



Informal Peer Communication as a Coping Mechanism for Mental Health Struggles: A Qualitative Study Among Indonesian University Students

Muh. Darul Azis¹, Andi Subhan Amir²

¹ Universitas Hasanuddin, Indonesia

¹ mhdarulazis22@gmail.com*, ² asa@unhas.ac.id

Article Info

Article history:

Received 26-01-2026

Revised 01-03-2026

Accepted 17-03-2026

Keyword:

interpersonal communication; coping mechanism; qualitative study; university students

ABSTRACT

Mental health challenges have become increasingly prevalent among university students in Indonesia. While various support systems are offered, interpersonal communication particularly with peers—emerges as a powerful coping mechanism. This study explores how university students use interpersonal communication to cope with mental health struggles. Using a qualitative approach, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 students from three major universities in Indonesia. Thematic analysis revealed three key themes: emotional release through trusted conversations, validation and empathy from peers, and the role of informal communication spaces such as student organizations and group chats. For instance, one participant shared how discussing their academic stress in a student organization meeting helped them feel understood, while another mentioned that regular group chats with close friends provided a sense of emotional relief. The findings suggest that peer-based communication contributes significantly to psychological resilience. The study highlights the need for universities to facilitate safe and supportive communication environments to strengthen student mental health.



©2026 Authors. Published by PT Mukhlisina Revolution Center.. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

INTRODUCTION

The rise of mental health issues among university students in Indonesia is a growing concern, especially in the wake of post-pandemic academic stress, social isolation, and increasing personal expectations. While institutional responses such as counseling centers have been developed, they are often underutilized due to stigma, fear of judgment, or lack of accessibility.

In contrast, many students tend to rely on their peers for emotional support, often through casual, everyday conversations. This form of interpersonal communication though informal may play a key role in helping students navigate psychological distress (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). However, academic literature in Indonesia rarely focuses on communication-based coping strategies. This research seeks to explore how interpersonal communication acts as a coping mechanism for students dealing with mental health challenges.

In recent years, mental health has emerged as a critical issue within higher education institutions, particularly among university students who face multifaceted pressures stemming from academic demands, social expectations, and personal transitions into adulthood. In the Indonesian context, these challenges have been further intensified by the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted traditional learning environments, reduced social interaction, and heightened uncertainty about future career prospects. Although universities have increasingly introduced formal mental health services such as counseling units and psychological support programs, empirical evidence suggests that many students remain reluctant to access these services due to persistent stigma, limited awareness, and concerns regarding confidentiality. Consequently, students often seek alternative, informal strategies to manage emotional distress (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). One such strategy is interpersonal communication with peers, which occurs naturally within students' everyday social interactions and may offer immediate emotional relief, mutual understanding, and a sense of belonging. Despite its apparent importance, interpersonal communication as a coping mechanism has received relatively limited scholarly attention in Indonesian mental health

and communication studies. Addressing this gap, the present study seeks to explore how university students utilize interpersonal communication in navigating mental health struggles, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of communication-based coping strategies within higher education settings.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative, descriptive method. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 15 university students aged 19–24 from three universities in Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and Surabaya. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their willingness to discuss experiences related to mental health and interpersonal communication. Specifically, participants were required to have experienced some form of mental health struggle, such as stress, anxiety, or depression, and were chosen to represent a range of academic disciplines. This criterion ensured that the sample included students who were likely to have diverse perspectives on coping mechanisms. Interviews were conducted online via Zoom, recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes. Coding was done manually to preserve context and interpretive depth. Ethical considerations included informed consent, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time.

