

The Mediating Role of Social Support in the Relationship Between Attitudes Toward Professional Psychological Help and Depressive Symptoms Among First-Year College Students

Xijie Zhang¹, Weiyang Dong¹, Jiahua Zheng², Haoyuan Zheng^{1*}

¹School of Teacher Education, Guangzhou Huashang College, Guangzhou, Guangdong, 510000 China

²Accounting School, Zhejiang University of Finance and Economics, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, 310018, China

ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether *social support* mediates the relationship between *attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help* and *depressive symptoms* among first-year college students. A total of $N = 337$ students completed measures of help-seeking attitudes, social support, and depressive symptoms. Results showed that help-seeking attitudes were positively associated with social support and negatively associated with depressive symptoms. Social support also negatively correlated with depressive symptoms and partially mediated the relationship between help-seeking attitudes and depressive symptoms (*indirect effect* = -0.06 , 95% CI [-0.11 , -0.02]). These findings highlight the importance of both positive help-seeking attitudes and social support in reducing depression among college students.

KEYWORDS

Depressive symptoms; Help-seeking attitudes; Social support; Mediation; College students

1 Introduction

Depressive symptoms have become a major mental health concern among first-year college students, a group uniquely challenged by the transition from high school to university. Depressive symptoms refer to persistent feelings of sadness, loss of interest, and diminished functioning, which can adversely affect students' academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and overall well-being. Evidence suggests that first-year students are particularly vulnerable to depression due to their need to adapt to new academic, social, and living environments (Dong & Li, 2020; Gao et al., 2025; Jamil & Su, 2025).

Attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help have been identified as a key factor influencing mental health outcomes in college populations. Attitudes toward help-seeking refer to individuals' beliefs, perceptions, and willingness to engage with mental health professionals when facing psychological difficulties. Positive help-seeking attitudes are associated with increased likelihood of accessing psychological resources and, consequently, better mental health (Kim, 2021; Nam et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2023). However, many students—especially first-year students—continue to exhibit stigma, mistrust, or reluctance toward seeking professional help, which may exacerbate depressive symptoms (Nam et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2023; Yu & Hu, 2022).

In addition to help-seeking attitudes, *social support* is widely recognized as a crucial protective factor in the context of mental health. Social support refers to the emotional, informational, and practical assistance received from one's social network, including family, friends, and peers. Prior research indicates that higher levels of social support are linked to lower levels of depressive symptoms, and that social support may also facilitate help-seeking behaviors by providing encouragement and reducing perceived barriers (Dong & Li, 2020; Gao et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2023; Yu & Hu, 2022).

According to the *Health Belief Model*, individual beliefs and environmental resources jointly shape health-related behaviors and outcomes. Building on this theoretical perspective, it is plausible that social support not only has a direct protective effect against depressive symptoms, but also mediates the association between help-seeking attitudes and depression (Rosenstock et al., 1988; Sullivan et al., 2020; Yu & Hu, 2022). However, the mechanisms through which professional help-seeking attitudes influence depressive symptoms—particularly the potential mediating role of social support—have received limited empirical attention, especially among first-year college students in China (Dong & Li, 2020; Gao et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2023).

Therefore, this study expands the current literature by examining whether social support mediates the relationship between attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help and depressive symptoms among first-year college students. By addressing this research gap, the study aims to provide new insights for both theory and practice in the promotion of student mental health.

* **Corresponding Author:** Haoyuan Zheng, alanzhengpsychology@gdhsc.edu.cn

2 Literature review

2.1 Depressive symptoms among first-year college students

Depressive symptoms are among the most commonly reported psychological problems in college populations, with first-year students identified as a particularly vulnerable group (Dong & Li, 2020; Jamil & Su, 2025; Noel et al., 2023). Epidemiological studies indicate that the prevalence of *depressive symptoms* among first-year college students is notably high, with rates ranging from 20% to 40% in various international and Chinese samples (Dong & Li, 2020; Sun & Li, 2025; Valerius et al., 2024). This elevated risk is often attributed to the substantial academic, social, and environmental adjustments required during the initial transition to university life (Jamil & Su, 2025; Noel et al., 2023; Sun & Li, 2025).

