



# Mental Health Literacy: Strengthening Community Mental Health Through Awareness

## *Ruh Sağlığı Okuryazarlığı: Farkındalık ile Toplum Ruh Sağlığını Güçlendirme*

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### ABSTRACT

Due to the increasing mental problems today, protecting and strengthening the mental health of the society has become an even more important issue. The lack of knowledge and stigmatizing attitudes of the societies about mental disorders lead to the inability to treat mental disorders effectively in the early period. In this context, increasing the mental health literacy of the society within the scope of preventive mental health services will be an important step. Mental health literacy is a very new concept for our country, it is not fully known and it is seen that studies on this subject are limited. Therefore, in this review, the concept of mental health literacy, its importance, interventions to improve it and what psychiatric nurses can do about it will be discussed. This review will provide important and up-to-date data to the literature and will raise awareness of mental health professionals about the need for mental health literacy intervention studies.

**Keywords:** Mental health literacy, mental health promotion, preventive mental health, psychiatric nursing

### ÖZ

Günümüzde artan ruhsal sorunlar nedeniyle, toplumun ruh sağlığını korumak ve güçlendirmek daha da önemli bir konu haline gelmiştir. Ruhsal bozukluklar hakkında toplumların bilgi eksikliklerinin ve damgalayıcı tutumlarının olması, ruhsal bozuklukların erken dönemde etkili bir şekilde tedavi edilememesine sebep olmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, koruyucu ruh sağlığı hizmetleri kapsamında toplumun ruh sağlığı okuryazarlığını arttırmak önemli bir adım olacaktır. Ülkemiz için ruh sağlığı okuryazarlığı, çok yeni bir kavram olup, tam olarak bilinmemektedir ve bu konuda yapılmış çalışmalarında sınırlı olduğu görülmektedir. Bu nedenle bu derlemede, ruh sağlığı okuryazarlığı kavramı, önemi, geliştirmeye yönelik müdahaleler ve bu konuda psikiyatri hemşirelerinin neler yapabileceği tartışılacaktır. Bu derleme, literatüre önemli ve güncel veriler kazandıracak ve ruh sağlığı okuryazarlığı müdahale çalışmalarının yapılması gerektiği konusunda ruh sağlığı profesyonellerine farkındalık kazandıracaktır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Koruyucu ruh sağlığı, psikiyatri hemşireliği, ruh sağlığını güçlendirme, ruh sağlığı okuryazarlığı

## Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being (WHO 2004). While the developing countries place more emphasis on physical health, the importance attached to the mental well-being of the society increases as the development level of the countries increases. According to WHO, mental health is the state of a person who realizes his potential, copes with stress factors, is productive and efficient in society, and maintains a state of internal balance (WHO 2012). The mental health concept is not merely the absence of mental disorders but the mental well-being of individuals (Patel et al. 2018).

In recent years, mental disorders have become an increased burden of disease in all countries (Wei et al., 2015). When examining the global distribution of the disease burden, it is seen that 13% of Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALY) and 32.4% of Years Life Disabled (YLD) are due to mental disorders (Vigo et al., 2016). In recent years, mental disorders have become an increased burden of disease in all countries (Wei et al., 2015). When examining the global distribution of the disease burden, it is seen that 13% of Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALY) and 32.4% of Years Life Disabled (YLD) are due to mental illnesses (Vigo et al., 2016). In the field of Years Life Disabled (YLD), it is stated that the mental disorders illnesses that negatively affect human life are depression and anxiety disorders, while WHO has classified these two mental disorders as common mental disorders (WHO 2017).

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It is reported that the mental well-being of societies decreases due to increasing stress and life problems, and mental disorders reach even more severe levels. According to the 2021 data of the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), it was found that the number of people diagnosed with major depressive disorder increased by 28.1%, and the number of people diagnosed with anxiety by 27.9% compared to other years in the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic (COVID-19 Mental Disorders Collaborators 2021).

