

**EXPLORING STUDENT PERCEPTIONS ON MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT IN
SECONDARY SCHOOLS, THE ROLE OF COUNSELING SERVICES AND THE
POTENTIAL FOR ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE INTEGRATION: A CASE OF
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ABSTRACT

Mental health challenges, such as anxiety, depression, and stress, are increasingly recognized as significant barriers to academic success and overall well-being among secondary school students, including those at Hartzell High School. These issues affect students' academic performance, social development, and personal growth. Despite rising awareness, Hartzell faces challenges in addressing these concerns due to limited resources, high teacher-to-student ratios, and societal stigma. This study aims to explore student perceptions of the current counseling services at Hartzell High School, assess their effectiveness, and examine how AI could enhance these services. Through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with ICT teachers, counseling staff, and students, the research will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of existing support systems and explore the potential role of AI in complementing traditional counseling methods. This study used a phenomenological research design to explore students' and educators' perceptions of mental health support in secondary schools, focusing on the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to improve counseling services. The findings revealed widespread dissatisfaction with the existing counseling services. Students reported that the support they received often lacked emotional depth and was not tailored to their individual needs. Concerns about confidentiality and trust emerged as major deterrents for seeking assistance. As a result, some students resorted to maladaptive coping strategies, including substance abuse. Teachers identified common mental health challenges among students, such as depression, academic stress, and trauma, and highlighted systemic barriers, such as limited access to technological resources that hindered the effectiveness of the support systems. Although students recognized the potential benefits of AI tools, such as chatbots and mental health apps, they emphasized a preference for systems that exhibited emotional intelligence, user-friendliness, and personalization. While students acknowledged AI's potential role in supporting mental health, they stressed that AI should complement, rather than replace, human intervention, particularly in severe cases of mental distress. Mental health support at Hartzell High School faces challenges related to resource limitations, a shortage of professional counselors, and concerns regarding confidentiality. Nevertheless, both students and teachers recognize the value of AI in supporting mental health, particularly in enhancing privacy and convenience.

KEYWORDS: *Artificial Intelligence, mental health, students, secondary school, support.***INTRODUCTION**

Mental health challenges among secondary school students are increasingly recognized as a significant barrier to academic success and overall well-being. In Zimbabwe, these challenges are becoming more pronounced, with anxiety, depression, and stress reported as common issues affecting students. Factors such as limited access to mental health resources, inadequate counseling services, large teacher-to-student ratios, and the pervasive stigma surrounding mental health

contribute to the difficulty in addressing these concerns effectively. The stigma, particularly, hinders students from seeking help and disclosing their mental health issues, which can worsen their conditions and impact their academic performance.^[1,2] At Hartzell High School, a secondary school in Zimbabwe, mental health difficulties among students have emerged as a growing concern. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these issues, with students reporting increased levels of stress, anxiety, and feelings of

isolation, all of which contribute to a decline in academic performance and personal well-being.^[3] Despite the rising need for mental health support, the school, like many others in Zimbabwe, lacks sufficient counseling services and resources to meet the needs of all students. Additionally, the lack of awareness and understanding of mental health issues often results in reluctance to seek help due to fear of judgment and social stigma.^[4] In this context, Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, such as mental health chatbots and virtual therapy applications, offer promising solutions to bridge the gap in mental health support for secondary school students. AI interventions can provide personalized, stigma-free, and easily accessible mental health resources, offering immediate assistance and interventions at the point of need.^[5] For instance, AI-driven platforms can assist in the early detection of mental health issues by monitoring students' behaviors and emotions, providing tailored cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) techniques, and guiding them toward appropriate support resources.^[6] However, while the use of AI in mental health interventions has seen success in higher education settings, its application in secondary schools, particularly in Zimbabwe, remains underexplored.^[7]

The Ministry of Health and Child Care, alongside UNICEF in 2023, reported an increase in mental health-related morbidity and mortality in Zimbabwe, with anxiety disorders affecting a significant portion of the population. These mental health issues, especially in adolescents, are often linked to academic pressure, social expectations, and lack of adequate coping mechanisms.^[8] By incorporating AI-based tools into the education system, Hartzell High School could offer a more effective and scalable solution to support student mental health. AI tools could enhance existing counseling services by providing real-time, confidential support, overcoming barriers related to stigma and access to traditional counseling services.^[9] This study aims to explore the perceptions of secondary school students at Hartzell High School regarding the mental health support services available to them, including their attitudes towards the existing counseling services and the potential for integrating AI-based interventions. By examining students' perspectives on AI-driven mental health tools and assessing the feasibility of their implementation, this research will provide valuable insights into the potential for AI to enhance mental health support in secondary education settings. Moreover, this study seeks to identify challenges and barriers to integrating AI in schools, including ethical considerations such as confidentiality and trust^[10,11], as well as the effectiveness of AI interventions in addressing the unique mental health challenges faced by secondary school students in Zimbabwe.

The findings of this study will contribute to the growing body of literature on mental health in secondary schools and provide evidence-based recommendations for future mental health strategies in Zimbabwean schools.

Additionally, it will inform the development of policies and practices for integrating AI into the school environment, helping to address the mental health crisis among adolescents in Zimbabwe.^[12-22]

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Research Design

This study utilized a phenomenological research design to explore students' and educators' perceptions regarding mental health support in secondary schools, specifically focusing on the potential integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to enhance existing counseling services. The phenomenological approach was chosen as it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' subjective experiences and how they make sense of their environment, particularly in relation to mental health support.^[23] The researchers aimed to gather insights into how students perceive current mental health services and how AI might address gaps in these services. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with both students and educators, providing a comprehensive understanding of the needs, challenges, and opportunities in integrating AI for mental health support.^[24] To achieve a deeper understanding of the research topic, a combination of focus group discussions and in-depth interviews was utilized. These qualitative data collection methods are highly effective in capturing detailed personal experiences and opinions, particularly when exploring sensitive issues like mental health.^[25] The study used open-ended interview guides and focus group discussion guides to allow participants to express their views freely.^[26] Focus groups were categorized by grade levels (Form 1 to Form 6) to capture variations in perceptions based on age and educational experience. Additionally, separate FGDs were conducted for guidance and counseling teachers and computer science teachers to explore their views on integrating AI into the mental health support system. Each group comprised 6 to 10 participants, fostering dynamic discussions while ensuring each participant's voice was heard. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached, meaning no new information or themes emerged from further discussions or interviews.^[27]

