

## Parental Mental Health Literacy

Hilal Arslan Şeker<sup>1</sup>, Esra Ceyhan<sup>2</sup>,

Ministry of Education, Turkey, Turkey<sup>1</sup>  
Anadolu University, Turkey, Turkey<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

*A lack of knowledge and skills in the field of mental health may lead individuals to experience psychological disorders and hinder their access to appropriate sources of support. Mental health literacy is a critical protective factor, as it enables individuals to recognize psychological symptoms, seek professional help, and develop resilience against stigmatizing attitudes. This issue plays a crucial role not only at the individual level but also in terms of its impact on family members. Parental mental health literacy, in particular, emerges as a key factor in the development of children's psychological processes. It plays a significant role in supporting both parents' own psychological well-being and the quality of their relationships with their children. As parents' level of mental health literacy increases, they are expected to monitor both their own and their children's mental health processes more objectively, apply self-help strategies, use psychological first aid skills in crisis situations, communicate more effectively with their children, and develop positive attitudes that reduce self-stigma when seeking psychological support. For all these reasons, developing intervention programs to enhance parents' mental health literacy is essential for strengthening not only parental functioning but also, indirectly, the psychological development of their children. For such programs to be effective, the factors associated with parental mental health literacy must be examined comprehensively. Accordingly, this study is a literature review that aims to identify the variables related to parents' levels of mental health literacy. A comprehensive search was conducted in the databases of DergiPark, YÖKTEZ, Scopus, and ProQuest using the keywords "mental health," "mental health literacy," and "parental mental health literacy." The findings reveal that mental health literacy is associated with demographic variables (gender, age, education level, socioeconomic status, history of psychological treatment, and family history of mental illness), mental health knowledge, stigmatizing attitudes, coping skills, and parental self-efficacy. The results suggest that parental mental health literacy programs have the potential to increase mental health knowledge, reduce stigma, enhance adaptive coping skills, and support intergenerational psychological well-being.*

**Keywords:** Mental health, mental health literacy, parents.

### 1. Introduction

Mental health literacy is defined as the body of knowledge required to recognize psychological disorders, prevent the chronicity of emotional distress, and seek appropriate solutions [15]. The multidimensional structure of mental health literacy allows individuals to approach their internal processes from a broader perspective. Subcomponents of mental health literacy include the ability to understand psychological difficulties, recognize risk factors, apply self-help strategies, possess knowledge about professional help-seeking, access mental health-promoting information, and provide psychological first aid when necessary [17].

A lack of knowledge and skills in the field of mental health increases the risk of individuals experiencing psychological disorders and creates barriers to accessing appropriate sources of support. Possessing a sufficient level of mental health literacy is of critical importance for recognizing one's own mental health needs, seeking support when necessary, and protecting oneself against stigmatizing attitudes during these processes.

Stigma plays a highly influential role in individuals' help-seeking behavior related to mental health processes [4,14]. Studies show that individuals who internalize society's stigmatizing labels regarding mental illness are more likely to experience a decline in self-esteem [8]. Negative judgments about psychological disorders prevent individuals from seeking professional help and result in deprivation

from much-needed support services. This condition may lead to unresolved psychological difficulties manifesting as somatic complaints [19]. In this context, expressing emotional distress through physical symptoms is often seen as more socially acceptable than disclosing psychological struggles, particularly due to fears of rejection and feelings of worthlessness triggered by stigma [25]. Accordingly, efforts to enhance mental health literacy are thought to contribute to reducing stigmatizing attitudes, enabling the early recognition of mental health problems, and supporting their prevention.

When individuals are supported in developing their mental health literacy, they are more likely to understand their psychological needs, closely monitor their emotional well-being, and be willing to seek help when necessary. Conversely, a lack of knowledge about mental health is thought to increase the risk of turning to non-scientific sources and mismanaging the help-seeking process. It remains unclear which sources individuals rely on to obtain mental health information. Some of these sources include the experiences of people with psychological difficulties, media content, and social networks [30]. However, the limited knowledge of social support networks concerning mental health may restrict access to professional help for those in need [26]. Therefore, programs designed to enhance mental health literacy are needed to prevent stigmatizing attitudes, increase accurate knowledge, and guide individuals toward appropriate sources of support when necessary.

