic occupational stress that can negatively influence their well-being, professional performance, and quality of life (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Mearns & Cain, 2003).

With schools and colleges paying greater attention to mental health, instructors have taken a more prominent role, both in instruction and as the first point of contact for students in need of help. As schools progress towards greater inclusion of mental health promotion in educational practice, teachers are required to identify psychological difficulties, provide appropriate assistance, and make appropriate referrals. Such obligations demand a sufficient level of mental health literacy, defined as the information and beliefs that help identify, manage, and prevent mental disorders (Jorm et al., 1997). Since then, mental health literacy has evolved into a more comprehensive concept, encompassing knowledge of positive mental health, awareness of mental disorders and treatment options, knowledge of stigma reduction, and knowledge of how to seek appropriate professional care (Kutcher et al., 2016).

Research demonstrates that greater mental health literacy is linked to more positive attitudes toward mental illness, greater willingness to seek professional help, and a greater capacity to help people with mental health problems (Jorm, 2019; Yildirim et al., 2021). In educational settings, instructors with higher levels of mental health literacy are more likely to recognize mental health problems among students, respond appropriately, and provide psychologically supportive educational environments (Dias et al., 2018). On the other hand, poor mental health literacy can lead to misunderstandings and stigma that may inhibit effective treatment of mental health issues in the school setting.

An additional crucial aspect that affects mental health-related behaviors is attitudes about mental disease. Positive attitudes result in acceptance, empathy, and help-seeking, whereas negative views often lead to stigma and discrimination. While knowledge of mental health issues is growing worldwide, stigma remains a major obstacle to the detection, disclosure, and treatment of mental health illnesses (Schomerus et al., 2021). For instructors, views regarding mental illness may influence how they respond to psychological discomfort and engage with students who are struggling with their mental health.

The way instructors deal with work stress is also essential. Coping mechanisms are defined as cognitive and behavioral attempts used to handle internal or external pressures seen as stressful (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Research has shown that problem-focused coping methods are often related to better adaptive psychological outcomes. In contrast, the overuse of avoidant coping can be associated with lower levels of well-being and resilience (Stanisławski, 2019). Therefore, it is crucial to understand teachers' coping strategies to develop treatments that build resilience and support mental health in educational contexts.

Previous research has explored mental health literacy, attitudes about mental illness, and stress coping strategies independently. However, limited data indicate how these variables relate to one another among teachers. Previous research has shown a relationship between mental health literacy and attitudes towards mental illness; however, data addressing the impact of mental health literacy on coping strategies are mixed (Jung et al., 2017; Spiker & Hammer, 2019). Additionally, there is less research on public elementary school teachers in the Philippine environment, especially in local school divisions where contextual and organizational variables may affect mental health experiences.

The study, anchored in the Cognitive Behavioral Theory and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, examined the mental health literacy, attitudes toward mental illness, and stress-coping mechanisms of public elementary school teachers in the Talibon I and Talibon II Districts of the Division of Bohol. Specifically, it examined the associations among these characteristics to inform the design of a Mental Health Literacy Enhancement Activity that may promote teacher well-being and foster a more positive educational environment.

Theoretical Background. This study is based on Mental Health Literacy Theory, Cognitive Behavioral Theory, and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. These hypotheses together account for the effects of teachers' mental health knowledge on attitudes to mental illness and reactions to occupational stress.

Theory of Mental Health Literacy: Jorm et al. (1997) first developed Mental Health Literacy (MHL), defined as the knowledge and beliefs that help identify, treat, and prevent mental health disorders. The notion has been broadened to encompass good mental health, decreasing stigma, and help-seeking behaviors (Jorm, 2019; Kutcher et al., 2016). In school contexts, instructors with higher mental health literacy are more likely to detect psychological problems, give appropriate help, and encourage good attitudes towards mental illness.

Cognitive Behavioral Theory. Cognitive Behavioral Theory (CBT) posits that a person's thoughts and beliefs influence their emotions and behavior (Beck, 1976). The CBT in this study indicates that precise knowledge of mental health can facilitate more positive views about mental illness, whereas

misunderstandings can lead to stigma. In addition, the idea suggests that adaptive thinking may assist individuals in responding to stressful situations in healthier ways.

Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping describes how people perceive and respond to stresses (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The concept suggests that coping techniques are determined by the appraisal of a stressful circumstance and the anticipated capacity to deal with it. This paradigm offers insight into how teachers adapt to occupational pressures and employ coping mechanisms to sustain well-being in the teaching profession.

In brief, these theories propose that the cognitive processes affect attitudes about mental disease as a function of mental health literacy and that the coping actions are affected by the evaluation of stressful situations and resources. This framework might be a reference to analyze the link between mental health literacy, attitude toward mental illness, and stress coping in public elementary school teachers.

RELATED LITERATURE AND STUDIES

Mental Health Literacy Among Teachers. There is growing recognition that mental health literacy is an essential component of mental health promotion and prevention. It is the information and beliefs that assist in the identification, management, and prevention of mental health problems (Jorm et al., 1997). More recent viewpoints also point to improved mental health, reduced stigma, and increased help-seeking efficacy (Kutcher et al., 2016).

Mental health literacy is an important professional ability since teachers are typically the first to identify behavioral and emotional changes in learners in schools. Research has demonstrated that instructors with higher mental health literacy are more competent at identifying mental health problems, providing adequate support, and referring students to appropriate services when needed (Dias et al., 2018). Nevertheless, studies show that although teachers have broad knowledge of mental health concerns, there are still gaps in understanding of risk factors, treatment options, and available resources (Li et al., 2022; Yildirim et al., 2021). These findings underscore the continued need to improve teachers' knowledge and abilities related to mental health.

Attitudes Toward Mental Illness. Attitudes about mental illness impact acceptance, stigma, and help-seeking behaviors. While mental health problems are more and more recognized, stigma is still a barrier that might prevent people from getting help and treatment (Schomerus et al., 2021). Increased mental health literacy is generally connected with more favorable views about mental illness and reduced levels of stigma, as shown by previous studies (Jung et al., 2017). Yildirim et al. (2021) also observed a beneficial impact of mental health literacy on attitudes about obtaining professional psychological care. Teachers' attitudes are especially significant in educational settings as they might impact

the support and referrals to students with mental health problems. Hence, increasing mental health knowledge may lead to more helpful and inclusive educational settings.

Stress and Coping Mechanisms Among Teachers. Teaching is often associated with considerable occupational stress due to instructional, administrative, and interpersonal demands (Mearns & Cain, 2003). To manage these challenges, teachers employ various coping strategies, commonly categorized as problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Previous studies have shown that teachers frequently rely on problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers commonly utilized social support, physical activity, and leisure activities to manage stress (Hidalgo-Andrade et al., 2021). Similarly, adaptive coping strategies have been associated with better psychological well-being and work performance (Rabenu et al., 2017). While coping has been widely studied among educators, limited evidence exists regarding the extent to which mental health literacy and attitudes toward mental illness influence teachers' coping behaviors.

Relationship Among Mental Health Literacy, Attitudes Toward Mental Illness, and Coping Mechanisms. **Relationship Among Mental Health Literacy, Attitudes Toward Mental Illness, and Coping Mechanisms.** Mental health literacy, attitudes toward mental illness, and coping mechanisms are closely linked to psychological well-being. Mental health literacy provides individuals with the knowledge needed to understand mental health concerns, while attitudes toward mental illness may influence acceptance, stigma, and help-seeking behaviors. Coping mechanisms reflect how individuals respond to stress and challenges in everyday life.

Greater mental health literacy is frequently associated with more positive views of mental illness and seeking professional treatment (Jung et al., 2017; Spiker & Hammer, 2019). However, the data on its correlation with coping strategies is varied, with some research showing substantial associations and others finding weak or non-significant effects (Nam et al., 2020). Similarly, few studies have examined the association between favorable views towards mental illness and more adaptive coping strategies among instructors.