Our country is one of the developing countries and has a young population. Considering that 70 to 75% of mental disorders occur in adolescents and young adults (Wei et al. 2015), it can be said that we are a country at risk for mental disorders. When the problems caused by the pandemic (more job losses, social isolation, discontinuation of social activities, etc.) are added to the previous problems (unemployment, social inequality, domestic violence, etc.) in our country, protecting and enriching the mental health of the society has become an even more important issue (COVID-19 Mental Disorders Collaborators 2021). It is stated that the most significant intervention in this direction is to increase the mental health literacy level of the society within the scope of preventive mental healthcare services (Lo et al. 2018, Ratnayake and Hyde 2019).

Mental health literacy is a concept that appeared in the health literacy field and has gained currency in recent years. Mental health literacy is a significant determinant in protecting and enriching the mental health of both the individual and the community (Kelly et al. 2007, Kutcher et al., 2016, Reavley and Jorm 2011.). However, it is not a well-known concept. According to the health literacy study performed in our country, while 64.6% of the society was found to have a low level of health literacy (Taş ve Akış 2016, Kaya and Karaca Sivrikaya 2019), there was no study revealing the mental health literacy of the society. While there are some studies that reveal the mental health literacy of societies in the international literature (Reavley and Jorm 2011, Gulliver et al. 2017, Ratnayake and Hyde 2019), it is remarkable that there are only a limited number of studies examining the mental health literacy levels of healthcare professionals in our country (Öztaş and Aydoğan 2021, Çinçinoğlu and Okanlı 2021). Therefore, the purpose of this review is to discuss the concept of mental health literacy, its importance, components, interventions to improve it, and what psychiatric nurses can do about it. This review will also shed light on mental healthcare professionals and raise awareness about the requirement to include mental health literacy in intervention studies.

### **Concept and Importance of Mental Health Literacy**

The concept of mental health literacy was first coined by Jorm et al. in 1997 and defined as “knowledge and beliefs about recognition, management and protection of mental disorders” (Jorm et al. 1997). However, with the increase in the incidence of mental disorders, Jorm expanded this definition and stated that mental health literacy consists of six components. These are:

- (1) the ability to recognize mental disorders
- (2) knowledge and beliefs about risk factors and causes,
- (3) knowledge about self-help interventions,
- (4) knowledge and beliefs about professional help available,
- (5) attitudes that facilitate recognition and appropriate help-seeking,
- (6) knowledge of how to seek mental health information (Jorm 2000).

In the definition of mental health literacy today, four components are mentioned. These are;

- (1) understanding how to obtain and maintain positive mental health,
- (2) understanding mental disorders and their treatments,
- (3) decreasing stigma related to mental disorders, and
- (4) enhancing professional help-seeking efficacy (Wei et al. 2015, Kutcher et al.2016).

When examining these definitions, it is aimed to increase mental health literacy, recognize mental disorders in the early stages, seek professional help and rehabilitate people’s health with appropriate care and treatments (Kutcher et al. 2016). However, mental disorders are still not fully known by society, and individuals with mental disorders are exposed to high levels of stigma and discrimination (Reavley and Jorm 2011, Kutcher et al. 2016). It is reported in the literature that low mental health literacy is responsible for poor health outcomes and high suicide rates in societies (Kutcher et al. 2016). By increasing the mental health literacy of the community and recognizing mental problems at an early stage, it will be possible to receive appropriate treatment and care, decrease stigmatization behavior, and develop a positive attitude and behavior towards professional help-seeking behavior. The more the mental health literacy of the community improves, the more positive the mental well-being will develop (Kelly et al. 2007, Reavley and Jorm 2011).