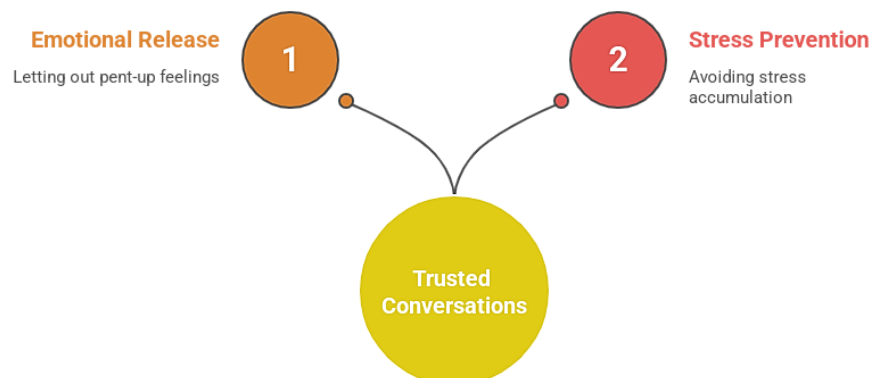
To gain an in-depth understanding of students' lived experiences, this study employed a qualitative descriptive research design, which is particularly suitable for capturing subjective meanings, personal narratives, and social processes related to mental health and communication practices. By engaging participants through semi-structured interviews, the research allowed for flexibility in exploring individual perspectives while maintaining consistency across key thematic areas. The selection of participants from different universities and cities was intended to capture diverse social and academic contexts, thereby enriching the data with varied experiences and viewpoints. Conducting interviews online not only ensured accessibility and participant comfort but also reflected the contemporary communication practices commonly used by students. Thematic analysis was chosen as the primary analytical technique because it enables systematic identification of patterns across qualitative data while preserving the depth and nuance of participants' expressions. Throughout the research process, ethical principles were rigorously upheld to protect participants' rights and well-being, recognizing the sensitivity of discussing mental health-related experiences. This methodological approach ensured that the findings were grounded in authentic student voices and reflective of real-world interpersonal communication dynamics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Emotional Release through Trusted Conversations

Many participants described talking to close friends as their primary way of “letting it out.” This emotional release was seen as crucial to prevent stress accumulation. One student stated, “If I don't talk to someone, I feel like I'm going to explode.”

Trusted Conversations Release Emotional Stress



Validation and Empathy

Participants often highlighted the importance of being listened to without judgment. Empathy from peers provided reassurance and reduced feelings of isolation. Several mentioned that hearing “I feel that too” helped them realize they were not alone.

Informal Communication Spaces

Group chats, student organizations, and even late-night campus hangouts served as informal spaces for peer support. These environments were perceived as more comfortable than formal counseling, especially for students hesitant to seek professional help.

These findings align with previous research indicating that peer communication plays a significant role in student well-being (Gibson & Rivers, 2019). However, the effectiveness of such communication depends heavily on trust, emotional safety, and mutual respect.

The findings of this study demonstrate that interpersonal communication serves not merely as a casual social activity but as a meaningful psychological coping mechanism for students experiencing mental health challenges. Emotional release through conversations with trusted peers allows students to articulate feelings that might otherwise remain suppressed, thereby reducing emotional tension and preventing the escalation of stress (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Furthermore, the presence of validation and empathy within peer interactions plays a crucial role in shaping students’ emotional resilience, as shared experiences and supportive responses help normalize mental health struggles and mitigate feelings of isolation. The significance of informal communication spaces highlights how support often emerges organically within students’ social environments, where power relations are minimal and interactions feel safe and non-judgmental. When viewed in relation to existing literature, these findings reinforce the argument that peer-based communication is a vital component of mental health support systems (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024). However, the discussion also underscores that the effectiveness of interpersonal communication depends on relational factors such as trust, emotional openness, and mutual respect. Without these elements, peer communication may fail to provide meaningful support or could even exacerbate emotional distress (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). Therefore, while informal communication holds considerable potential, it should be understood as complementary rather than substitutive to professional mental health services.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that interpersonal communication functions as an effective coping mechanism for mental health struggles among Indonesian university students. Trusted peer conversations, empathetic responses, and informal social spaces contribute to emotional resilience. Universities should recognize and support these informal communication networks as part of their mental health strategy.

