

## Communication process in order to maintain mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic among Indonesian students

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**Abstract:** This research was conducted to analyze in depth about the communication process that started with the psychological (mental) symptoms that arise during the pandemic, communication partners, ideal communication approaches, and messages that are conveyed in order to maintain mental health of students in Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a qualitative approach with the case study method, this research is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the researched problem. Researchers paid attention and examined an issue of interest, and used a single case as an instrument to describe it in detail. Results of this research showed that students are at a high risk for mental health disorders during the pandemic. Symptoms that they experienced are anxiety disorders, stress, burnout, depression, loneliness and relationship problems. Family and friends are the most appropriate communication partners during the pandemic. The pandemic has sparked a revolution momentum to restore the role of the family for children. Interpersonal communication is still considered as the most ideal approach. The majority of communication messages are emotional, spiritual and motivational. Based on the results of this research, it is hoped that the government and universities will increase the awareness of students' mental health because of the lack of mental health counseling for students.

**Keywords:** Communication Process, Mental Health, Pandemic, Students.

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini dilakukan untuk menganalisis secara mendalam tentang proses komunikasi yang dimulai dari gejala psikologis (mental) yang muncul selama pandemi, mitra komunikasi, pendekatan komunikasi yang ideal, dan pesan yang disampaikan dalam rangka menjaga kesehatan mental mahasiswa di Indonesia selama masa COVID-19. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kasus, penelitian ini diharapkan dapat memberikan pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang masalah yang diteliti. Peneliti memperhatikan dan meneliti suatu isu yang menarik, dan menggunakan satu kasus sebagai instrumen untuk menggambarannya secara rinci. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa sangat berisiko mengalami gangguan kesehatan mental selama masa pandemi. Gejala yang mereka alami adalah gangguan kecemasan, stres, kelelahan, depresi, kesepian dan masalah hubungan. Keluarga dan teman adalah mitra komunikasi yang paling tepat di masa pandemi. Pandemi menciptakan momentum revolusi untuk mengembalikan peran keluarga bagi anak. Komunikasi interpersonal masih dianggap sebagai pendekatan yang paling ideal. Pesan komunikasi mayoritas adalah pesan emosional, spiritual dan motivasi. Dari hasil penelitian ini diharapkan pemerintah dan perguruan tinggi meningkatkan kesadaran terhadap kesehatan jiwa mahasiswa karena kurangnya penyuluhan terkait kesehatan jiwa bagi mahasiswa.

**Kata Kunci:** Proses Komunikasi, Kesehatan mental, Pandemi, Siswa.

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## INTRODUCTION

Through communication, humans express themselves, form networks of social interaction, and develop their personalities. Communication experts agree with psychologists that communication failure is fatal both individually and socially. Individually, communication failure leads to mental illnesses. Socially, communication failures hinder mutual understanding, cooperation, tolerance, and the implementation of social norms. Communication is not just knowledge in the head, but also a skill. Therefore, communication skills must be honed through daily activities by combining themselves through various constructive activities (Masturi & Utami, 2018).

Mental health is one of the issues that has received the spotlight in Indonesia during the Covid-19 pandemic. The uncertain situation coupled with the pressure of economic factors makes people vulnerable to mental health. People are not only struggling economically, but also experiencing stress and mental pressure. Mental health cases in Indonesia have experienced a significant increase due to the Covid-19 pandemic, was likely due to the limited access and social problems experienced by the community, leading to depression.

Many researches on the Covid-19 pandemic from the psychological aspect have been conducted in line with the changes people experience as a result of the pandemic. Research from Edara found that emotional intelligence (EI) significantly impacts subjective wellness and its counterpart distress. Consequently, it is natural to ask whether emotionally intelligent skills and competencies can be enhanced to improve wellbeing and buffer distress (Edara, 2021). Research by Qing Zhao, Xiaoxiao Sun, Fei Xie, Beijing Chen, Li Wang, Li Hu, and Qin Dai showed the effect of the pandemic on community groups; Covid-19 has already turned into a multi-faceted crisis, covering areas of health, economy, education, and international relationships (see the Introduction section). The current authors are concerned that relative to other age groups, the middle-aged Chinese people might receive the highest pressure to actively cope with all of these life changes (e.g., family income, education for children, aged care for parents, etc.) (Zhao, Sun, Xie, Chen, Wang, & Dai, 2021).