### **Knowledge Levels of Societies About Mental Disorders and Evidence-Based Treatments**

It is seen that there exist many international studies on the recognition levels of mental disorders in societies. In a study performed by Drancourt et al. (2013), the length of untreated mental health problems was 8.2 years for anxiety and depression, while it was 14.5 years for bipolar disorder. The mean time in understanding the illness and seeking help was 9.6 years after the first-episode of bipolar disorder. These long processes cause suicide attempts and the continuation of the disease with residual symptoms (Tay et al. 2018a). In the study conducted (Reavley and Jorm 2011) in Australia for 16 years in three time periods, 1995, 2003, and 2011, it was determined that 39% of the population identified depression and 27% schizophrenia in the sample in 1995, while 75% of the population identified

depression in the sample in 2011. It was found that about 30% of them could identify schizophrenia and post-traumatic stress disorder. In a study conducted in Australia (by Reavley and Jorm 2011) for 16 years in three time periods, 1995, 2003, and 2011, it was determined that 39% of the population identified depression and 27% schizophrenia in the sample in 1995, while 75% of the population identified depression in the sample in 2011. It was found that about 30% of them could identify schizophrenia and post-traumatic stress disorder. It is also mentioned in the study that professional help-seeking behavior is delayed as a result of misattribution of mental disorders as “stress” or “life problems” (Reavley and Jorm 2011). In a study conducted with high school students in the USA (Coles et al. 2016), it was found that students identified depression with a maximum rate of 40%. In a study examining the recognition rates of mental disorders among British, Malaysian, and Hong Kong people (Loo et al. 2012), depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, schizophrenia, and ADHD were the most recognized mental disorders, while the rates of most common mental disorders were determined to be British, Hong Kongers and Malaysians, respectively. It is stated here that factors such as the development level of countries, mental health services, and education level of the society are efficient in recognizing mental disorders between countries (Loo et al. 2012). Although it is seen that the ability of societies to recognize mental disorders has developed within years and that society is best in recognizing depression, it is understood that the knowledge level about other mental disorders, such as schizophrenia, was low when examining the international studies. In our country, a study was found in which only the knowledge of the general population on obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCD) was evaluated. In this study, it was found that the participants had inadequate knowledge and false beliefs about OCD disease, its treatment, and its etiology (Beşiroğlu et al. 2010).

Societies have a low level of knowledge about mental disorders in addition to a lack of knowledge about evidence-based treatments (Tay et al. 2018a). Studies show that societies use alternative treatment options rather than evidence-based treatments. While it was found in a study conducted with young adults in Portugal that individuals chose vitamins as the most beneficial method in the treatment of depression, it was followed by tea, antidepressants, and anxiolytics. It was also reported in the study that individuals ranging from 28.6% to 37.3% considered antipsychotics, sedative-hypnotics, and antidepressants as harmful (Loureiro et al. 2013). In our country, the society's search for treatment for mental disorders is different (healer, psychic, etc.). In the study performed by Beşiroğlu et al. (2010), it was determined that the most preferred option of the participants for the treatment of individuals with religious obsessions was ‘visiting a religious healer’. In countries with low mental health literacy, it is seen that the level of knowledge about diseases and their treatments is low, and alternative treatment options are used more. It leads to the nonrecognition of mental problems, a delay in early diagnosis, and help-seeking behaviors in society.

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### **Stigma and Help-Seeking Behavior Against Mental Disorders**

Stigma is one of the major barriers to diagnosing and treating mental disorders. Diagnosis and treatment of individuals become difficult due to the lack of knowledge, fear, and stigmatizing attitudes towards mental disorders (Olçun and Şahin Altun 2017, Tay et al. 2018a). In our country, it is known that there exist some stereotypes for psychiatric patients that they are dangerous, aggressive, and harmful to society (Çapar and Kavak 2019). In many international and national studies (Olçun and Şahin Altun 2017, Wong et al. 2018, Çapar and Kavak 2019, Zhang et al. 2019, Şahin and Şahin Altun 2020) on this subject, it is seen that stigma negatively affects patients' self-esteem, treatment processes, help-seeking, functionality, social relations, quality of life, and levels of hope and happiness. One of the most effective methods in fighting stigma will be to increase the mental health literacy of society. In the study performed (Cheng et al. 2018), individuals with high mental health literacy levels were found to have low stigmatizing attitudes, while in a study conducted in our country (Çinçinoğlu and Okanlı 2021, it was found that as the mental health literacy of nursing students increased, their stigmatization level decreased.