Study Setting

Hartzell High School, located in Mutasa District, Manicaland, Zimbabwe, is a distinguished United Methodist Mission Boarding School, renowned for its longstanding reputation for academic excellence.^[28] The institution has been committed to providing a comprehensive and supportive educational environment for many years, positioning itself as one of the leading schools in the region.^[29] The student body is notably diverse, representing a broad spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds, which enhances the school community and fosters an inclusive, dynamic atmosphere.^[30] Hartzell High offers both boarding and day-school options, providing students with the flexibility to choose an educational setting that best suits their personal and academic needs. This flexibility

accommodates a variety of lifestyles, allowing students to thrive in an environment that nurtures both academic achievement and personal growth.^[31] The school's emphasis on creating a well-rounded learning experience ensures that students not only excel academically but also develop socially and emotionally, promoting overall well-being.^[32] The school's infrastructure includes purpose-built classroom blocks for each grade level, facilitating an organized and efficient learning environment that supports the institution's mission of academic excellence while fostering holistic student development.^[33] In addition to its academic strengths, Hartzell High places significant emphasis on the well-being and personal development of its students. This dual focus on academic achievement and emotional growth makes it an ideal setting for examining student perceptions of mental health support.^[34] The diversity within the student population creates an insightful context for examining varied mental health experiences. This diversity allows for a more detailed understanding of how different student groups engage with and perceive mental health resources, offering important perspectives on their specific needs and challenges.^[30] As such, Hartzell High provides an excellent setting for examining mental health support in secondary schools, especially in relation to how diverse student populations engage with and benefit from these services.^[35]

Population and Sample

The primary participants of this study were secondary school students from Hartzell High School. To ensure a diverse representation of students from various academic backgrounds, stratified sampling was used. This technique ensured inclusion of students from different grade levels (Form 1 to Form 6) as well as students from different educational settings (boarding vs. day school). Additionally, teachers from the guidance and counseling department, as well as computer science teachers, were included in the sample. These educators were selected based on their roles in providing or facilitating mental health support or their potential involvement in the integration of AI technologies within the schools' existing frameworks. The coordinators at the school assisted in selecting participants based on these criteria.

Data Collection

To achieve a deeper understanding of the research topic, a combination of focus group discussions and in-depth interviews was utilized. These qualitative data collection methods are highly effective in capturing detailed personal experiences and opinions, particularly when exploring sensitive issues like mental health.^[37] The study used open-ended interview guides and focus group discussion guides to allow participants to express their views freely. Focus groups were categorized by grade levels (Form 1 to Form 6) to capture variations in perceptions based on age and educational experience. Additionally, separate FGDs were conducted for guidance and counseling teachers and computer science teachers to explore their views on integrating AI into the

mental health support system. Each group comprised 6 to 10 participants, fostering dynamic discussions while ensuring each participant's voice was heard. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached, meaning no new information or themes emerged from further discussions or interviews.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data gathered from the interviews and focus group discussions were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is particularly effective for identifying recurring themes and patterns across qualitative data, thus making it ideal for analyzing open-ended responses and focus group discussions.^[37] The analysis process involved transcribing the data and translating responses from Shona (a local language) into English to ensure accuracy and clarity.^[38] Thematic analysis was employed to identify common issues, experiences, and attitudes expressed by students and teachers regarding mental health support and the potential for AI interventions. Themes were organized into categories, such as current mental health support systems, perceptions of AI integration, and challenges to implementation.^[39] This approach allowed the researchers to draw meaningful conclusions from the diverse perspectives of the participants.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the research, particularly involving minors, ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the study. Ethical guidelines were strictly followed to ensure the protection of participants' rights, privacy, and well-being.^[23] The research received approval from the relevant Ethics Review Board (AUREC), and permission was obtained from the school authorities at Hartzell High School before data collection commenced.^[40] Informed consent was obtained from both the participants and their guardians or parents, ensuring that all individuals understood the research process, potential risks, and their rights to confidentiality and voluntary participation.^[6,41] All personal data were handled with the utmost care, and participants' identities were protected throughout the study. The researchers took special care to minimize any potential psychological harm, ensuring that participants felt comfortable sharing their views and experiences regarding mental health support.^[6]

Findings

Teacher Understanding of Mental Health at Hartzell High School

At Hartzell High School, teachers exhibit a profound and multifaceted understanding of the mental health challenges that students face, recognizing the substantial impact these issues have on academic performance and overall well-being. Educators acknowledge that emotional and psychological struggles are not only common among students but also significant barriers to their success in school and beyond. One counseling teacher explained:

"Some students struggle with emotional management, and we classify this as a mental health issue."

This statement reflects a broader consensus among staff at Hartzell High that emotional regulation difficulties are not simply transient behaviors or isolated incidents, but important mental health concerns that require professional attention and care. Many teachers echoed this perspective, highlighting the importance of early identification and intervention to address mental health issues before they escalate. As one teacher emphasized:

"If we catch it early, we can provide support that helps students cope, and this can prevent a lot of future struggles."

This focus on early detection aligns with the school's proactive approach to mental health, where educators aim to prevent long-term negative outcomes by identifying potential issues as soon as they arise. Recognizing the importance of timely intervention, the teachers at Hartzell High have adopted structured models and strategies to help them spot early warning signs of mental health concerns.

A widely used tool at Hartzell High for identifying mental health challenges is the **BeSD (Behavioral, Emotional, and Social Development)** model. This diagnostic tool helps teachers detect changes in student behavior that may signal underlying emotional or psychological difficulties. One teacher explained:

"We observe deviations in behavior, such as isolation, withdrawal, or agitation. When we notice these signs, we use the BeSD model to assess whether there might be a mental health issue developing."

By leveraging the BeSD model, teachers can more effectively monitor shifts in students' behavior, allowing them to identify when a student may need additional support or intervention. This proactive approach allows teachers to provide timely assistance before issues intensify, ultimately fostering a healthier and more supportive school environment.

However, the teachers at Hartzell High recognize that identifying mental health concerns involves more than just recognizing behavioral shifts. They emphasize the importance of distinguishing between short-term emotional regulation issues and deeper psychological disorders, such as anxiety, depression, and trauma, which can have far-reaching effects on a student's life. One teacher shared:

"We need to be careful when interpreting emotional outbursts. While they may seem like a natural part of adolescence, sometimes they are indicators of deeper psychological struggles like anxiety or trauma."

This nuanced understanding demonstrates the teachers' sensitivity to the complexity of mental health issues. They appreciate that students may face underlying psychological challenges that are not always

immediately visible through behavior alone. As another teacher put it:

"We try not to jump to conclusions. Emotional outbursts may indicate that something more serious is at play. That's why we take the time to differentiate between a bad day and something that might need professional attention."

Such careful observation and assessment ensure that the support provided to students is tailored to the specific nature and severity of their issues, fostering a supportive environment that promotes both academic and emotional success.

The teachers' commitment to mental health extends beyond academic performance and encompasses a holistic approach to student well-being. As one teacher explained:

"By addressing mental health early, we help students not only in their studies but also in managing their emotional and social lives. It's about building resilience, helping them navigate life's challenges, and giving them the tools to succeed in every part of life."

This holistic approach underscores the value placed on the individual needs of each student, ensuring that mental health is not treated as a one-size-fits-all issue. Teachers at Hartzell High are trained to recognize the complex interplay of emotional, behavioral, and social factors that contribute to mental health struggles. Their individualized approach reflects the school's commitment to both academic success and emotional well-being.

The teachers at Hartzell High School exhibit an empathetic, informed, and proactive approach to mental health, using tools like the BeSD model and prioritizing early identification and intervention. Their commitment to supporting students' mental health is integrated into their broader educational philosophy, ensuring that students not only thrive academically but also receive the care and attention they need to manage their emotional and psychological challenges.