First-year students must adapt to new learning environments, establish peer relationships, and manage increased autonomy, all of which can contribute to increased stress and emotional difficulties. The negative impact of *depressive symptoms* in this population is well documented. *Depressive symptoms* are associated with reduced academic achievement, impaired social functioning, lower life satisfaction, and even increased risk for substance abuse and suicidal behaviors (Jamil & Su, 2025; Sun & Li, 2025; Valerius et al., 2024). Moreover, early-onset *depressive symptoms* may persist and develop into clinical depression if left unaddressed, underscoring the urgent need for early identification and intervention among first-year college students (Dong & Li, 2020; Jamil & Su, 2025). Given the potentially far-reaching consequences, understanding the prevalence and effects of *depressive symptoms* in this population is critical for both researchers and practitioners.

2.2 Attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help and depressive symptoms

Attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help refer to individuals' beliefs, perceptions, and willingness to seek assistance from mental health professionals when experiencing psychological distress. These attitudes are shaped by a variety of factors, including perceived stigma, beliefs about the effectiveness of therapy, cultural norms, and past experiences with mental health services. Positive attitudes toward help-seeking have been shown to increase the likelihood of utilizing professional psychological services and are consistently associated with lower levels of *depressive symptoms* among college students (Kim, 2021; Nam et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2023). Conversely, negative or ambivalent attitudes toward help-seeking can serve as significant barriers to accessing care and are linked to higher risk for persistent *depressive symptoms* (Nam et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2023; Yu & Hu, 2022).

The importance of help-seeking attitudes is particularly pronounced among first-year college students. During the transition to university, these students often encounter increased stress and emotional challenges, but may lack established support systems or familiarity with campus mental health resources. Studies indicate that first-year students are less likely to seek professional help for *depressive symptoms* compared to upper-year students, partly due to greater stigma, lack of knowledge, or reluctance to acknowledge mental health issues (Dong & Li, 2020; Wang et al., 2023; Yu & Hu, 2022). This reluctance can exacerbate *depressive symptoms* and hinder timely intervention. Given the strong empirical link between help-seeking attitudes and *depressive symptoms*, understanding the determinants and effects of help-seeking attitudes is essential for reducing depression and improving the well-being of first-year college students.

2.3 Social support and depressive symptoms

Social support is broadly defined as the emotional, informational, and practical assistance individuals receive from their social network, including family, friends, and peers. Social support can be categorized into subjective support (perceived emotional support), objective support (actual received assistance), and support utilization (the extent to which individuals make use of available resources). Extensive research has demonstrated that social support serves as a protective factor against *depressive symptoms* across different age groups and cultural contexts (Gao et al., 2025; Sullivan et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023).

The protective effects of social support on *depressive symptoms* are well documented among college students. Higher levels of perceived social support are consistently associated with lower levels of *depressive symptoms*, better emotional regulation, and greater resilience to stress (Dong & Li, 2020; Gao et al., 2025; Sullivan et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023; Yu & Hu, 2022). Social support not only provides emotional comfort but also offers practical guidance and tangible resources that can buffer the negative effects of stress and psychological challenges.

For first-year college students, social support is particularly important as they navigate new academic and social environments. Studies indicate that those with stronger social support networks are less likely to develop or sustain *depressive symptoms* during their first year of university (Dong & Li, 2020; Gao et al., 2025; Yu & Hu, 2022). Conversely, inadequate social support has been linked to higher risk of depression, social withdrawal, and poorer overall adjustment (Jamil & Su, 2025; Wang et al., 2023; Noel et al., 2023). Given these findings, enhancing social support has become a key target for interventions aimed at reducing *depressive symptoms* and promoting psychological well-being among first-year college students.

2.4 Attitudes toward seeking professional help, social support, and depressive symptoms: interrelationships and mechanisms

Recent research has increasingly emphasized the need to understand the complex interplay among attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help, social support, and *depressive symptoms*, especially among university students. Evidence suggests that positive attitudes toward help-seeking are not only directly associated with lower levels of *depressive symptoms*, but may also facilitate access to social support networks (Kim, 2021; Nam et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2023). Students who are more open to professional help are often more likely to disclose their difficulties, seek advice, and mobilize support from friends, family, and campus resources, thereby indirectly mitigating *depressive symptoms* (Kim, 2020; Wang et al., 2023; Yu & Hu, 2022).

At the same time, social support is widely recognized as a potential mediator in the relationship between help-seeking attitudes and depression (Sullivan et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023; Yu & Hu, 2022). The *Health Belief Model* posits that both individual beliefs (such as attitudes toward help-seeking) and environmental resources (such as social support) jointly influence health-related outcomes (Rosenstock et al., 1988). Several empirical studies have proposed that students with positive help-seeking attitudes tend to have better access to social support, which, in turn, reduces the risk of *depressive symptoms* (Kim, 2021; Wang et al., 2023; Yu & Hu, 2022). However, most existing research has focused on the direct effects of these variables, and relatively few studies have systematically tested the mediating role of social support, particularly among first-year college students in China (Dong & Li, 2020; Gao et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2023).