Individuals with mental disorders also refrain from applying to health institutions due to stigma. In a systematic review, it was reported that the biggest barrier to help-seeking behavior for mental health services is embarrassment and stigma (Gulliver et al. 2010). In a study conducted with individuals diagnosed with depression in the USA (Conner et al. 2010), they found that individuals were exposed to a high level of stigma by society, and therefore they were not willing to seek professional help. The high level of stigmatizing attitudes in societies prevents individuals with mental disorders from seeking professional help and causes a decrease in belief in the usefulness of such help. Improving mental health literacy also improves behaviors towards individuals with mental disorders and reduces stigmatizing attitudes in addition to knowledge skills about mental health (Kelly et al. 2007).

## **Approaches to Improve Mental Health Literacy**

In the literature, it is stated that the mental health literacy of the society should be improved for firm mental health (Kelly et al. 2007, Tay et al. 2018a). Jorm et al. have also asserted that mental health literacy can be improved with mental health training programs. For this reason, they established the Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) in Australia in 2000 (Kelly et al. 2007, Reavley and Jorm 2011, Tay et al. 2018a). They started the 'Mental Health First Aid' training courses at the center in 2001. This training program aims to provide information to the society on how to support individuals and how to manage the situation in case of a mental crisis or mental disorder (Reavley and Jorm 2011). As a result of the training programs of this center, it has been observed that individuals with mental disorders seek more help, and accordingly, their quality of life increases by receiving better care and treatment in the early period (Jorm 2012). The findings of this study became a model for many other countries and Mental First Aid Centers were opened in other countries and community mental health training programs were started to be carried out. In our country, the major responsibility for informing society about mental disorders falls on the Community Mental Health Centers (CMHC). Training programs and interventions that reduce stigma are given by mental healthcare professionals working in these centers, mainly for mentally risky groups (children-adolescents, women, the elderly, immigrants, etc.) (Akdoğan 2018). However, we see that these interventions are still not performed at the intended level in our country.

Another significant approach to improve mental health literacy is to provide training within the scope of school-based mental health services to young people studying at schools and universities. It is even more important to improve the mental health literacy of young people, the future adults of society (Lo et al. 2018, Ratnayake and Hyde 2019). Another significant approach to improve mental health literacy is to provide training within the scope of school-based mental health services to young people studying at schools and universities. It is even more crucial to improving the mental health literacy of young people, the future adults of society (Lo et al. 2018, Ratnayake and Hyde 2019). Teaching adolescents and young adults about mental disorders and providing information about their diagnosis and treatment will be an important step that can reduce the burden of healthcare organizations since they are among risky groups and mental disorders are often prevalent at these ages (Jorm 2012, Lo et al. 2018). When examining the international literature, we saw that they focused on child-adolescent and young adult groups to improve mental health literacy and performed educational interventions on these groups. In the study conducted by Campos et al. (2018), students between the ages of 12 and 14 were given two-week training on mental disorders, and it was found that the mental health literacy levels of the students increased significantly. In the study conducted by Ratnayake and Hyde (2019), it was found that the training given to young people between the ages of 16 and 18 on mental disorders increased their mental health literacy levels, help-seeking

behaviors, and psychological well-being. In training programs, it is necessary to include teachers and families in addition to young people (Gulliver et al. 2010, 2017). In a study performed with a university's teaching staff in Australia (Gulliver et al. 2017), it was found that the level of mental health literacy was not at the intended level and there were stigmatizing attitudes. Therefore, it is stated in the study that the teaching staff cannot sufficiently help a young person with a mental disorder and cannot direct them to the necessary health institutions promptly (Gulliver et al. 2017). In another study (Baker-Henningham et al. 2009), it was reported that the problematic behaviors exhibited by children in the classroom environment decreased as a result of the training given to teaching staff.