Student Understanding of Mental Health at Hartzell High School

While teachers at Hartzell High School demonstrate a robust understanding of the mental health challenges students face, the students' understanding of mental health is more varied and often shaped by personal experiences, cultural beliefs, and the level of awareness within the school community. In contrast to the teachers' focused and structured approach to identifying and addressing mental health concerns, students' views on mental health often reflect a mix of confusion, stigma, and emerging awareness.

Many students acknowledge the importance of mental health but do so in terms that are less nuanced than those

of their teachers. For instance, a Form 4 student mentioned:

"I know mental health is important, but sometimes we don't talk about it much. People just call it stress or 'being upset,' not realizing it could be something deeper."

This suggests that students often associate mental health challenges with more superficial emotions, such as stress or temporary sadness, without recognizing the complexities of issues like anxiety, depression, or trauma. Another student, reflecting on their own struggles, stated:

"Sometimes I feel overwhelmed, but I don't know if that's mental health or just me being tired. I don't think many students even know what mental health really is."

This points to a gap in students' understanding of the signs and symptoms of mental health disorders, as well as a lack of familiarity with the deeper psychological issues that can impact academic and personal life.

However, some students expressed a growing awareness, particularly as discussions around mental health become more prevalent in society and education. A Form 6 student explained:

"I've heard more about mental health lately, especially in our school. It's not just about being sad or angry anymore, it's also about what's happening inside. I think some of us don't know how to ask for help."

This suggests that while awareness of mental health is slowly increasing among students, many still struggle with how to approach the topic or recognize when they or their peers may need professional support.

Students also described challenges in how mental health is perceived within the school community. One Form 5 student noted:

"We're told to just focus on schoolwork, and if you get stressed, that's just part of life. Sometimes it feels like mental health isn't taken seriously until someone has a big breakdown."

This quote highlights the stigma that can still surround mental health issues among students, where struggles may be dismissed or minimized until they escalate into more visible crises. It contrasts with teachers' more proactive stance on early identification and intervention.

Another student shared their frustration with the lack of understanding among peers:

"If you're anxious about exams, people just say you're weak. They don't understand it could be something bigger than just 'nerves.' That's why some of us don't talk about it."

This reflects the common stigma surrounding mental health among students, where emotional struggles are

often downplayed or misunderstood, leading to reluctance in seeking help.

In contrast, a small group of students expressed the need for more education about mental health, indicating a desire for greater awareness and support. A Form 6 student suggested:

"I think we need to learn more about mental health, maybe even in class. It would help us understand ourselves and our friends better. Sometimes we don't know how to handle what others are going through."

This reflects an emerging recognition among students of the need for more structured mental health education, which could bridge the gap between the students' limited understanding and the teachers' more developed awareness.

Common Mental Health Issues Identified

The teachers identified a variety of mental health concerns that frequently affect students at Hartzell High. These challenges range from emotional regulation issues to more complex psychological disorders. The most commonly observed mental health issues include depression, stress from academic pressure post traumatic stress disorders. Students exhibiting symptoms such as withdrawal, apathy, and a lack of motivation toward school work were frequently noted. Teachers recognized that these behaviors were indicative of underlying mental health struggles, often pointing to depression. Many students experience high levels of stress and anxiety due to academic demands, leading to mental exhaustion and burnout. Teachers reported that academic pressure is a significant contributor to student mental health issues, particularly in higher-grade levels. A considerable number of students at Hartzell High are dealing with trauma, whether due to the loss of parents, physical abuse, or domestic violence. One teacher commented:

"Trauma from home life deeply affects students' ability to engage in class and can lead to emotional instability."

The teachers emphasized that trauma significantly impairs a student's ability to focus and participate in school activities, affecting their overall academic performance and social interactions.

Some students diagnosed with bipolar disorder experience significant challenges related to attendance, academic performance, and emotional consistency. Teachers noted that these students often struggle to maintain consistent engagement with schoolwork and extracurricular activities.

In addition to these psychological issues, teachers pointed out that cultural and spiritual beliefs are sometimes seen as underlying causes of mental health struggles. Some students' experiences and expressions of mental health issues may be influenced by their cultural context, which teachers noted should be considered when

providing support. A teacher remarked on this intersection:

"Cultural and spiritual beliefs can sometimes influence how students present and cope with their mental health struggles. It's important to consider both psychological and cultural factors when offering support."

This highlights the need for a culturally sensitive approach to mental health care, one that takes into account the diverse backgrounds of students in order to offer more effective support.

Frequency of Occurrence of Mental Health Issues

The findings from the focus group at Hartzell High School reveal a troubling trend of chronic stress among students, with around 70% of participants reporting frequent feelings of being "stressed" or "overwhelmed." This high prevalence of stress among students is not unique to Hartzell High; it mirrors a broader pattern seen in both global and regional research, especially in Southern Africa, where high stress levels among adolescents are consistently observed. In particular, the academic demands placed on students in the African setting have been identified as a key factor contributing to these elevated stress levels. Moreover, many of these students are often viewed as the potential means of salvation for their families, offering a way out of socio-economic hardship.

At Hartzell High, academic pressures were overwhelmingly identified as the primary source of stress. One student captured the experience succinctly, saying,

"The workload is non-stop. There's always a new assignment or exam to worry about. It feels like I'm never really at ease."

This sentiment reflects the everyday struggles students face in managing the constant influx of academic responsibilities. Such comments are not isolated but part of a broader narrative that links the demanding nature of secondary education to increasing levels of stress among students.

In the wider context, these findings underscore the profound effects that academic pressure has not only on students' mental health but also on their academic performance and overall well-being. Many students report feeling overwhelmed by the constant pressure to perform, which in turn impacts their ability to engage with their studies effectively. These stressors create a cycle where the pressure to succeed academically leads to mental exhaustion, which further hampers students' academic outcomes. The overwhelming nature of the academic environment, with its persistent deadlines, exams, and assignments, contributes significantly to the mental and emotional strain experienced by students. As the demands of education continue to escalate, it becomes increasingly clear that the academic environment itself plays a critical role in shaping

students' stress levels. The growing body of evidence suggests that addressing the root causes of academic stress, including the overwhelming workload and lack of adequate support, is crucial to improving both students' mental health and their ability to thrive academically.

Perceived Quality of Current Counseling Services

Students at Hartzell High School voiced considerable concerns about the perceived inadequacy of the school's counseling services, expressing dissatisfaction with the emotional support they received. Many students characterized the counseling sessions as superficial and limited in scope, often offering general advice that failed to address their specific emotional or psychological challenges. One student commented:

"The counseling feels like pep talks. They tell us we're not the first to face these problems and that we won't die, but it doesn't feel like real support."

This sentiment of superficial care was echoed by several students, underscoring a widespread feeling of dissatisfaction with the lack of individualized attention and emotional engagement. Students expressed frustration that the counseling offered by the school did not provide the personal depth or relevance needed to address their unique situations. As one student explained: *"It's not that they don't try, but it just feels like they say the same thing to everyone. We need someone who actually listens to us and gets where we're coming from."*

This feedback highlights a significant gap between students' expectations of emotional support and the generic support they feel they are receiving. Students emphasized the need for more personalized attention, where their emotional experiences could be addressed with greater sensitivity and understanding.