While existing literature highlights the value of mental health literacy, positive attitudes, and effective coping in promoting well-being, these constructs have often been examined independently. Moreover, studies involving public elementary school teachers in the Philippine context remain limited. Thus, the present study examined the relationships among mental health literacy, attitudes toward mental illness, and stress coping mechanisms to provide evidence that may inform teacher mental health initiatives and support programs.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design. This study employed a quantitative research approach utilizing a descriptive-correlational design. The descriptive component was used to determine the levels of mental health literacy, attitudes toward mental illness, and stress coping mechanisms among public elementary school teachers. In contrast, the correlational component examined the relationships among these variables. This design was deemed appropriate because it allowed the investigation of naturally occurring associations without manipulating any of the study variables.

Research Locale and Participants. The survey was undertaken among public elementary school teachers in the Talibon I and Talibon II Districts of the Division of Bohol, Philippines, in the School Year 2022–2023. The target demographic was 444 public elementary school teachers allocated to the two districts. Sample size calculation was made at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. 292 instructors were identified as responders. The participating schools were selected using stratified random sampling to guarantee proportional participation.

Eligible participants were teachers who had served for at least 1 year, held permanent employment status during the study period, and voluntarily agreed to participate in the research. Teachers with provisional appointments and those who did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded from the study.

Research Instruments. Data were collected using a structured survey questionnaire composed of four sections.

The first section gathered demographic information, specifically age and sex. The second section measured Mental Health Literacy (MHL) using an education-modified version of the Mental Health Literacy Scale (MHLS) originally developed by O'Connor and Casey (2015) and subsequently adapted for educational settings by Kenney (2019). The instrument assessed respondents' literacy across the dimensions of recognition of disorders; knowledge of risk factors and causes; knowledge of self-treatment; knowledge of available professional help; and knowledge of how to seek mental health information.

The final segment assessed attitudes about mental illness using items developed to test respondents' views, perceptions, and readiness to engage in appropriate help-seeking and support behaviors for mental health difficulties. The fourth portion measured stress-coping processes using the Brief COPE Inventory (Carver, 1997). The tool assessed coping reactions in three domains: problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant. The instruments were reviewed by experts before administration to verify content validity. Reliability testing yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .87, indicating strong internal consistency and sufficient reliability for research use.

Data Collection Procedures. Data collection was conducted by distributing printed survey questionnaires to eligible respondents after

obtaining consent from the relevant authorities. Participants were told the objective of the study, that their participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time without penalty. The completed surveys were gathered and reviewed for completeness, coded, and prepared for statistical analysis.

Ethical Considerations. The study adhered to established ethical principles governing research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by ensuring that no personally identifiable information was included in the dataset. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed that they could decline participation or withdraw from the study at any stage without adverse consequences.

The study further observed the principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, respect for persons, and justice. Data were used solely for academic and research purposes and were stored securely to protect participants' privacy.

Statistical Treatment of Data. Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were employed to analyze the data. Frequency counts, percentages, weighted means, and composite means were used to describe the respondents' demographic characteristics, levels of mental health literacy, attitudes toward mental illness, and stress coping mechanisms.

To determine the relationships between respondents' demographic characteristics and the study variables, the Chi-square Test of Association and Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation (ρ) were used as appropriate.

Spearman's ρ was likewise employed to examine the relationships among mental health literacy, attitudes toward mental illness, and stress coping mechanisms. Statistical significance was evaluated at the .05 level. All analyses were performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 26.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Level of Mental Health Literacy. The findings revealed that the respondents were generally **moderately literate in mental health**, suggesting a satisfactory level of awareness and understanding of mental health concepts among public elementary school teachers. This finding aligns with previous studies indicating that educators typically possess a foundational understanding of mental health concerns but often demonstrate varying levels of competence across specific dimensions of mental health literacy (Dias et al., 2018; Kutcher et al., 2016). Given the increasing expectations placed on teachers to support students' psychosocial well-being, moderate literacy may provide a useful foundation for school-based mental health promotion. However, it may not be sufficient for effective identification and intervention.