Mass media also have an important role in improving mental health literacy. It will be easy and efficient to apply internet-based intervention programs to society in today's world in which the internet is used so widely. (Tay et al. 2018b). It is known that the news and advertisements about mental disorders in the media are efficient in the attitudes and stigmatizing approaches of society. Using this important power of the media to improve mental health literacy will have a considerable influence (Kutcher et al. 2016, Tay et al. 2018b). While it is emphasized in the studies that the mass media is an effective approach in the development of mental health literacy, it is stated that such strategies improve the knowledge levels, beliefs, and attitudes of individuals (Kelly et al. 2007). In a systematic review (Tay et al. 2018b), it was found that educational interventions were more effective in informing society about mental disorders such as anxiety and eating disorders, about which the society did not know much. However, internet-based interventions provided more information on depressive disorders, about which society knew more. Videos, advertisements, news, etc., play a crucial role in society's obtaining more accurate information about mental disorders and changing its perspective and attitude.

Another method for improving mental health literacy is to develop coping mechanisms for individuals and teach them new and effective coping mechanisms. Some studies indicate that effective coping mechanisms might be more efficient than proven methods to treat mental disorders (Kelly et al. 2007, Jorm 2012).

## **Mental Health Literacy and Psychiatric Nursing**

For the development of the mental health of the society, the Ministry of Health has assigned psychiatric nurses the responsibility of raising awareness of the society about mental health training programs under the name of preventive mental health services. Among the primary duties of psychiatric nurses are to take responsibility and create support programs for the protection and maintenance of mental health of all groups with a high risk of mental disorders, such as children, adolescents, women, the elderly, unemployed, disabled, those living in a low socioeconomic level, immigrants, individuals with high substance addiction. (Ministry of Health Republic of Turkey 2011).

Psychiatric nurses, who are in contact with patients and their families most in clinics, play a key role in improving the mental

health literacy of society. It is reported that their perspectives on the disease and their quality of life have changed positively and their stigmatizing attitudes have decreased, due to the training to be given to the patient and his/her family about mental disorders in the clinic (Özer et al. 2020). In addition, psychiatric nurses can also conduct social intervention programs together with CMHCs. They can provide training to society, especially on mental disorders and stigma (Akdoğan 2018). The training works that will also discuss teachers, students, and families all together in schools are also attempts to be made by psychiatric nurses. For example, Oban et al. (2011) found that the training given to high school students about schizophrenia reduces the social distance and stigmatizing attitudes of students towards schizophrenic patients.

It is observed that healthcare professionals may also have stigmatizing attitudes towards mental disorders. A study (Yüksel and Taşkın 2005) reported that psychiatrists have more positive attitudes towards mental disorders than non-psychiatric doctors, while another study with nurses (Kayahan 2009, Arkan et al. 2011) found that nurses had negative beliefs and attitudes towards mental disorders. A study conducted by Öztaş and Aydoğan (2021) also found that the mental health literacy of healthcare professionals is at a moderate level. For this reason, psychiatric nurses need to plan in-house training on this subject and increase the mental health literacy levels of healthcare professionals. All these interventions will have a positive impact on the quality of patient care and community mental health.

## Conclusion

In this review, it is understood that it is necessary to increase the knowledge level of societies about mental disorders and reduce their stigmatizing attitudes. In the literature, it is reported that the most important intervention in this regard is to increase the mental health literacy level of the society within the scope of preventive mental health services (Kutcher et al. 2016, Lo et al. 2018). In our country, it is required to plan interventions to fully fulfill the requirements of the community-based model, ensure nonlimitation of the treatment of individuals with mental disorders to hospitals, perform the treatment in their natural environment and reduce the risk factors for mental health. It might be suggested to conduct training studies in CMHCs, clinics, and polyclinics to enrich community mental health and improve mental health literacy. In addition, more comprehensive and effective attempts should be implemented within the scope of fighting stigma in our country. In this connection, it can be suggested that psychiatric nurses take an active role and provide training to the patient, family, and society. It has been observed that there isn't adequate study on mental health literacy in our country. It would be beneficial to carry out studies on mental health literacy in our country to determine and monitor at what level and in which direction the society's knowledge, belief, and attitude about mental disorders.

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