

# PERCEIVED STIGMA, PROFESSIONAL BURNOUT, AND OPENNESS TO PSYCHOLOGICAL HELP AMONG REHABILITATION SPECIALIZATION STUDENTS

*Original Article*

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Professional burnout is increasingly recognized as a significant concern among healthcare students, particularly those specializing in rehabilitation sciences such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy, and speech-language pathology. The demanding academic workload and clinical responsibilities place these students at heightened risk for emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment. Additionally, perceived stigma surrounding mental health issues often discourages students from seeking psychological support, potentially exacerbating burnout and negatively impacting academic performance and future professional competence.

**Objective:** This study aimed to assess the relationship between perceived stigma, professional burnout, and openness to psychological help among rehabilitation specialization students in Lahore, Gujranwala, and Faisalabad.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional study was conducted after obtaining ethical approval from the relevant institutional review boards. A total of 300 rehabilitation specialization students were recruited using a non-probability convenience sampling technique from universities across the three cities. Inclusion criteria encompassed students enrolled in physiotherapy, occupational therapy, or speech-language pathology programs, while those with pre-existing diagnosed mental health conditions were excluded. Participants completed a self-administered questionnaire consisting of four sections: demographic information, the Perceived Stigma Scale, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), and the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (ATSPPH). A pilot study involving 30 participants confirmed the questionnaire's reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.78). Data were analyzed using SPSS version 24, with descriptive statistics applied to demographic data, Pearson's correlation for relationships between variables, and multiple regression analysis to identify predictors of help-seeking behavior.

**Results:** Among participants, 40.2% reported high levels of emotional exhaustion, 35.8% experienced moderate burnout, and 24.0% exhibited low burnout. Perceived stigma was prevalent in 56.3% of students, while 68.9% recognized the benefits of mental health services. Despite this awareness, only 21.4% had previously sought psychological help. A significant negative correlation was found between perceived stigma and openness to seeking psychological support ( $r = -0.482$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Additionally, burnout demonstrated a moderate positive correlation with stigma ( $r = 0.365$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ).

**Conclusion:** The study underscores the detrimental effect of perceived stigma on rehabilitation students' willingness to seek psychological help. Although awareness of mental health benefits was high, stigma remained a major barrier. Institutional support programs, stigma-reduction campaigns, and peer counseling initiatives are necessary to foster a more supportive academic environment and enhance mental well-being among students.

**Keywords:** Burnout, Cross-sectional studies, Mental health, Psychological help-seeking behavior, Rehabilitation students, Stigma, Student health services.

## INTRODUCTION

Rehabilitation sciences encompass diverse disciplines such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy, and speech-language pathology, all of which demand rigorous academic and clinical training. The intensity of these programs often places students at significant risk for professional burnout, a psychological syndrome marked by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment. This phenomenon is increasingly recognized as a serious concern within healthcare education, as it not only impairs academic performance but also contributes to long-term professional dissatisfaction and adverse mental health outcomes (1). Burnout among healthcare students can undermine the development of essential clinical skills, potentially compromising future patient care and professional growth. Compounding this issue is the pervasive stigma associated with mental health within the healthcare sector. Stigma, defined as negative societal attitudes that discourage individuals from acknowledging psychological distress, remains a barrier to seeking appropriate psychological support (2). Many healthcare students fear that admitting to mental health challenges could lead to perceptions of weakness or professional incompetence (3). This fear often fosters reluctance to seek psychological help, leading to prolonged periods of distress that negatively affect both academic achievements and clinical competence (4). The internalization of these stigmatizing attitudes can have a profound impact, reducing students' openness to psychological support even when it is urgently needed.

Despite growing awareness of mental health issues in educational settings, the interplay between perceived stigma, professional burnout, and openness to seeking psychological help remains underexplored in the context of rehabilitation specialization students, particularly within Pakistan. Previous research has predominantly focused on practicing healthcare professionals, leaving a significant gap in understanding the unique challenges faced by students undergoing intensive clinical training (5). Given the cultural and societal influences that shape mental health perceptions in Pakistan, there is a critical need to investigate how these factors collectively influence rehabilitation students' willingness to seek psychological support. This study seeks to address this gap by evaluating the relationships between perceived stigma, professional burnout, and openness to psychological help among rehabilitation specialization students in Lahore, Gujranwala, and Faisalabad. By identifying these associations, the research aims to inform the development of targeted interventions designed to foster mental well-being and support academic success in this vulnerable population. The objective of this study is to provide evidence-based insights that can contribute to the formulation of effective strategies for mitigating burnout, reducing stigma, and encouraging help-seeking behaviors among future rehabilitation professionals.