Furthermore, research on attitudes and behaviors that affect the development of a pandemic was conducted in the light of both threat regulation and social identity approaches to the social psychological implications of the Covid-19

pandemic. Study 1 showed that perceived Covid-19 threat was directly associated with more favorable attitudes towards refugees. Study 2 provided further evidence that Covid-19 threat perception was indirectly linked to both negative and positive attitudes and intentions towards refugees (Troian & Bagci, 2021). More specifically, research on how to deal with mental disorders during a pandemic conducted by Ángel Rosa-Alcázar, María Dolores García-Hernández, José Luis Parada-Navas, Pablo J Olivares-Olivares, Sergio Martínez-Murillo, and Ana I Rosa-Alcázar aimed to know the coping strategies of Spanish OCD patients during the Covid-19 lockdown (April 2020). The coping strategies most used by both groups were acceptance, use of emotional support, self-distraction, active coping and planning. These are positive coping strategies that helped control stress emerged at the beginning of lockdown (Rosa-Alcázar, García-Hernández, Parada-Navas, Olivares-Olivares, Martínez-Murillo, & Rosa-Alcázar, 2021).

The last example is research on the effects of online learning during the pandemic. Learning with the online system has not been able to run well due to the fact that efficient methods have not been found, facilities and infrastructure are not supportive, and the students are not aware of the importance of education (Lestari and Wanitini, 2021).

However, the results of the researches above have not answered comprehensively how to approach the communication process in order to maintain mental health during the pandemic, especially among students. Thus, the purpose of this research is to analyze in depth how the communication process starts from the psychological symptoms that arise during the pandemic, communication approaches, messages, and also partners of communication.

The novelty of this research is the in-depth identification of the symptoms of mental disorders in students during the pandemic, how to overcome them through a communication approach with distinctive communication messages and how to communicate the role of the closest people during the pandemic.

The researchers formulated the research problems as follows:

1. What are the mental illness symptoms experienced by students in Indonesia during the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. Who are the communication partners for students in Indonesia in maintaining mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic?

3. What is the ideal communication approach during the pandemic for students in Indonesia?
4. How is the message conveyed in order to maintain mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic among students in Indonesia?

**METHOD**

The research used qualitative approach with the case study method. This research is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the researched problem through the case study method. The type of case study used in this research was a single case study. In this research, the researchers paid attention to and examined an issue of interest, and used a case as an instrument to describe it in detail.

The subjects in this research were students. Because one of the characteristics of case study

research is to use various sources of information in data collection to provide a detailed and in-depth description of responses to an event, in addition to students, researchers also recruited psychologists, interpersonal communication experts and parents as research subjects. The objects of the current study were the communication process and symptoms of mental disorders. In this regard, the communication process observed in this research was adjusted to the research questions and objectives. Primary data were obtained from interviews with the informants, the results of field observations in the form of notes about situations and events as well as data about the informants. The researchers selected all the informants in this research using the purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques, which are listed in the table below:

**Table 1. Research Informants**

Full Name	Information
Febby Permata D	Student
Wahyu Maulana M	Student
Anita	Student
Zanjabil Zulkarnain	Student
Muhammad Iqbal Jauhari	Student
Anggi Siska Hariyana	Student
Giri Wicaksono	Student
Giwan Gunawan	Student
Mohammad Iqbal Assidiq	Student
Juwita Sri Rahmawati	Student
Eunike Setiawati	Psychologist
Kadek Pramitha Sari	Psychologist

Secondary data were obtained from documents, in the forms of websites, social media, and others. The informants were comprised of ten students and two psychologists. The following were the techniques used by researchers in collecting data:

1. Documentation
2. Archive Records
3. In-depth Interview and Intensive Interview.
4. Observation
5. Literature Study

According to Yin, 2014 (in Ridder, 2017), there are two general strategies in case study data analysis:

1. Basing on Theoretical Propositions: the first and preferred strategy is to follow the theoretical propositions that guide the case study.
2. Develop Case Descriptions: the second general strategy is to develop a descriptive framework for organizing case studies.