A further point of dissatisfaction stemmed from the perception that counselors, who are often drawn from the teaching staff, struggled to meet students' mental health needs due to their competing responsibilities. Many students felt that teachers, who are primarily responsible for academic duties, were unable to dedicate the time or focus required to adequately support students' emotional well-being. One student remarked:

"We really need professional counselors who are not part of the teaching staff. Teachers have other duties, and counseling isn't their main focus. We need someone who is just there to help with our mental health."

This view was widely shared, with students advocating for specialized mental health professionals who could devote their full attention to addressing the psychological needs of students. They felt that bringing in external, qualified counselors would allow for more focused, in-depth support. One student stated:

"It would be so much better if we had someone who is dedicated to mental health, not a teacher who's got a full timetable of classes to teach."

Students also conveyed a sense of discomfort and lack of trust in the current system, with some expressing that they felt more at ease speaking with individuals who were not directly tied to the school's teaching staff. As one student shared:

"We even feel better to have you guys here and talk as we feel better talking to someone who is not related to any of the teaching staff, and it feels relieving."

This comment reveals a deeper issue of mistrust in the counseling system at Hartzell High, where students appear more willing to open up to external researchers or professionals who are not embedded in the school's academic structure. This highlights a significant disconnect between students' needs for emotional support and the existing school-based counseling services. Many students voiced concerns that the system, as it currently stands, is inadequate in addressing their mental health needs and that significant changes are required to create a more supportive environment.

The desire for greater trust, privacy, and focused attention from qualified professionals was a central theme across the feedback. Students suggested that structural changes, such as introducing dedicated mental health professionals, could improve their overall well-being and academic success. This feedback aligns with broader research that underscores the importance of having specialized mental health professionals who are separate from the school's teaching staff. One student concluded:

"If the school really cared about our mental health, they'd bring in people who can actually help, not just tell us we'll be okay."

This collective desire for a more responsive and individualized approach to mental health support at Hartzell High School indicates a pressing need for reform in how counseling services are structured and delivered. Students are calling for a more specialized, professional approach that recognizes the complexities of mental health and provides the tailored care that each student requires.

Concerns about the traditional Counselling mechanisms

Confidentiality and Trust Issues

Confidentiality emerged as a major concern among students at Hartzell High School, with many expressing fears of breaches of trust within the counseling process. A key issue for students was the perception that teachers were not respecting the privacy of students' personal matters. One student shared:

"The teachers act all friendly when the parents are here, but once they leave, they gossip about our personal problems among themselves. It breaks our trust. It's unethical."

This sentiment was echoed by others, who voiced a deep sense of betrayal when their personal issues were discussed openly by teachers. One student revealed:

"I was afraid to talk to anyone about my problems because I overheard teachers discussing students' personal issues. It made me feel like there was no privacy and that I'd be judged or labeled."

Such concerns about confidentiality were widespread, with students fearing that their struggles would be shared without their consent. Another student expressed:

"I heard teachers gossiping about students' personal struggles, and that made me nervous. I don't want people to think I'm weak or have problems."

For some students, these concerns were so significant that they chose to handle their mental health privately rather than confide in teachers. This lack of trust created a barrier that deterred students from seeking the help they needed. One student explained:

"I just don't feel safe talking to anyone here. If they can't respect privacy, how can I trust them with something as serious as my mental health?"

The violation of confidentiality not only undermined students' trust in the counseling services but also contributed to feelings of disillusionment with the entire support system. Many students felt that the school's counseling services were not equipped to offer the necessary level of privacy and trust essential for effective support. One student commented:

"I would rather keep my problems to myself than risk someone telling others about them. It's just not worth it to talk to someone who can't keep things private."

This perception of compromised confidentiality significantly impacted the willingness of students to engage with the counseling services, and in some cases, caused them to seek other avenues for support. This lack of trust in the confidentiality of the system mirrors broader research that highlights the critical importance of maintaining confidentiality in counseling and how violations can hinder therapeutic outcomes. Students' reluctance to engage with the counselors also reflected a broader issue in school counseling, where breaches of trust have been shown to negatively affect the efficacy of support services.

The lack of professionalism, particularly during parent visitation days, further compounded these concerns. Some students felt that the counselors put on a false show of compassion when parents were present but offered little genuine support afterward. One student described:

"When my parents were here, the counselors acted like they cared, but when it was just us, it was a different story. They just told me to deal with it. It felt fake, like they were only doing it because they had to."

This inconsistency between appearances and actual behavior created an environment of distrust, with students questioning the sincerity of the counseling staff. One student remarked:

"It's like they're just doing the bare minimum when the parents are around, but once they leave, it's like we don't matter anymore."

This gap between what students expected and the reality of their interactions with counselors contributed to a sense of disillusionment and detachment from the counseling services. These concerns align with documented challenges in educational settings, where the lack of professional integrity can undermine students' faith in the support system and make them reluctant to seek help.

Punitive Responses from Counseling Teachers

In addition to issues surrounding confidentiality, some students reported feeling belittled or punished when attempting to seek help from counselors. Rather than receiving the support they expected, students described being criticized or dismissed, which further undermined their trust in the counseling system. One student shared:

"Some of the teachers punish us when we come to them for help. Instead of offering advice or correction, they just make us feel worse."

Such punitive responses were particularly damaging, as they not only discouraged students from seeking help but also reinforced feelings of shame and self-doubt. One student recalled a particularly dismissive interaction:

"I went to talk to one of the teachers about stress, and they just laughed. They said, 'What do you know about stress? You're just a child.' It made me feel like my problems didn't matter."

This type of response has been shown to contribute to student disengagement and reluctance to reach out for help. When students feel belittled or invalidated by those in positions of authority, it discourages them from seeking support in the future. Another student explained:

"When teachers act like my problems aren't important, it makes me feel like I'm just overreacting. It stops me from going to them when I really need help."

These dismissive and punitive responses are damaging, as they create an environment where students feel unsafe and unsupported in discussing their mental health challenges. Such interactions are well-documented in research, which indicates that negative, belittling responses in school counseling settings can exacerbate mental health struggles and deter students from engaging with support services.

Confidentiality concerns, a lack of professionalism, and punitive responses all contributed to students' mistrust in the counseling services at Hartzell High School. These issues not only diminished the effectiveness of the mental health support available but also perpetuated a

cycle of disengagement and emotional distress among students. There is a clear need for structural changes to ensure that students feel heard, respected, and supported when seeking help for their mental health challenges.

Teacher-to-Student Ratio and Counseling Services: A Detailed Analysis

One of the most pressing concerns highlighted by teachers was the inadequate teacher-to-student ratio within the counseling services. Currently, each counselor is responsible for approximately nine students, a ratio that is significantly higher than ideal. This overburdened system has led to increased strain on counselors, as they are forced to manage large caseloads without sufficient time or resources to offer the individualized attention each student requires.