Regarding **recognition of mental health disorders**, respondents demonstrated a moderate level of literacy. They were generally able to identify symptoms associated with mental health conditions, particularly anxiety-

related disorders such as social phobia. However, lower recognition was observed for symptoms related to persistent depressive disorder. This finding is consistent with Jorm et al. (1997), who reported that anxiety disorders are often more readily recognized by the general public than depressive disorders, particularly when symptoms are less visible or develop gradually over time. Since teachers frequently serve as frontline observers of behavioral and emotional changes among learners, enhancing their ability to recognize a broader range of mental health conditions remains important.

Regarding **knowledge of risk factors and causes**, respondents were only slightly literate, making it the weakest dimension of mental health literacy. This finding suggests limited understanding of the biological, psychological, environmental, and social determinants associated with mental illness. Similar deficiencies have been reported in previous research, which found that individuals often possess basic awareness of mental health conditions but lack a deeper understanding of their underlying causes and risk factors (Tesfaye et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). Such limitations may hinder teachers' capacity to identify vulnerable students and implement preventive mental health practices within the school environment.

The respondents demonstrated a moderate level of literacy regarding **knowledge of self-treatment**. They recognized the value of healthy behaviors such as adequate sleep in managing emotional difficulties but exhibited uncertainty regarding maladaptive coping practices, particularly avoidance behaviors. This finding supports Kutcher et al.'s (2016) assertion that mental health literacy extends beyond disorder recognition to include understanding of effective self-management strategies. The observed gaps indicate a need for further education on evidence-based approaches to emotional regulation and self-care.

In terms of **knowledge of professional help available**, respondents were moderately literate. They demonstrated awareness of professional mental health services and therapeutic approaches, particularly Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), but displayed limited understanding of confidentiality-related issues in mental health practice. This finding is comparable to previous studies showing that individuals may be familiar with professional mental health services while simultaneously possessing misconceptions regarding the roles and ethical responsibilities of mental health practitioners (Jorm, 2019; Martinez et al., 2020). Strengthening teachers' understanding of referral systems and professional mental health services may facilitate more effective support for students experiencing psychological difficulties.

Among all dimensions, **knowledge of how to seek mental health information** received the highest rating and was interpreted as indicating high literacy. Respondents expressed confidence in locating mental health information, accessing resources, and utilizing available channels to obtain relevant knowledge. This finding is encouraging because information-seeking efficacy has been identified as a critical component of mental health literacy

and an important predictor of help-seeking behavior (O'Connor & Casey, 2015; Yildirim et al., 2021). The increasing availability of digital platforms and online mental health resources may have contributed to respondents' confidence in accessing mental health information.

Overall, the findings indicate that public elementary school teachers possess a moderate level of mental health literacy, characterized by strengths in seeking mental health information and awareness of available professional services but weaknesses in understanding risk factors and causes of mental illness. Consistent with the Mental Health Literacy Theory proposed by Jorm et al. (1997), these results suggest that while teachers have developed foundational mental health knowledge, targeted professional development programs remain necessary to strengthen critical areas of mental health competence. Enhancing teachers' mental health literacy may contribute not only to their personal well-being but also to their capacity to promote positive mental health outcomes among learners.

Correlation Between Mental Health Literacy, Attitudes Toward Mental Illness, and Stress Coping Mechanisms. Mental health literacy, attitudes toward mental illness, and stress coping mechanisms are important psychological constructs that may influence teachers' well-being and professional functioning. Understanding the relationships among these variables is essential because mental health literacy may shape how individuals perceive mental illness. In contrast, attitudes toward mental illness may influence help-seeking behaviors and interpersonal interactions. Furthermore, coping mechanisms determine how individuals manage occupational stress and psychological challenges. To determine whether significant relationships exist among these variables, Spearman's rank-order correlation was employed. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Correlation Matrix of Mental Health Literacy, Attitudes Toward Mental Illness, and Stress Coping Mechanisms (N = 292)*

Variables	Spearman's rho (ρ)	p-value	Interpretation	Decision
Mental Health Literacy and Attitudes Toward Mental Illness	.668**	< .001	Strong Positive Correlation	Reject H_0
Mental Health Literacy and Stress Coping Mechanisms	-.083	.157	Weak Negative Correlation	Fail to Reject H_0
Attitudes Toward Mental Illness and Stress Coping Mechanisms	-.071	.224	Weak Negative Correlation	Fail to Reject H_0

Note. $p < .05$ indicates statistical significance. Spearman's rho was used because the data were non-normally distributed.