With improved mental health literacy, individuals are expected to cope more effectively with challenging life events. The process of coping with stressful situations involves the cognitive and behavioral efforts an individual employs when confronted with adversity [10]. When these efforts are guided by adequate mental health knowledge and skills, they are more likely to facilitate healthy coping strategies. In contrast, individuals with low levels of mental health literacy are more likely to avoid seeking help in times of stress, turn to addictive substances such as alcohol or drugs, or engage in maladaptive strategies such as social withdrawal [1, 18]. In contrast, individuals with higher levels of mental health literacy are known to recognize psychological symptoms more effectively and to use adaptive coping strategies free from stigmatizing attitudes toward help-seeking. Furthermore, increased mental health literacy has been associated with improvements in psychological well-being [20]. Individuals who possess accurate knowledge about mental health and psychological well-being are expected to feel more competent in dealing with life challenges [27]. Therefore, mental health literacy can be considered a protective factor that provides individuals with cognitive and behavioral resources for managing psychological risk factors.

In recent years, efforts to enhance mental health literacy have gained increasing momentum [31]. These efforts often include both parents and their children. Given that adolescents' realistic perspectives on mental health are known to develop through the objective attitudes of their parents [2], it is anticipated that initiatives aimed at improving parental mental health literacy will also indirectly influence the mental health literacy of their children. In addition, research indicates that adolescents often struggle to recognize psychological disorders and are reluctant to seek professional help [24], while also identifying their parents as a primary source of support in coping with psychological difficulties [16]. Therefore, parents play a crucial role in monitoring both their children's and their own psychological processes and in supporting healthy development.

Parental mental health literacy is considered to be transmitted across generations and has been shown to influence children's own levels of mental health literacy. Negative parent-child relationships, which are often at the root of psychological difficulties, are suggested to be associated with low parental competence, inadequate mental health literacy, and poor communication [6,7]. Studies have reported that parents with high levels of mental health literacy tend to be more responsive to their children's needs and provide a more supportive developmental environment [13].

The ability to recognize a child's needs and to communicate effectively reflects high parental competence [5], whereas low parental competence has been linked to an increased tendency toward behavioral problems in children [9]. Therefore, when parental mental health literacy is supported, it is expected that parents will feel more confident in proactively addressing psychological needs and that their emotional bond with their children will be strengthened. It is also believed that parents with high levels of mental health literacy are more capable of identifying psychological risk factors and reducing stigma related to mental health. In this regard, adolescents are likely to model their parents' attitudes toward psychological disorders, which may contribute to an increase in their own level of mental health literacy. Furthermore, parental mental health literacy is seen as a significant factor in shaping the quality of the parent-child relationship. Parents with higher mental health literacy tend to hold more positive beliefs and attitudes toward parenting, allocate quality time to their children, and build healthier relationships [29]. In light of these considerations, the aim of this study is to systematically identify the demographic, cognitive, attitudinal, behavioral, and social factors associated with parents'

mental health literacy levels. The findings are expected to strengthen the theoretical foundation for the development of a parental mental health literacy program and highlight its potential for indirectly contributing to both parents' psychological processes and the quality of parent–child relationships.

## **2. Method**

In this literature review, a systematic search was conducted in the DergiPark, YÖKTEZ, Scopus, and ProQuest databases using the keywords “mental health,” “mental health literacy,” and “parental mental health literacy.” The review included both recent empirical studies published within the last 10 to 15 years that examined variables associated with parental mental health literacy, as well as earlier foundational publications that contributed to the theoretical background of the field. The conceptual framework of this study was grounded in Jorm's dimensions [17] of mental health literacy. The literature review included both national and international sources.

## **3. Findings**

The analyses conducted within the scope of this review reveal that several key variables are associated with parents' levels of mental health literacy. These include demographic factors (such as gender, age, education level, socioeconomic status, history of psychological treatment, and family history of mental illness), cognitive factors (mental health knowledge), attitudinal factors (stigmatizing beliefs), behavioral factors (coping strategies), and social factors (parent–child relationships). The findings provide a theoretical framework for determining the content priorities of programs aimed at enhancing mental health literacy among parents.

### ***3.1. Demographic Characteristics and Mental Health Literacy***

Research shows that mental health literacy significantly varies according to demographic characteristics. Individuals' levels of mental health literacy have been found to be associated with variables such as gender [3, 28], age and history of psychological treatment [21], education level and socioeconomic status [28], as well as family history of mental illness [23].