In conclusion, this study provides empirical evidence that interpersonal communication plays a substantial role in helping Indonesian university students cope with mental health struggles. Through trusted conversations, empathetic peer responses, and engagement in informal social spaces, students are able to construct supportive networks that foster emotional expression and psychological resilience. These findings suggest that mental health interventions in higher education should not be limited to formal institutional services but should also acknowledge and strengthen existing peer communication networks.

However, the applicability of these findings may vary across different types of universities and regional contexts. For instance, in larger urban universities with more diverse student populations, peer communication networks may be more formalized or structured compared to smaller regional institutions where informal interactions may be more spontaneous. Furthermore, universities in regions with different cultural or socio-economic characteristics may need to tailor their mental health strategies to fit the unique communication practices and social dynamics of their student populations. By promoting a campus culture that encourages open dialogue, mutual support, and emotional safety, universities can enhance students’ overall well-being and reduce barriers to seeking help. Future research may further explore how interpersonal communication intersects with digital platforms,

cultural norms, and institutional policies to shape students' mental health experiences in increasingly complex academic environments.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declare that there is no conflict of interest

REFERENCES

- Barry, M. M., Clarke, A. M., Jenkins, R., & Patel, V. (2013). Tinjauan sistematis efektivitas intervensi promosi kesehatan mental bagi remaja di negara berpendapatan rendah dan menengah. *BMC Public Health*, 13(1), 835. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-13-835>
- Biddle, L., Gunnell, D., Sharp, D., & Donovan, J. L. (2004). Faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi pencarian bantuan pada dewasa muda yang mengalami gangguan mental: Survei lintas sektoral. *British Journal of General Practice*, 54(501), 248–253.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Menggunakan analisis tematik dalam psikologi. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Corrigan, P. W., Druss, B. G., & Perlick, D. A. (2014). Dampak stigma gangguan mental terhadap pencarian dan partisipasi dalam layanan kesehatan mental. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 15(2), 37–70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100614531398>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Penelitian kualitatif dan desain riset: Memilih di antara lima pendekatan* (Edisi ke-4). Sage Publications.
- Eisenberg, D., Hunt, J., & Speer, N. (2013). Kesehatan mental di universitas-universitas Amerika: Variasi antar subkelompok mahasiswa dan antar kampus. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 201(1), 60–67. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NMD.0b013e31827ab077>
- Gibson, K., & Rivers, I. (2019). Berbicara tentang kesehatan mental: Komunikasi antar teman sebagai strategi dukungan. *Youth Studies Australia*, 38(1), 12–20.
- Gulliver, A., Griffiths, K. M., & Christensen, H. (2010). Hambatan dan pendukung perseptual terhadap pencarian bantuan kesehatan mental di kalangan remaja: Tinjauan sistematis. *BMC Psychiatry*, 10(1), 113. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-244X-10-113>
- Halili, S. H. (2019). Kemajuan teknologi dalam pendidikan 4.0. *The Online Journal of Distance Education and e-Learning*, 7(1), 63–69.
- Hunt, J., & Eisenberg, D. (2010). Masalah kesehatan mental dan perilaku mencari bantuan di kalangan mahasiswa. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 46(1), 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2009.08.008>
- Kitzrow, M. A. (2003). Kebutuhan kesehatan mental mahasiswa masa kini: Tantangan dan rekomendasi. *NASPA Journal*, 41(1), 167–181.
- Mukhlis, L. (2025a). A Phenomenological Study of Personal Spiritual Experiences in Navigating Religious Pluralism within Interfaith Communities. *Irfana: Journal of Religious Studies*, 1(6), 212–220.
- Mukhlis, L. (2025b). Spiritual Grounds for Economic Growth: A Qualitative Exploration of Rural Indonesian Women's Transformative Journeys Through Mosque-Led Empowerment Programs. *Servina: Jurnal Pengabdian Kepada Masyarakat*, 1(8), 289–298.
- Mukhlis, L., & Abdullah, M. N. (2025). *Hukum Keluarga Islam di Indonesia* (1st ed.). Mukhlisina Revolution Center.