The validity test of the data conducted in this research incorporated the credibility test consisting of the extension of observations, deepening persistence, triangulation of sources, triangulation of data collection and discussions with colleagues.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

**The Mental Illness Symptoms Experienced by Students in Indonesia during the Covid-19 Pandemic**

According to Fransiska Kaligis, Madhyra Tri Indraswari, Raden Irawati Ismail, there are various mental health responses to the Covid-19 outbreaks. People’s thought processes, behaviors, and emotional responses to an outbreak vary greatly depending on their backgrounds and the community that they live in. For some people, the misinformation, uncertainty, and fear of contagion may aggravate stress and anxiety, which can

induce mass panic. Mental health education and psychological support from all stakeholders, such as the government, health professionals, and the community, may be valuable during the pandemic (Kaligis, Indraswari, & Ismail, 2020).

The development of the Covid-19 pandemic from a psychological perspective has entered a stage that is also dangerous for the mental health of individuals, causing a decline in the quality of mental health. "Yes, this pandemic situation has a serious impact on the decline in individual mental health conditions due to major changes in daily habits that are quite basic and last a long time (prolonged period)" (Setiawati, August 6, 2021). Even though it is getting better, the impacts on mental health start from the lack of frequency and intensity of communicating and interacting with other people.

All informants agreed that as students, they are at a high risk for mental health decline during the Covid-19 pandemic. Hariyana believes that students are at risk for mental health decline that starts with a sense of shock and fear. "In my opinion, yes, because the news of the dangerous new variant of Covid-19 has caused shock and fear for some people" (Hariyana, September 4, 2021). Then, this thing has developed to be more complex along with the changes in habits (new normal) that are unavoidable, such as changes in how to interact with other people and the learning process.

The types of mental disorders that often occur during the Covid-19 pandemic vary with different levels of severity. Two psychologists who were recruited as research informants mentioned some mental disorders. "Stress, depression, burnout, demotivation, unhealthy relationship issues between us as co-workers, bosses, partners, siblings, friends" (Sari, August 7, 2021). More completely, Setiawati mentioned mental disorders as follows:

1. Anxiety disorders, such as GAD (Generalized Anxiety Disorder), social anxiety, OCD, panic disorder
2. Severe stress to burnout stage
3. Depression
4. Loneliness
5. Relationship problems (e.g., with spouse, parent-child relationship, etc.) (Setiawati, 6 August 2021)

Some of these mental disorders were actually experienced by an informant who openly admitted this discomfort. "The types of mental disorders that occur mostly like stress, panic, and feelings that are always unsettled" (Wicaksono,

September 1, 2021). When a person has a mental disorder, they cannot hide the symptoms as it can be seen from their behavior, the way they talk, and the unenthusiastic look on their face. Physical appearances also sometimes seem not normal and change significantly. Mental disorders commonly experienced by adolescents (students) are anxiety disorders, stress or burnout due to their study, relationship problems (with peers, parents, teachers or lecturers), or complaints of addictive behavior. Students may experience decreasing speed in completing assignments due to difficulties in collecting data, coordinating and communicating with the lecturers, which trigger anxiety and burnout in students.

Based on the research by Vicente Javier Clemente-Suárez, Eduardo Navarro-Jiménez, Manuel Jimenez, Alberto Hormeño-Holgado, Marina Begoña Martinez-Gonzalez, Juan Camilo Benitez-Agudelo, Natalia Perez-Palencia, Carmen Cecilia Laborde-Cárdenas, and Jose Francisco Tornero-Aguilera, different stressors have been identified in this pandemic, ranging from psychophysiology, confinement, to social and work. Depending on the level of severity and the country of origin, various interventions have been applied to return to normality and prepare new interventions. The new stressors have a direct impact on people's mental health, provoking governments and health services to become more flexible, innovative, and adaptable to the changing situations. Technology and mass media could use to achieve the aim. Nevertheless, preparing the general population for possible future waves of the pandemic is currently the best measure to mitigate more serious effects on people's mental health (Clemente-Suárez, 2021). In a research called "Mental Emotional Disorders in Clients of the COVID-19 Pandemic at Quarantine Homes", it was found that the most complaints were somatic, such as feeling anxious or tense (40%) and neglecting daily activities (37%) (Nurjanah, 2020).