## METHODS

This cross-sectional study was conducted over four months in universities across Lahore, Gujranwala, and Faisalabad, aiming to investigate the relationship between perceived stigma, professional burnout, and openness to psychological help among rehabilitation specialization students. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) and ethical committees of the participating colleges and universities (reference number should be included if available). Prior to participation, all students provided informed consent after being briefed on the study's objectives, voluntary participation, and confidentiality measures (6). A total of 300 students were recruited using a non-probability convenience sampling method. Participants were eligible for inclusion if they were enrolled in physiotherapy, occupational therapy, or speech-language pathology programs at recognized institutions. Students with pre-existing diagnosed mental health conditions were excluded to maintain the focus on burnout and stigma experienced during the course of academic and clinical training, without the confounding effects of prior mental health diagnoses (7).

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire comprising four sections. The first section gathered demographic information, including age, gender, year of study, and program specialization. The second section employed the Perceived Stigma Scale, which measured participants' perceptions of mental health stigma within their academic and social environments. The third section utilized the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), a validated instrument designed to assess the three dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (1). The final section featured the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (ATSPPH), which evaluated students' openness and willingness to seek psychological support when needed (8). To ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted with 30 participants from similar academic backgrounds, resulting in a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.78, indicating acceptable internal consistency for the survey instruments (2). Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 24. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions, were applied to summarize demographic characteristics and key variables. Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated

to examine the relationships between perceived stigma, burnout, and openness to seeking psychological help. Furthermore, multiple regression analysis was used to identify predictive factors that influenced students’ willingness to seek psychological assistance, providing insights into the most significant contributors to help-seeking behavior (9). The methodology was designed to ensure robust data collection and analysis while adhering to ethical standards throughout the research process. A potential limitation of using non-probability convenience sampling is the reduced generalizability of the findings, as the sample may not be representative of the entire population of rehabilitation students in Pakistan. However, the study’s focus on specific academic cities and diverse rehabilitation disciplines aimed to provide a meaningful understanding of the targeted student population’s mental health challenges and coping mechanisms (10).

RESULTS

Among the 300 participants, the mean age was 22.8 years (SD = 2.31). In terms of burnout levels, 40.2% of students reported high emotional exhaustion, while 35.8% experienced moderate burnout, and 24.0% exhibited low burnout symptoms. These findings suggest a considerable prevalence of burnout, with nearly three-quarters of the participants experiencing moderate to high levels of professional fatigue. Regarding perceived stigma, 56.3% of students expressed significant concerns about societal judgment associated with seeking psychological help. Despite this, 68.9% of participants acknowledged the potential benefits of mental health services. However, only 21.4% had previously sought professional psychological help, indicating a notable gap between recognizing the importance of mental health support and actively seeking it. Correlation analyses revealed a significant negative relationship between perceived stigma and openness to psychological help ( $r = -0.482, p < 0.001$ ). This finding indicates that students with higher levels of perceived stigma were less likely to seek psychological support. Additionally, a moderate positive correlation was identified between burnout and perceived stigma ( $r = 0.365, p = 0.002$ ), suggesting that students experiencing higher burnout levels also reported increased feelings of stigma related to mental health help-seeking.