Studies indicate that women tend to have higher levels of mental health literacy compared to men. This finding is linked to women's greater interest in mental health issues and their more positive attitudes toward help-seeking [22]. It has also been suggested that older individuals develop more experience with mental health over time and use these experiences more functionally [21]. In particular, a personal history of psychological treatment or a family history of mental illness contributes to acquiring more knowledge about mental health and using this knowledge more consciously [12,16]. Higher levels of education and socioeconomic status are also associated with greater mental health literacy, which may be explained by easier access to mental health information and resources [11,16]. These findings suggest that programs aiming to enhance mental health literacy should be designed with attention to participants' demographic characteristics. Tailoring interventions to specific demographic profiles may yield more effective outcomes in promoting mental health literacy.

### ***3.2. Mental Health Knowledge and Stigmatizing Attitudes***

Research has identified stigmatizing attitudes as another key variable associated with mental health literacy. Stigmatizing language in society and widespread labeling of psychological disorders act as barriers to individuals' help-seeking behaviors [4, 8]. Stigma may lead individuals to avoid professional support and may trigger emotional processes such as fear of rejection and feelings of worthlessness, which in turn can result in the somatization of psychological distress [19, 25]. In this context, mental health literacy functions as a protective factor against the development of stigmatizing attitudes [8]. The findings suggest that programs designed to improve mental health literacy should not only focus on the transmission of information but also aim to transform stigmatizing beliefs that hinder help-seeking behaviors. Such programs are expected to enhance individuals' ability to recognize psychological symptoms earlier and to foster more positive attitudes toward seeking professional support.

### ***3.3. Mental Health Literacy and Information Sources***



Research has reported a significant association between individuals' levels of accurate and reliable mental health knowledge and their levels of mental health literacy. The quality of mental health information plays a critical role in shaping individuals' positive attitudes toward mental health [26, 30]. Reviews have shown that individuals frequently obtain information about mental health from non-professional sources such as media, social networks, and personal experiences. However, these sources are often lacking a scientific basis and may carry the risk of misinformation. In particular, the limited knowledge of one's social environment regarding mental health may prevent individuals in need from accessing professional support [26].

These findings indicate that mental health literacy programs should be designed to help individuals critically evaluate the sources of information they encounter and guide them toward scientifically valid content. Raising awareness about misinformation originating from media and social environments is a crucial component of this process.

### **3.4. Coping Strategies and Mental Health Literacy**

Studies have shown a significant relationship between individuals' levels of mental health literacy and the ways in which they cope with stress. The level of knowledge and awareness related to mental health plays a critical role in shaping how individuals perceive challenges and how they respond to them [18, 20]. Individuals with higher levels of mental health literacy are observed to cope more effectively with stressful situations, are more willing to seek help, and are able to recognize psychological symptoms at an earlier stage [20]. In contrast, individuals with lower levels of mental health literacy are more likely to adopt maladaptive coping strategies such as denial, substance use, or social withdrawal in the face of stress [18]. These findings suggest that mental health literacy programs should aim to support individuals in recognizing psychological symptoms early, identifying appropriate sources of help, and developing healthy coping strategies.

### **3.5. Parental Mental Health Literacy and Family Relationships**

Studies have revealed a significant relationship between parents' levels of mental health literacy and the quality of their relationships with their children [13, 16]. Parental mental health literacy is a key factor in recognizing children's psychological needs, establishing healthy parent-child relationships, and supporting children's psychological well-being [13]. In particular, adolescents' attitudes toward mental health are known to be shaped by their parents' approach [16]. Parents with higher levels of mental health literacy are reported to adopt positive approaches that support their children's development while maintaining distance from stigmatizing beliefs. The findings indicate that parents with stronger mental health skills are better able to assess their children's psychological needs and contribute to sustaining psychological well-being within the family.

## **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

The findings of this review reveal that parents' mental health literacy is associated with demographic variables, stigmatizing attitudes, coping skills, and perceptions of self-efficacy. Mental health literacy appears to function not only as a protective factor at the individual level but also as a critical component in promoting public mental health on a broader societal scale. In light of the findings, it can be suggested that psychoeducational programs designed to enhance parents' mental health literacy may contribute to increasing mental health knowledge, reducing stigma, and supporting adaptive coping strategies. Furthermore, the knowledge and skills that parents acquire through mental health literacy are likely to influence the psychological development of their children through intergenerational transmission.

Therefore, it is expected that well-structured programs will promote not only individual mental well-being but also intergenerational mental health across families.

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