### **The Communication Partners for Students in Indonesia in Maintaining Mental Health during the Covid-19 Pandemic**

The importance of good communication between family members, friends, teachers/lecturers, and other people must be realized and nurtured from an early age, especially during the pandemic because communication can build family cohesiveness, create a sense of mutual love and, most importantly, maintain mental health. The ideal communication approach

during the Covid-19 pandemic or to deal with individuals who experience mental health disorders during the Covid-19 pandemic will certainly be different from usual; a more intense and flexible approach is needed. The roles of friends and family in communicating with teenagers/students who are experiencing mental disorders due to the Covid-19 pandemic have also become more crucial than ever.

Families or parents play a role in ensuring their children's health and safety, providing facilities and infrastructure to develop their children's abilities as a provision for social life, and instilling social and cultural values in their children as early as possible. Parents give love, acceptance, appreciation, recognition, and guidance to their children. The relationship between parents and children is very important for building trust in others and in themselves. It can also help with the children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. "The positive role of friends and family in maintaining mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic is very important because basically humans need love and support in living this life" (Anita, August 30, 2021). Then, Rahmawati added that the role of family and friends "is quite important. When I can't cheer myself up, I definitely need to talk to my friends or family" (Rahmawati, 15 September 2021).

Another informant felt that the presence of friends and family could help them "respond to the news well, avoid overthinking and support each other to continue to suggest good things" (Hariyana, September 6, 2021). New habits also occur within the family and friends. "My family used to get together to eat and share stories. But for friends, it seems less important because of the lack of communication with friends" (Gunawan, August 29, 2021).

The love that exists between family members is very important to strengthen the family ties so that it can prevent the causes of mental weakness in children. Affection will be very influential in the growth and development of adolescents. They will grow into a person who respects other people and stays away from being overbearing. To foster a sense of affection, there are several things that family members can do, such as:

1. Building care between families
2. Giving examples of how to empathize
3. Training teenagers emotionally
4. Teaching how to treat others according to their capacity
5. Reminding teenagers to always help others

The government can be a catalyst to accelerate families' adaptation to the Covid-19 pandemic and help them prepare another pandemic in the future. It should be noted that it is no coincidence that the Covid-19 pandemic emerged when humans were ready to face it, which was indicated by the human ability to master remote technology and the development of the internet, which is now the answer to the crisis caused by the pandemic and shows that life can still continue even though humans are forced to do many things through the virtual world. If the family is able to pass this revolutionary period, a new world will be born with a better quality, marked by the large role of the family in various human activities in the future and the revived family values. Eventually, the strongest country is the one that is able to help families endure these revolutionary roles during the pandemic.

### **The Ideal Communication Approach during the Pandemic for Students in Indonesia**

During the pandemic, there have been changes in the way people communicate with family, friends or co-workers. Currently many friends get angry easily because of unimportant things. Some people feel their friendship is weakening. Something might be missing in friendship and misunderstandings are becoming more common. In addition, maintaining close relationships with friends are getting more difficult. However, the pandemic is not over yet. Everyone believes communication is important. However, not everyone can communicate well.

The most appropriate communication approach during the pandemic is interpersonal communication, especially for communication with friends, family and even teachers. However, obstacles occur, such as teachers' and students' limited adaptability to and mastery of information technology, inadequate facilities and infrastructure, and limited internet access (Amalia & Sa'adah, 2020). Interpersonal communication is communication performed by individuals to exchange ideas or thoughts with others. In interpersonal communication, individuals communicate feelings, ideas, emotions, and other information face-to-face to each other. Interpersonal communication can be done in both verbally and non-verbally. Not only about what is said and what is received, interpersonal communication is also about how it is said and how body language is used.

The researchers found that there are many changes in all communication components.

For example, because there are more recipients at home, the beneficiary sources involve many family members. In addition, the message content, media, barriers, effects, context and ethics have changed. Each individual must adapt again and try to be accustomed to new habits in communicating. For example, in terms of time for communication, “By finding the right time for communication, not at the wrong time, like we have to wait for a good mood first so that there are no mistakes in the delivery and the listener feels comfortable” (Jauhari, September 1, 2021).