Table 1: Burnout Levels

Burnout Level	Percentage
High	40.2
Moderate	35.8
Low	24.0

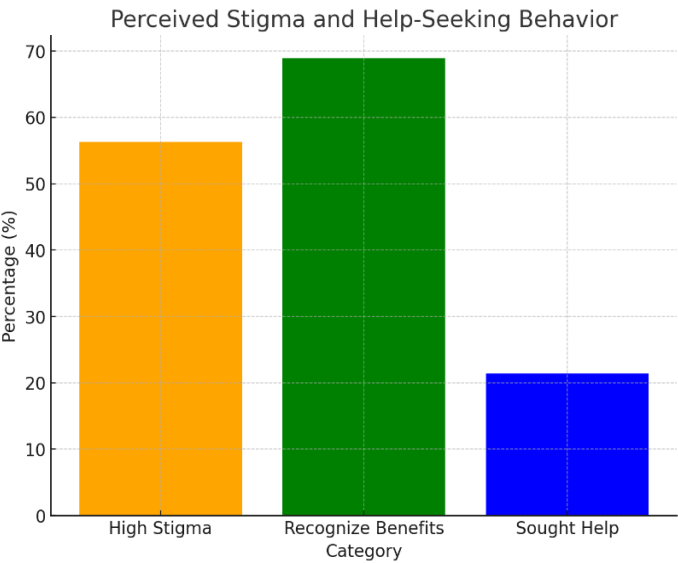


Figure 2 Perceived Stigma and Help Seeking Behavior

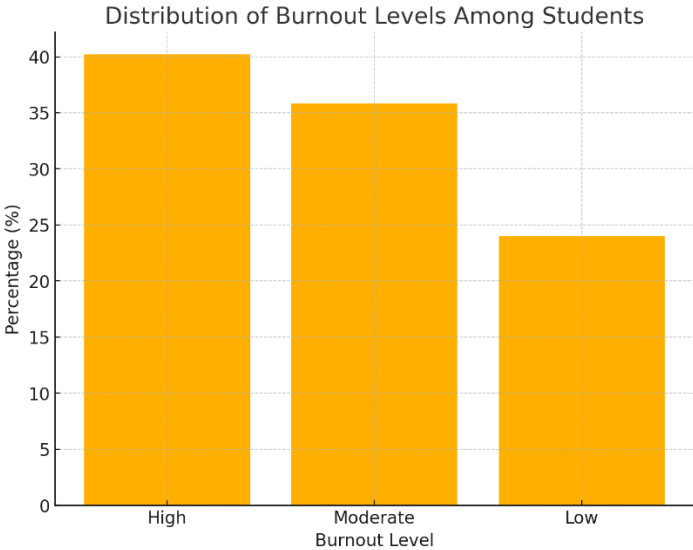


Figure 1 Distribution of Burnout Levels Among Students

**Table 2: Stigma and Help-Seeking**

Category	Percentage
High Stigma	56.3
Recognize Benefits	68.9
Sought Help	21.4

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the significant levels of professional burnout experienced by rehabilitation specialization students, reflecting patterns previously observed among healthcare students globally. The high prevalence of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization in this population aligns with earlier research suggesting that the demanding academic workload, coupled with extensive clinical training, places these students at heightened risk for burnout. This condition not only undermines academic performance but also has long-term implications for professional satisfaction and mental well-being, potentially affecting future clinical competence and patient care quality (11,12). Perceived stigma emerged as a substantial barrier to seeking psychological support, consistent with existing literature highlighting that healthcare students often internalize societal and professional expectations of resilience and emotional invulnerability. The negative correlation between perceived stigma and openness to psychological help observed in this study is in line with earlier findings, indicating that fears of being perceived as weak or professionally incompetent continue to dissuade students from accessing available mental health resources. This reluctance, despite an acknowledgment of the benefits of psychological support, reveals a persistent gap between awareness and action in seeking help (13,14).

The association between burnout and perceived stigma suggests a cyclical relationship where heightened burnout may intensify feelings of stigma, further reducing the likelihood of seeking professional assistance. This dynamic highlights the urgency of implementing institutional interventions aimed at reducing stigma while simultaneously addressing the underlying causes of burnout. Strategies such as integrating mental health education into academic curricula, facilitating peer support programs, and conducting stigma-reduction workshops could create a more supportive environment for students. Strengthening faculty involvement in mental health promotion and embedding counseling services within academic institutions may also improve accessibility and encourage early intervention (15). One of the key strengths of this study lies in its focus on rehabilitation specialization students in Pakistan, a group often overlooked in mental health research. By addressing a population with specific academic and clinical demands, the study adds valuable insights to the existing body of knowledge and sets the stage for more targeted interventions. Additionally, the use of validated measurement tools, such as the Maslach Burnout Inventory and the Perceived Stigma Scale, enhances the reliability of the findings (16,17).

However, the study is not without limitations. The use of a non-probability convenience sampling method restricts the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of rehabilitation students across Pakistan. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design prevents causal inferences between the variables, limiting the ability to determine whether stigma causes burnout or vice versa. Self-reported data may also introduce bias, as students might underreport psychological distress due to fear of judgment, despite assurances of confidentiality (18,19). Future research should aim to incorporate longitudinal designs to track changes in burnout and stigma over time, providing a clearer understanding of causal relationships. Expanding the sample size and including students from a wider range of institutions across different regions of Pakistan could enhance the generalizability of the results. Additionally, examining demographic factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, and academic year could offer more nuanced insights into how these variables influence burnout and help-seeking behaviors (20,21). Overall, this study highlights the pressing need for comprehensive institutional reforms aimed at fostering a mentally healthy learning environment for rehabilitation students. Addressing stigma, promoting mental health awareness, and ensuring easy access to psychological support are essential steps toward enhancing both academic performance and future professional competence.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights the complex relationship between perceived stigma, professional burnout, and openness to psychological help among rehabilitation specialization students in Lahore, Gujranwala, and Faisalabad. The findings emphasize the critical need for institutional efforts to reduce stigma and foster mental health awareness through structured support programs, creating an environment that prioritizes student well-being and academic success. Addressing these challenges through proactive interventions can not only enhance students' psychological resilience but also contribute to their professional growth and future competence in healthcare settings. Future research should focus on developing and evaluating long-term strategies that effectively mitigate burnout and encourage help-seeking behaviors, ultimately promoting a healthier and more supportive educational atmosphere.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author	Contribution
Seemal Amin <sup>1</sup>	Substantial Contribution to study design, analysis, acquisition of Data Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Muhammad Suleman Tahir	Substantial Contribution to study design, acquisition and interpretation of Data Critical Review and Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Maryum Khan	Substantial Contribution to acquisition and interpretation of Data Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Zarqa Sharif	Contributed to Data Collection and Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Kiran Haq	Contributed to Data Collection and Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Afifa	Substantial Contribution to study design and Data Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Hafiza Sana Ashraf*	Contributed to study concept and Data collection Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Azka Laraib	Writing - Review & Editing, Assistance with Data Curation

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