One counseling teacher shared their frustration, stating: "The sheer number of students we are expected to assist means we are often juggling multiple urgent cases at once. While we try our best to support everyone, it's impossible to offer the kind of personalized, in-depth care every student deserves."

The lack of one-on-one time with students is particularly concerning for those facing significant emotional, psychological, or academic challenges. With limited time, counselors are unable to fully address the deeper issues many students face, such as trauma, anxiety, or depression, which require a sustained and focused approach. This limitation in providing individualized care is compounded by an increasing demand for counseling services, as more students are seeking help for a wide range of mental health issues.

A different counselor, who preferred to remain anonymous, emphasized the emotional toll this situation is taking on both the staff and students: "When a student walks into my office with a problem that needs immediate attention, I don't always have the time to help them as fully as I would like. And I can see the frustration in their eyes when we have to rush through their session or schedule them for another time. It's heartbreaking."

In addition to the emotional strain on counselors, the impact on the students is becoming more visible. Teachers reported that students are less likely to seek help when they feel that counselors are too busy to offer timely support. One teacher explained, "Many of my students express reluctance to visit the counselor, knowing that they may have to wait for a long time or might not receive the individualized care they need in the limited time they have."

Teachers and staff members alike are advocating for a solution to this growing problem. There is a strong call for an increase in counseling staff to lower the counselor-to-student ratio. This would allow counselors to spend more time with each student, building deeper, more

effective relationships and providing more personalized mental health support. According to one teacher: "More counselors would not only ease the workload on the existing staff but also ensure that every student has the opportunity to access the resources they need. Mental health is just as critical as academic support, and we need to prioritize it to ensure that no student is left behind."

The need for better access to mental health resources is not only a matter of efficiency but of ensuring that students are receiving the necessary emotional support to thrive. Teachers and counselors agree that more staffing is essential for creating a school environment where students feel supported both academically and emotionally. Without it, the gap between the growing need for mental health services and the ability to provide adequate care will continue to widen, putting both students and staff under increasing pressure.

Factors Exacerbating Mental Health Challenges Academic Pressures

Among the various stressors identified by students at Hartzell High School, academic pressures were consistently ranked as the most significant. Students expressed feeling overwhelmed by the relentless demands to perform at high levels, and the burden of meeting these expectations often resulted in frustration, exhaustion, and emotional depletion. As one student shared:

"It's exhausting trying to meet expectations all the time. There's always more to do, and I don't know how to manage it all."

This sentiment was echoed across multiple discussions, highlighting the pervasive stress that many students feel as they navigate a continuous cycle of exams, assignments, and deadlines. For some, these pressures contribute to feelings of inadequacy and escalating anxiety. One student revealed:

"No matter how hard I try, it always feels like there's more to do. The pressure just keeps building up, and it feels like it's never enough."

The weight of academic life, combined with the desire to meet expectations, creates a high-stress environment that impacts students' emotional health. Many participants shared that the fear of failure, coupled with unrealistic standards from teachers and parents, only intensified their anxiety. As one student explained:

"I feel like I'm always under a microscope, constantly worrying that if I don't perform well, everything will fall apart."

These academic pressures extend beyond the classroom, reaching into external factors like standardized testing, societal expectations, and familial demands. The constant drive to succeed academically often leads students to associate their worth with their grades, further compounding their stress. The pressure to excel is especially pronounced in environments where students

are confronted with high-stakes national exams, creating a sense of overwhelming burden. Many students articulated a deep sense of stress as they grappled with the challenge of balancing academic demands with personal lives, often feeling trapped in a cycle of never-ending expectations.

Interpersonal Relationships

In addition to academic pressures, students also identified interpersonal relationships as a significant source of stress. Peer relationships and social dynamics are a crucial aspect of adolescence, often creating an additional layer of anxiety as students navigate the complexities of fitting in, managing friendships, and meeting social expectations. One student confessed:

"My friends' opinions constantly stress me out. I worry if I'm saying or doing the right things, and it distracts me from focusing on schoolwork."

This concern was not unique to one individual but reflected the experiences of many students who felt pressure to be accepted and avoid social exclusion. Adolescents, in particular, are highly influenced by the opinions of their peers, and the desire for social acceptance often overshadows academic priorities. For some, the fear of judgment or rejection from their friends can result in a constant cycle of worry. One student explained:

"I'm always trying to figure out if I'm saying the right things or acting in the right way. It's like I can't relax because I'm always concerned about how others perceive me."

The complexities of peer pressure, social comparison, and the inherent need for acceptance can distract students from their academic responsibilities, exacerbating the stress they already feel. The pressure to maintain friendships, avoid conflict, and meet peer expectations creates emotional strain, which many students struggle to manage. In regions such as Southern Africa, students face the additional challenge of balancing traditional family values with modern social influences, which can heighten social anxiety and add another layer of stress. As one student shared:

"It's difficult because I feel like I'm torn between what my family expects and what my friends think is cool. I just want to fit in, but it's hard when I'm not sure which side to be on."

Family Dynamics

Family-related stress was also a prominent factor that emerged in the focus group discussions. Many students shared that turbulent home environments, characterized by conflict or instability, hindered their ability to focus on academics and manage their emotions. One student remarked:

"Home life is chaotic. It's hard to focus at school when there's constant arguing and negativity at home."

For many, the emotional toll of difficult family situations followed them into the classroom, making it nearly impossible to concentrate on assignments or maintain emotional equilibrium. Some students described feeling emotionally drained or distracted as they navigated the complexities of home life. One participant explained:

"I try to study, but it's hard when there's always fighting at home. I can't focus because all I think about is how things are at home."

This disconnect between home life and academic performance underscores the role that family dynamics play in exacerbating mental health challenges. Students who experience instability at homewhether due to family conflict, economic hardship, or parental strugglesare often at a disadvantage in terms of emotional well-being and academic achievement. One student remarked:

"I have to worry about things at home, and it feels like I don't get any space to just focus on school. It's hard to care about assignments when there's so much going on at home."

In regions like Southern Africa, where political instability, economic challenges, and family breakdowns are more common, these stressors are particularly pronounced. Students from such backgrounds often carry additional burdens, where financial struggles and home instability create an environment where emotional and mental health issues can persist unchecked. As one student shared:

"When things are tough at home, it's hard to care about school. My parents are struggling, and it's hard not to get caught up in their problems."

Technological Pressures and Social Media

The growing influence of technology and social media has also contributed to students' mental health challenges. Although technology offers various benefits, its pervasive presence in students' lives can sometimes exacerbate stress, especially regarding the pressure to maintain an idealized online presence. Many students shared how the constant barrage of perfect images and curated lifestyles on social media contributed to feelings of inadequacy. One student commented:

"I'm always checking social media, and it just makes me feel like I'm not doing enough or not good enough. Everyone seems to be living their best life, and I feel like I'm falling behind."

The need to compare oneself to peers online can create an unhealthy cycle of self-doubt and anxiety. The pressure to present an idealized version of oneself often leads to heightened emotional strain, particularly for those already struggling with self-esteem. Another student explained:

"It's like I'm constantly comparing myself to others. I see how happy everyone else seems, and it just makes me feel like I'm not measuring up."