### **The Message Conveyed in Maintaining Mental Health during the Covid-19 Pandemic among Students in Indonesia**

In regard to communication messages, it can be concluded that there are emotional, spiritual and motivational approaches that dominate the communicated messages during the pandemic. Emotional messages seem to evoke negative or positive emotions in an individual. Negative emotions include guilt, fear, and shame will encourage you to do or stop doing something. On the other hand, positive emotions include a sense of humor, affection, pride and comfort. “In my point of view, a good communication approach is an emotional approach. This is because everyone needs someone to talk to in order to reduce stress or deal with other mental disorders” (Gunawan, August 29, 2021). Similarly, Permata also explained that, “An emotional approach is possible, to strengthen oneself to have positive thoughts, to raise the mood, to motivate people to do healthy and useful activities” (Permata, August 31, 2021).

Spiritual messages are messages that relate to religious values and teachings. Individuals are increasingly concerned and need to reap spiritual benefits (spiritual values). “By always praying to God Almighty, wishing that we will always be given health and hoping that other people who are infected with Covid-19 are getting better” (Wicaksono, September 1, 2021). In line with the statements from Wicaksono, Jauhari said, “A lot of *dhikr* reduces overthinking because a lot of *dhikr* can help us calm our mind and always remember the power of Allah SWT. Instead, overthinking stresses us out. Leave everything to Allah” (Jauhari, September 1, 2021).

Motivational messages are messages that have motives to touch humans’ internal conditions. Motivation is a process that pushes the intensity, direction, and persistence of an individual to achieve their goals. The pandemic

may cause a saturation point, resulting in a decrease in people’s motivation. However, knowing that there is a problem in motivation is a good step to managing it. Several informants realized that during the pandemic and motivational messages also have powerful impacts on daily life. Not only motivation for others, but also for yourselves. The most important thing is never to be pessimistic and give up; the pandemic should not be used as an excuse and obstacle. Everything will surely pass, and what has been prayed for all this time will gradually come true” (Permata, August 31, 2021). Another motivational message came from Maulana, “Be sick as much as you can, have fun as much as you can. It is because in the current pandemic, health is more important than material things. So, don’t forget to take a rest and pamper your body” (Maulana, September 1, 2021). The pandemic situation is very tough, but people should always have motivation, energy and productivity. People must restore control over their lives amid the uncertainty of life during the pandemic.

For the effectiveness and convenience of communication process during the pandemic, a psychologist, Setiawati, offered several suggestions as follows:

1. Establishing communication that is non-judgmental, without true-false, good-bad standards, and validating other people’s emotional experiences the emotional experience of others by acknowledging feelings and understanding of events.
2. Be fully present when (active listening)
3. Don’t force people to talk
4. Use more open-ended questions
5. Ask gently and patiently  
(Setiawati, 6 August 2021).

However, the ways and messages communicated by an individual are also ultimately influenced by the individual’s emotional and spiritual intelligence (Masturi & Utami, 2018).

## **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

Students are at high risk of experiencing mental disorders during the Covid-19 pandemic. Mental health disorders can range from mild to severe. The symptoms of mental health disorders include anxiety disorders, stress, burnout, depression, loneliness and relationship problems. The problems faced by students include the burden of assignments, distant relationships,

and difficulties in direct communication and interaction because they are isolated at home. Family and friends are the most appropriate communication partners during the pandemic despite the use of online platforms. The pandemic has created a revolution momentum to restore the roles of the family for children. Interpersonal communication is still considered the most ideal communication approach, but with a different context because each individual still has to stay at home. The majority of communication messages are emotional, spiritual and motivational. Non-judgmental messages, non-pushing messages, and more open-ended questions are recommended.

Based on the results of this research, it was found that there were still very few students receiving education about mental health, both from campus and from the government. Universities can take advantage of the social media they already have or the social media of one of the directorates dealing with counseling issues to disseminate information about mental health. For further research, a quantitative approach can be adopted with an adequate population size so that it can find more accurate data about the handling of mental health problems.

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