Given the unique challenges faced by first-year students, investigating these mechanisms is crucial for developing effective interventions. A better understanding of how help-seeking attitudes and social support jointly influence *depressive symptoms* can inform targeted mental health strategies and support services tailored to the needs of university freshmen.

2.5 The current study

Guided by the *Health Belief Model*, the present study examines the associations among attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help, social support, and *depressive symptoms* in first-year college students. Specifically, this study addresses three research questions: (1) Do attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help predict *depressive symptoms*? (2) What is the relationship between social support and *depressive symptoms*? (3) Does social support mediate the association between help-seeking attitudes and *depressive symptoms*?

It is hypothesized that (a) more positive help-seeking attitudes and (b) higher levels of social support will each be associated with lower *depressive symptoms*, and (c) social support will mediate the relationship between help-seeking attitudes and *depressive symptoms*.

3 Methods

3.1 Participants

A total of $N = 337$ first-year college students ($n = 40$ males, $n = 297$ females) participated in this study. Participants were recruited from a university in southern China. All participants provided informed consent and completed the survey anonymously and voluntarily.

3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help

Attitudes were assessed using the 29-item *Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale* (ATSPPH) developed by Fischer and Farina (1995). Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), with higher total scores indicating more positive help-seeking attitudes. The scale has demonstrated good reliability and validity in Chinese university student populations. In the present study, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.72$.

3.2.2 Social support

Social support was measured with the 14-item *Social Support Rating Scale* (SSRS), which assesses subjective support, objective support, and support utilization. This scale, compiled by Xiao Shuiyuan (1994), has been widely validated in Chinese populations. Higher scores indicate greater levels of perceived social support. In this study, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.76$.

3.2.3 Depressive symptoms

Depressive symptoms were measured using the 20-item *Self-Rating Depression Scale* (SDS) developed by Zung (1965). Each item was rated on a 4-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating more severe *depressive symptoms*. The SDS has been widely used in both Chinese and international studies. In this study, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$.

3.3 Procedure

Data were collected using an online survey platform (*Wenjuanxing*). Participants were provided with information about the study, and their confidentiality and anonymity were ensured. The survey took approximately 15–20 minutes to complete.

3.4 Data analysis

Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson correlation analysis, and mediation analysis were conducted using SPSS 26.0 and the *PROCESS* macro (Model 4). The indirect effect of social support was tested using bootstrapping procedures (5,000 samples) with 95% confidence intervals (CIs).

4 Results

4.1 Descriptive statistics and correlations

Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients for the main variables are presented in Table 1. The mean (*M*) and standard deviation (*SD*) for attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help were $M = 101.83$ ($SD = 8.37$), for social support were $M = 37.30$ ($SD = 6.79$), and for depressive symptoms were $M = 48.96$ ($SD = 9.78$).

Attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help were positively correlated with social support ($r = 0.16$, $p < 0.01$), and both variables were negatively correlated with depressive symptoms ($r = -0.21$, $p < 0.01$ for attitudes; $r = -0.37$, $p < 0.01$ for social support).

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables ($N = 337$)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Help	101.83	8.37	1		
2. Social Support	37.30	6.79	0.16**	1	
3. Depressive Symptoms	48.96	9.78	0.21**	0.37**	1

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

4.2 Mediation analysis

A mediation analysis was conducted using the *PROCESS* macro (Model 4) to examine whether social support mediated the relationship between attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help and depressive symptoms.

As shown in Table 2 and Figure 1, attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help significantly predicted social support ($\beta = 0.13$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = 0.004$), and social support significantly predicted depressive symptoms ($\beta = -0.50$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.001$).

The direct effect of attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help on depressive symptoms remained significant ($\beta = -0.18$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = 0.003$), while the indirect effect through social support was also significant (indirect effect = -0.06 , 95% CI $[-0.11, -0.02]$).

These results indicate that social support partially mediated the relationship between attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help and depressive symptoms among first-year college students.