This constant engagement with social media platforms can make it harder for students to disconnect from external pressures, and the emotional toll of online interactions can spill over into their real lives.

School Environment and Support Systems

The overall school environment and the support structures in place also contribute to the mental health challenges students face. Many students expressed a sense of being overlooked or unsupported, particularly when it came to addressing emotional or psychological needs. One student shared:

"I don't feel like anyone at school really gets what I'm going through. I try to talk to my teachers, but they're too busy or just don't seem to care."

This lack of emotional support at school often leads to students feeling isolated, which exacerbates their mental health struggles. The absence of personalized guidance or emotional support further compounds the challenges they face. As one student described:

"I feel like I'm just another face in the crowd. No one really listens, and it makes everything harder."

A lack of access to adequate counseling services or support systems leaves many students without the resources needed to cope with their stress. This highlights the importance of creating an environment that fosters emotional well-being alongside academic success.

Health-Related Concerns

Physical health issues also contribute to the mental health challenges students face at Hartzell High School. Students who experience chronic illness, sleep deprivation, or poor nutrition are often at a higher risk for developing mental health problems. One student shared:

"I'm always tired, and it's hard to concentrate in class. I don't think people realize how much lack of sleep affects how I feel every day."

When students' physical health is compromised, it often has a direct impact on their mental well-being. Insufficient sleep and poor nutrition contribute to mood swings, increased anxiety, and difficulty coping with stress, making it even harder for students to keep up with academic demands.

Help-Seeking Tendencies

A key finding from the focus group discussions was the significant reluctance among students to seek professional mental health support. Only a small portionaround 30%of students reported having accessed mental health services, while the remaining 70% expressed varying degrees of hesitation and discomfort in doing so. This widespread reluctance was largely attributed to concerns over privacy and the stigma attached to mental health issues. Students overwhelmingly cited fears of being judged or labeled as

"weak" or "different" if they sought help, which reinforced their hesitancy to approach school counselors or mental health professionals. One student summed up these feelings, saying:

"I'd never talk to anyone about my problems here. People would think I'm just making excuses, and I don't want anyone to look at me like I'm weak."

This reluctance to seek help is not unique to this study, as similar patterns have been observed in other settings. Particularly in Southern Africa, where mental health awareness remains low, stigma around mental health is pervasive and often discourages young people from reaching out for support. One student highlighted how their previous experiences made it difficult to trust others with their personal struggles:

"I overheard teachers talking about other students' problems, and it really made me hesitate to talk to anyone about my own. If they can talk about other people's struggles, I'm scared they might talk about mine too."

This situation underscores a critical barrier to help-seeking: confidentiality and trust. Students feel that their personal information may not be kept secure or private, which discourages them from engaging with available mental health services. This finding reveals how critical it is for schools to create an environment where students can feel safe and assured that their privacy will be respected. As another student shared:

"If I need help, I wouldn't know where to go because I don't trust that anyone would keep my issues private. I hear too many stories of people talking behind others' backs."

The Stigma of Mental Health

The pervasive stigma surrounding mental health was another dominant theme that emerged in the focus group. Many students expressed a deep fear of being labeled as mentally unwell or seen as vulnerable. One student shared their reluctance to discuss mental health, saying:

"I don't want to be seen as weak or different. I just keep it to myself instead."

This sentiment was echoed by several others, all of whom noted that the fear of being judged or ostracized by their peers outweighed their desire for support. The stigma surrounding mental health issues often leads students to internalize their struggles and suffer in silence, believing that reaching out for help would make them stand out in a negative way. This social pressure is particularly intense in communities where mental health issues are still viewed with suspicion or misunderstanding.

Addressing this stigma is crucial for creating an environment where students feel comfortable seeking help. Efforts to reduce the stigma of mental health within school settings are essential in fostering a culture where students are not only aware of the resources available to

them but also feel safe using those resources without fear of judgment or discrimination. In the words of one participant:

"It would be easier to get help if people didn't think that asking for help meant you were crazy or something."

These statements emphasize the need for a school-wide initiative to normalize discussions about mental health and promote awareness, which could lead to greater acceptance of mental health care as an important part of overall well-being.

Coping Mechanisms Among Students: Strategies and Consequences in the Face of Mental Health Challenges

In the absence of adequate mental health resources, students often find themselves turning to a variety of coping mechanisms in an attempt to manage the overwhelming stress they experience. These strategies include emotional release, avoidance, technology distractions, and, in more extreme cases, substance abuse. While these coping mechanisms may provide temporary relief, many fail to address the underlying sources of stress, leaving emotional challenges unresolved and sometimes even exacerbating the issue in the long term.

Emotional Release: A Short-Term Escape

For some students, emotional release, particularly through crying, serves as a brief outlet for the tension they feel. As one student shared,

"Sometimes when the pressure gets too much, I just cry. It helps me feel a little better afterward."

This form of emotional release, while offering temporary relief, does not solve the core problems causing the distress. It allows students to discharge some of their emotional tension, but it does little to address the root causes of their anxiety or stress. As one participant explained,

"Crying helps for a little while, but the stress doesn't go away. I know I need more help than that."

While this may provide a sense of release in the moment, it does not lead to lasting emotional healing and may even delay more constructive coping strategies.

Avoidance: A Barrier to Emotional Growth

Avoidance is another common coping strategy employed by students when faced with difficult emotions or overwhelming stress. Many students spoke about their tendency to push aside their problems rather than confront them. One student expressed,

"When I can't handle things, I just try to forget about them. Ignoring the issue feels easier than confronting it."

This avoidance mechanism may offer short-term emotional relief, but it comes at a cost. Over time, this strategy can prevent students from learning how to

confront and deal with their emotional difficulties in healthier, more productive ways. As one participant shared,

"I've tried to forget things for so long, and now it feels like I don't know how to deal with anything when it gets tough."

This avoidance not only prevents growth but also leaves students vulnerable to prolonged emotional struggles, as unaddressed issues can resurface later, often in more intense forms.

Technology Distractions: Escaping Reality

In today's digital age, many students turn to technology as a means of distraction from their stressors. Video games, social media, and other online platforms offer a temporary escape from the pressures of school and life. One student shared,

"I play games to escape. It's my way of avoiding everything that stresses me out."

While technology can provide a short-term break from reality, excessive engagement with digital distractions can have detrimental effects on students' mental health.

"Sometimes I play for hours without even realizing it," one student confessed, noting how easy it is to become consumed by virtual worlds.

While this escape might momentarily alleviate feelings of stress, it can also foster a cycle of avoidance, further distancing students from real-life challenges and solutions. This overreliance on technology can delay the development of effective coping mechanisms and may contribute to increased anxiety, isolation, and other mental health struggles.

Extreme Coping Mechanisms: Substance Abuse as a Last Resort

When adequate mental health support is unavailable, some students resort to extreme coping mechanisms, such as substance abuse, as a means to manage their emotional pain. One student disclosed,

"We find ways to sneak drugs into the school, like hiding them in water bottles or getting someone from outside to bring them in. We know it's wrong, but we feel like we have no other choice."