Mental Health Literacy and Attitudes Toward Mental Illness. The results revealed a strong positive and statistically significant relationship

between mental health literacy and attitudes toward mental illness ($p = .668, p < .001$). This indicates that teachers with higher levels of mental health literacy tend to exhibit more favorable attitudes toward mental illness. The finding suggests that greater knowledge and understanding of mental health conditions contribute to reduced stigma and increased acceptance of individuals experiencing mental health concerns. This result supports Jorm et al.'s (1997) assertion that mental health literacy facilitates recognition, understanding, and appropriate responses to mental health issues. Likewise, the finding corroborates the studies of Jung et al. (2017) and Yildirim et al. (2021), which found that higher mental health literacy is associated with more positive attitudes toward mental illness and professional help-seeking.

Mental Health Literacy and Stress Coping Mechanisms. The analysis showed a weak negative and statistically non-significant relationship between mental health literacy and stress coping mechanisms ($p = -.083, p = .157$). This finding indicates that mental health literacy does not significantly influence how teachers cope with stress. While respondents may possess adequate knowledge regarding mental health, such knowledge does not necessarily translate into the use of adaptive coping strategies. This suggests that coping behaviors may be influenced by other factors such as resilience, social support, personality, and workplace conditions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The result is consistent with Nam et al. (2020), who reported that mental health literacy does not always directly predict coping behaviors despite contributing to mental health awareness.

Attitudes Toward Mental Illness and Stress Coping Mechanisms. The findings further revealed a weak negative and statistically non-significant relationship between attitudes toward mental illness and stress coping mechanisms ($p = -.071, p = .224$). This suggests that having favorable attitudes toward mental illness does not necessarily result in more effective stress management practices. However, positive attitudes may promote acceptance and help-seeking activities. Coping strategies seem to be more affected by individuals' perception of stresses and available coping resources rather than their attitudes towards mental illness (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This conclusion is consistent with Stanisławski (2019), who noted that coping techniques are grounded in the relationship between situational demands and personal resources. Therefore, variables such as resilience, self-efficacy, and organizational support may have a more significant effect on teachers' coping strategies than views about mental illness alone.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that public elementary school teachers possess a moderate level of mental health literacy, characterized by strengths in seeking mental health information and awareness of available professional services but limitations in understanding risk factors and causes of mental illness. Generally,

the views of respondents towards mental illness were positive, although certain stigmatizing ideas persisted. The most commonly adopted stress management method was problem-focused coping. The results showed a strong positive association between mental health literacy and attitudes toward mental illness. This indicates that people with more information about mental health tend to have more positive views and are more receptive to discussing mental health issues. However, mental health literacy and attitudes about mental illness did not substantially impact coping with stress, suggesting that other personal, societal, and organizational variables may influence coping behaviors. In general, the results highlight the need to improve teachers' mental health literacy to encourage positive attitudes towards mental illness and facilitate supportive learning settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The results suggest that school administrators need to enhance mental health literacy programs for teachers through periodic seminars, workshops, and professional development activities on mental health awareness, risk factors, early identification, and referral procedures. Schools must put in place stigma reduction programs that support positive views of mental illness and help-seeking behaviors among both teachers and students. Teacher wellness programs should also integrate practical stress management and resilience-building strategies to enhance coping skills. The lack of significant associations between mental health literacy, attitudes, and coping methods suggests that other factors may impact coping behaviors and should be included in future treatments, such as resilience, self-efficacy, social support, and organizational climate. Finally, future research might adopt mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to get a more nuanced picture of teachers' mental health experiences and the elements that shape their psychological well-being over time.

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