Table 2 Mediation model: predicting depressive symptoms

Pathway	β	SE	95% CI
Attitudes $\rightarrow$ Social Support	0.13*	0.04	
Social Support $\rightarrow$ Depressive Symptoms	-0.50***	0.07	
Attitudes $\rightarrow$ Depressive Symptoms (Direct)	-0.18**	0.06	
Attitudes $\rightarrow$ Depressive Symptoms (Total)	-0.24***	0.06	
Indirect Effect ($a \times b$)	-0.06*		$[-0.11, -0.02]$

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

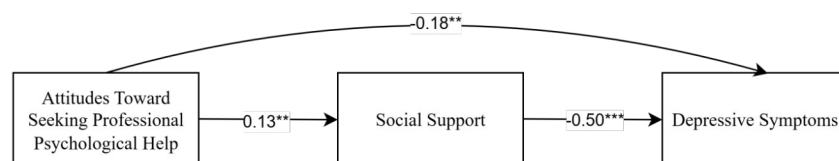


Figure 1 Mediation model of social support in the relationship between attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help and depressive symptoms

Note. Path coefficients are standardized. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

5 Discussion

The present study aimed to examine whether social support mediates the relationship between attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help and *depressive symptoms* among first-year college students. Three primary findings emerged. First, more positive attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help were associated with higher levels of social support. Second, both positive help-seeking attitudes and social support were associated with lower levels of *depressive symptoms*. Third, social support was found to partially mediate the relationship between help-seeking attitudes and *depressive symptoms*.

5.1 Contribution of help-seeking attitudes to social support

The results showed that students who held more positive attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help reported higher levels of perceived social support. This suggests that individuals who are psychologically open to seeking help are also more likely to engage with, access, and utilize support from their social environments, including friends, family members, and institutional resources. This finding extends previous literature by demonstrating that personal help-seeking attitudes not only facilitate individual help-seeking behaviors, but also strengthen one's broader social support network within the college context (Kim, 2021; Nam et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2023). Such an effect may foster a culture of mutual support and openness within university communities.

5.2 Protective effects of social support and help-seeking attitudes on depressive symptoms

Consistent with the *Health Belief Model* (Rosenstock et al., 1988) and existing research, both positive attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help and greater social support were associated with lower levels of *depressive symptoms* (Dong & Li, 2020; Gao et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2023). This highlights the dual protective function of these factors, underscoring the importance of targeting both psychological attitudes and social resources in university mental health interventions. Interventions that seek to enhance students' openness to professional help, while simultaneously promoting robust social networks, may be especially effective in reducing depression and supporting the mental well-being of first-year students.

5.3 Mediation role of social support

The mediation analysis revealed that social support partially mediated the relationship between attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help and *depressive symptoms*. In other words, students with more positive attitudes toward seeking help not only experience lower levels of depression directly, but also benefit indirectly through enhanced social support (Dong & Li, 2020; Gao et al., 2025; Kim, 2021; Wang et al., 2023). This finding supports theoretical models positing that social resources are key mechanisms through which psychological attitudes influence mental health outcomes and points to the value of interventions that simultaneously address both individual attitudes and social environmental factors (Gao et al., 2025; Sullivan et al., 2020; Yu & Hu, 2022).

5.4 Limitations, future directions, and implications

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the sample was predominantly female, which may restrict the generalizability of findings to other gender groups or more balanced populations (Nam et al., 2010). Second, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causality among variables. Third, reliance on self-report measures raises the possibility of bias, such as social desirability effects. Additionally, the study was conducted in a single cultural and academic context—first-year college students in China—which may not reflect experiences in other settings.

Future research should recruit more diverse samples, including a balance of genders and students from multiple universities or regions. Longitudinal or experimental studies are recommended to clarify causal relationships (Jamil & Su, 2025; Noel et al., 2023). Utilizing multiple assessment methods, such as peer reports or behavioral observations, could also help address limitations related to self-report data. Moreover, further research might examine whether other sources of support, such as online or community-based networks, play similar mediating roles.

Theoretically, these findings highlight the importance of integrating both individual psychological factors and social environmental resources in understanding and addressing *depressive symptoms* among college students. Practically, the results suggest that university mental health interventions should aim to cultivate both positive attitudes toward help-seeking and strong support networks. Such dual-focused strategies may be particularly effective in promoting psychological well-being and reducing depression among first-year college students.

6 Conclusion

In summary, this study demonstrates the important roles of help-seeking attitudes and social support in reducing *depressive symptoms* among first-year college students. By identifying social support as a partial mediator, the findings provide new insight into the mechanisms linking psychological readiness to seek help and student mental health. These

results have important theoretical implications for understanding the interplay of individual and social factors in mental health, and practical implications for designing campus interventions. Programs that foster positive help-seeking attitudes and build supportive social environments may be especially effective in promoting psychological well-being in college populations.

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