This troubling statement reflects a growing trend where students turn to substances as a way of self-medicating their emotional distress. Desperation drives some to risk their health and future to manage their mental state, often with dire consequences. One student recounted a painful experience of a peer who began using substances to cope with their emotional struggles, leading to a downward spiral that included dropping out of school and worsening mental health.

"They just couldn't cope anymore," the student said, highlighting the dangers of relying on such harmful coping strategies.

Without sufficient mental health resources, the lack of healthier coping alternatives can push students toward high-risk behaviors that only deepen their emotional struggles and limit their opportunities for recovery.

Rebellious Responses to Broken Trust: Defying Authority as a Coping Mechanism

In addition to the more conventional coping strategies, some students respond to negative experiences with counselors or other school authority figures by engaging in rebellious or disruptive behaviors. This is often the result of broken trust, where students feel that those in positions of support have failed them. As one student explained,

"It wasn't that we wanted to rebel, but after the teachers broke our trust, we didn't know what else to do."

This rebellion is not born out of pure defiance, but rather a reaction to feeling unsupported and betrayed by those who are supposed to help. When trust in authority figures is damaged, students may turn to maladaptive behaviors, such as skipping classes, defiance, or disengagement, as a way to express their frustration and reclaim some sense of control.

"I just stopped going to counseling because I felt like they weren't listening," one student recalled.

This feeling of abandonment can lead to disengagement from school altogether, further isolating students and hindering their emotional and academic progress.

Mental Health Support in Schools: The Integration of Traditional Counseling and AI Technologies

Traditional counseling services in secondary schools have long been considered vital for fostering students' emotional well-being and academic success. School counselors have played an essential role in guiding students through the emotional and academic pressures they face during adolescence. As one participant, a Form 3 student, noted,

"Counseling is important, but sometimes it feels like it's only available when you have a major problem. AI could help detect when students are struggling before it gets to that point, making it easier for everyone to get help when they need it."

This concern underscores a major issue within many educational systems: students often do not seek mental health support until they are already in crisis. The limited accessibility to timely and proactive counseling exacerbates emotional distress, preventing students from receiving necessary help before their challenges escalate.

Many students expressed a desire for more proactive mental health strategies, highlighting the potential role of

artificial intelligence (AI) in bridging the gap. Through monitoring behavioral patterns, analyzing communication cues, and assessing emotional states, AI could provide early interventions by flagging students who might be at risk. One Form 6 participant elaborated on the value of AI tools in this context:

"AI could provide counselors with real-time data that shows how a student is coping. This would allow counselors to offer more tailored support and track progress over time."

This sentiment reflects the growing interest in AI as a means of offering more personalized mental health interventions. By supplementing traditional counseling, AI could help counselors better understand their students' emotional states and tailor their approaches to individual needs.

The integration of AI in mental health support has shown promising potential in making support more timely, accessible, and personalized. AI-powered tools such as chatbots and mental health apps are increasingly being used to provide immediate emotional support and guidance. Approximately 40% of students reported using these tools for both academic and emotional support. For many students, the appeal of AI tools lies in their privacy and convenience. One student shared,

"Talking to a chatbot feels safer than speaking to a teacher. I can say whatever I'm feeling without worrying about judgment or gossip."

This perspective underscores the growing recognition that AI tools can serve as non-judgmental, anonymous platforms where students can discuss their feelings and concerns without fear of stigma. The ability to access emotional support at any time also adds a level of convenience that traditional counseling services may struggle to provide.

However, despite these advantages, students also recognized that AI cannot replace human intervention for more significant mental health issues. As one student put it,

"For smaller problems, I'm fine using AI, but for something serious, I'd still need to talk to a person."

This is a crucial distinction, as AI tools can provide temporary relief during moments of acute stress, but they fall short in offering the emotional depth and empathy that a human counselor can provide. AI tools have a role to play in mental health support, but their limitations must be acknowledged. Many students stressed the importance of human interaction for dealing with more complex emotional or psychological concerns, emphasizing that AI should be seen as a supplementary tool, not a replacement for human support.

Moreover, while AI tools are valued for their convenience and privacy, students noted that they often lack the emotional intelligence needed to effectively

address their emotional needs. One participant explained,

"AI is helpful, but it doesn't provide emotional support. We need 'Human AI' that can listen and respond like a person would."

This feedback suggests a key limitation in current AI systems: their inability to replicate the nuanced, empathetic responses of a human being. As AI technology continues to evolve, there is a growing call for more emotionally intelligent systems that can better understand and respond to students' emotional states.

Several students proposed potential improvements to existing AI tools, such as incorporating voice and video responses. One student suggested,

"It would be great if AI could respond like Siri, but with more emotional intelligence. I'd prefer video responses, not just text."

This proposal reflects a broader trend in AI development toward creating systems that can engage users more naturally and authentically, mimicking the experience of interacting with a human being. The addition of voice and video capabilities could make AI interactions feel more personal, improving the emotional connection between students and technology. Such advancements could also help foster a more supportive and engaging environment for students seeking emotional support.

Another important concern raised by students was the complexity of language used by AI systems. One student remarked,

"The AI uses complex English, which is difficult to understand. It would be better if it were simpler."

This feedback highlights the need for AI tools to be more accessible, particularly for students experiencing emotional distress. Simplified language, user-friendly interfaces, and clear communication are essential to ensuring that AI tools are effective in educational settings. By adopting these improvements, AI could become a more effective supplement to traditional mental health support, helping students navigate their emotional challenges more easily and with greater clarity.

Ethical and Practical Considerations of AI in Mental Health Support

While the potential for integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI) into school counseling offers a transformative opportunity for supporting students' mental health, it also introduces a range of ethical and practical concerns that require careful consideration. These concerns primarily center around issues of privacy, bias, dependency, and the broader implications of relying on technology for emotional well-being.

One of the most significant concerns raised by students is the issue of privacy. A Form 5 participant articulated this worry by stating,

"I think AI could be useful, but I worry about privacy. Would the AI have access to all my personal information? I wouldn't want it to be misused or shared without my consent."

This anxiety is not isolated; it reflects a much larger, ongoing debate about the ethics of using AI in mental health care, especially in school environments where the data of minors is involved. Students are understandably hesitant to trust AI systems with sensitive, personal information, particularly in a context where their emotional vulnerabilities might be exposed.

Another student raised a concern about potential data breaches, stating,

"What if someone hacks into the system and steals my personal data? I wouldn't feel safe anymore."

This highlights the critical importance of ensuring robust security measures when implementing AI in schools. It is essential that AI systems designed for mental health support adhere to the highest standards of data protection, ensuring that any information collected is kept confidential, securely stored, and used only for the intended purpose. Without these safeguards, students may feel exposed and unsafe, potentially hindering their willingness to engage with AI-driven tools altogether.

Algorithmic Bias: Fairness and Inclusivity in AI Systems

Equally concerning is the potential for algorithmic bias, which could undermine the fairness and effectiveness of AI systems. AI relies on vast amounts of data to generate responses and recommendations, but if the data is not balanced or is misrepresented, there is a risk that AI could unintentionally perpetuate existing societal biases.

"What if the AI can't understand my specific situation? I feel like it might be more useful for other people, but not for someone like me," one student expressed.