- Mukhlis, L., Arifin, T., Ridwan, A. H., & Zulbaidah. (2024). Integrating Artificial Intelligence and Maqāṣid al-Syarī'ah: Revolutionizing Indonesia's Sharia Online Trading System. *Computer Fraud and Security*, 2024(11), 301–309. <https://doi.org/10.52710/cfs.238>
- Mukhlis, L., Arifin, T., Ridwan, A. H., & Zulbaidah. (2025). Reorientation of Sharia Stock Regulations: Integrating Taṣarrufāt al-Rasūl and Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah for Justice and Sustainability. *Journal of Information Systems Engineering and Management*, 10(10s), 58–66. <https://doi.org/10.52783/jisem.v10i10s.1341>
- Mukhlis, L., Arifin, T., Ridwan, A. H., Zulbaidah, Rosadi, A., & Solehudin, E. (2025). Reformulation of Islamic Stock Law: The Application of Taṣarrufāt al-Rasūl and Maqāṣid al-Syarī'ah to Develop a Dynamic and Sustainable Islamic Capital Market in Indonesia. *Journal of Posthumanism*, 5(3), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.63332/joph.v5i3.913>
- Mukhlis, L., Janwari, Y., & Syafe'i, R. (2023). INDONESIA STOCK EXCHANGE: THEORETICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF MUDHARABAH AND MUSYARAKAH CONTRACTS. *Yurisprudencia: Jurnal Hukum Ekonomi*, 9(2), 243–264. <https://doi.org/10.24952/yurisprudencia.v9i2.8466>
- Mukhlis, L., Maryam, S., & Sormin, S. A. (2023). Model Pembelajaran Living History Berbasis PjBL Untuk Meningkatkan Keterampilan Histografi Mahasiswa. *Jurnal Educatio FKIP UNMA*, 9(4), 1800–1809. <https://doi.org/10.31949/educatio.v9i4.5595>
- Mukhlis, L., & Saidah, Y. (2025). Dynamics of Nature-Based learning in Developing Children's Motoric Skills: Teacher and Parent Perspectives. *HUMANISMA: Journal of Gender Studies*, 9(1), 64–79. <http://dx.doi.org/10.30983/humanisme.v4i2.9366>
- Mukhlis, L., Suradi, Janwari, Y., & Syafe'i, R. (2023). Sosialisasi Saham Syariah sebagai Instrumen Pengembangan Ekonomi Masyarakat di Badan Kontak Majelis Taklim (BKMT) Kabupaten Mandailing Natal. *Jurnal Pengabdian Multidisiplin*, 3(2), 2–9. <https://doi.org/10.51214/japamul.v3i2.604>
- Naslund, J. A., Aschbrenner, K. A., Marsch, L. A., & Bartels, S. J. (2016). Masa depan perawatan kesehatan mental: Dukungan teman sebaya dan media sosial. *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences*, 25(2), 113–122. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796015001067>
- Reavley, N. J., & Jorm, A. F. (2011). Sikap stigmatis remaja terhadap penderita gangguan mental: Temuan dari survei nasional Australia. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 45(12), 1033–1039. <https://doi.org/10.3109/00048674.2011.621061>
- Rickwood, D., Deane, F. P., Wilson, C. J., & Ciarrochi, J. (2005). Upaya pencarian bantuan masalah kesehatan mental oleh remaja. *Australian e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health*, 4(3), 218–251. <https://doi.org/10.5172/jamh.4.3.218>
- World Health Organization. (2022). Kesehatan mental dan kesejahteraan mahasiswa universitas. <https://www.who.int/publications/studentmentalhealth>