This concern underscores the need for AI systems that are not only accurate but also capable of recognizing and accommodating the diverse needs of all students. For example, AI tools must be programmed to understand the varied cultural, social, and emotional contexts that different students may face. A failure to do so could lead to marginalized groups feeling ignored or misunderstood.

Transparency and Autonomy in AI Design

Moreover, there is a growing call to design AI tools that are transparent and maintain a student's autonomy. It's not enough to simply collect data; students must be informed about how their data is being used and given the power to control the level of access.

"We should have the choice to decide if we want to share personal information or not. It would make me feel more in control," one participant emphasized.

Clear communication regarding the purpose and limitations of AI is vital for building trust. Transparency about how AI operates and what data is collected will not only ensure students feel secure but also reinforce their confidence in the technology. The principle of informed consent must guide the development of these systems, as students should feel empowered to engage with AI only on their own terms.

Cognitive Engagement and Emotional Dependency on AI

In addition to concerns over privacy and fairness, students have expressed anxiety about the impact of AI on their cognitive engagement and academic integrity. While AI can be a valuable tool for managing stress and academic challenges, many students worry that an over-reliance on these systems may encourage intellectual laziness.

"AI can encourage laziness. If we rely too much on AI for help, we might stop thinking for ourselves and lose our cognitive skills," one student remarked.

This fear is particularly relevant in educational settings, where the emphasis on developing critical thinking and problem-solving abilities is paramount. AI tools can make academic tasks easier or provide emotional support during difficult moments, but students may become overly dependent, undermining their ability to think critically and work through challenges independently.

Another participant echoed this concern, saying,

"It's easy to let AI do all the work for you, but you're not really learning anything that way."

The potential for students to lean too heavily on AI for solutions or emotional relief could lead to a decline in their own cognitive development, making it harder for them to develop the essential skills needed for future success. While AI can serve as a supplementary resource, it must not replace personal effort or independent thinking. As one student noted,

"I'd like to use AI for some help when I'm stuck, but I still want to figure things out on my own." This sentiment emphasizes that AI should enhance, rather than replace, a student's own engagement with their learning and emotional well-being.

Furthermore, there is a fear that students may become desensitized to human support, especially in the realm of emotional well-being. AI tools, while providing immediate, anonymous, and non-judgmental support, cannot replicate the empathy, understanding, and complex emotional responses that human counselors offer. Students may begin to see AI as a quick fix to their emotional struggles, bypassing the deeper, more

meaningful conversations that could take place with a trained counselor.

"I like that AI is always there, but I also feel like it might not understand me as well as a real person," one student commented.

The balance between technology and human support is essential to ensure that students do not lose out on the rich, nuanced guidance that human counselors are able to offer.

DISCUSSION

The findings from Hartzell High School provide a nuanced understanding of mental health dynamics among students, highlighting a significant disconnect between educators' and students' perceptions and engagements. Teachers at Hartzell display an in-depth grasp of mental health challenges, recognizing emotional and psychological issues as significant barriers to students' academic and personal success. Utilizing the Behavioral, Emotional, and Social Development (BeSD) model, educators are proactive in early identification and intervention strategies to assess emotional needs. This aligns with existing research emphasizing that early detection can markedly enhance student outcomes.^[42] Furthermore, teachers differentiate between transient emotional responses and more severe psychological disorders, reflecting recent studies that emphasize the need for a comprehensive understanding of emotional dysregulation.^[43] Contrastingly, students often have a fragmented and oversimplified view of mental health, reducing it to terms like "stress" or "being upset," without a deeper comprehension of complex conditions such as anxiety or depression. This aligns with literature indicating that adolescents frequently lack an awareness of the extensive range of mental health issues due to societal stigma and insufficient education.^[13,44]

The communication gap regarding mental health is exacerbated by language barriers and a lack of mental health literacy within the school system.^[46] Students at Hartzell expressed a clear desire for enhanced mental health education, advocating for its incorporation into the curriculum, which supports calls for integrating mental health literacy that can empower students to articulate and seek help for their emotional struggles.^[45] The mental health challenges identified by teachers such as depression, academic stress, trauma, and emotional dysregulation are representative of stressors faced by adolescents more broadly. Research consistently shows that academic pressure is a significant contributor to increased stress and anxiety among students.^[47] The fact that 70% of students at Hartzell reported feeling overwhelmed mirrors findings from Southern Africa, affirming the correlation between academic stress and heightened mental health issues.^[48,49]

In addition, acknowledging trauma as a critical factor affecting emotional well-being resonates with recent

studies emphasizing that home life profoundly influences adolescents' mental health trajectories.^[11] Despite teachers' efforts in recognition and intervention, students at Hartzell reported dissatisfaction with available counseling services, feeling they were superficial and did not address their deeper emotional needs. This aligns with broader research indicating that students often perceive school-based counseling as inadequate.^[50] Concerns regarding confidentiality deter students from seeking help, as they fear breaches of trust or unprofessional behavior from staff. This concern is corroborated by Kafka^[6], who highlights the importance of confidentiality in therapeutic relationships. Stigma surrounding mental health issues continues to be a substantial barrier to help-seeking among students, consistent with Vogel^[52], emphasizing the need for normalization in mental health discussions and education.

The coping mechanisms adopted by students' emotional release and avoidance underscore the need for more effective intervention strategies. Although emotional release may temporarily alleviate distress, it does not target the root causes of emotional turmoil. Literature indicates that maladaptive coping strategies often exacerbate mental health issues instead of alleviating them.^[52] The widespread prevalence of such coping strategies at Hartzell highlights deficiencies in access to effective mental health resources and stresses the importance of comprehensive, school-based emotional support structures.

As educational institutions explore integrating artificial intelligence (AI) in mental health support, students at Hartzell expressed both optimism and skepticism. While AI could facilitate early detection of distress and provide non-judgmental support, concerns about privacy, algorithmic bias, and the emotional limitations of AI reveal the necessity of human counselors in addressing complex emotional needs.^[4,12] This aligns with broader ethical debates surrounding AI in mental health care, as experts caution against solely relying on technology to meet emotional demands.^[10]

The findings from Hartzell High School elucidate the intricacies of adolescent mental health in educational contexts, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach in safeguarding students' emotional and psychological well-being. Bridging the understanding gap between educators and students, enhancing mental health education, and improving counseling services are vital steps toward enhancing mental health outcomes. Thoughtful integration of AI technology alongside robust human-centered support systems can offer innovative solutions supporting existing counseling frameworks. By prioritizing mental health literacy, early detection, and impactful interventions, educational institutions can foster environments conducive to both academic success and mental well-being for all students.

CONCLUSION

The experiences and insights from Hartzell High School resonate with broader research on adolescent mental health, underscoring the need for improved education, better support services, and an integrated approach to mental health care within schools. Incorporating structured mental health education, early detection methods, enhanced counseling, and responsible technology use can cultivate supportive environments conducive to students' emotional and academic growth. Addressing the challenges highlighted in this study is essential for educational institutions globally to enhance their mental health frameworks and better support the increasingly complex emotional landscapes of students.

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