



## BERBAKTI: Jurnal Pengabdian Kepada Masyarakat

Vol. 4 No. 1, May 2026, Hal 132-139

e-ISSN 2987-033X, <https://doi.org/10.30822/berbakti.v4i1.5351>

Open Access: <https://journal.unwira.ac.id/index.php/BERBAKTI>

# Strengthening the School Mental Health Ecosystem Through Peer Counseling Service Innovation for High School Students

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received: May 01, 2026

Revised: May 27, 2026

Accepted: May 30, 2026

**Keywords:** Mental Health; Peer Counselors; Academic Stress; Student Empowerment



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### ABSTRACT

Adolescent mental health is a critical determinant of academic and social success. In some high schools, students face high levels of academic stress and bullying, while the availability of Guidance and Counseling (BK) teachers is severely limited to address the needs of all students. This community service initiative aims to empower selected students as peer counselors to provide initial psychological support and enhance collective awareness among the school community. The implementation method was participatory, involving stages of socialization, intensive training in basic counseling skills such as active listening and empathy, stress management workshops, and the integration of case reporting technology. The results of the activity demonstrated high enthusiasm and a significant improvement in participants' competence in detecting mental health issues among peers. Students are now able to act as agents of change who provide psychological first aid and understand referral procedures to professionals. This program concludes that empowering peer counselors is an effective and sustainable strategy for addressing gaps in counseling services, reducing stigma, and creating a safe, inclusive educational ecosystem that supports the mental well-being of all students in high schools.

### INTRODUCTION

Mental health is a fundamental aspect that underpins the holistic development of adolescents, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions. Adolescence is a phase fraught with demands for adaptation, so unstable psychological conditions can directly impact learning quality and social interaction skills. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that one in five adolescents experiences mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, which significantly disrupt their learning and social interaction abilities (Freeman & Block, 2021). In line with this, the American Psychological Association (APA) highlights that good mental health not only enhances emotional well-being but also improves students' cognitive functioning and motivation to learn (Hosseinkhani et al., 2020).

Mental health disorders in adolescents can be triggered by several factors, such as high academic pressure, which also has physical effects through sleep disturbances and reduced concentration that hinder academic performance (Pascoe et al., 2020). External factors such as

bullying and social isolation for victims carry a higher risk of developing persistent mental health disorders (Finning et al., 2020). Such conditions also exist in Indonesia; a study by Noboru et al. (2021) shows that structured anti-bullying educational interventions have proven effective in changing students' attitudes and behaviors. These findings are reinforced by a meta-analysis by Fraguas et al. (2021), which confirms that school-based anti-bullying programs are significantly effective in reducing aggressive behavior through a multi-component approach. Furthermore, peer support has also been shown to be a significant protective factor through the social support network of one's peer group (Putri et al., 2024). Therefore, the creation of an inclusive, safe, and supportive school environment is an absolute prerequisite for optimizing students' potential a condition that has not yet been fully realized in many secondary schools across Indonesia.

The implementation of mental health services at the school level often faces serious resource constraints, and this situation is clearly evident at one of the high schools in Bulukumba, South Sulawesi, which served as the site of the community service project. Based on initial observations and a needs analysis conducted by the service team, it was found that students at this school face complex issues: academic pressure stemming from performance expectations, anxiety, and even cases of bullying occurring within the school environment, while their stress management skills remain very limited. This situation is exacerbated by a significant shortage of professional staff; out of a total of over 400 enrolled students, the school has only 2 Guidance and Counseling (BK) teachers, meaning each teacher must serve an average of over 200 students. Consequently, counseling services cannot optimally reach all students, and many psychological issues go undetected early on. This situation underscores the urgent need for alternative strategies capable of empowering the school community itself as the first line of psychological support.

In response to these issues, this community service program offers a solution in the form of Peer Counseling. This approach is considered strategic because it involves people who are closest to students in their daily lives, thereby minimizing the psychological barriers to seeking help (Daniele et al., 2022). This program trains selected students in basic counseling skills, including active listening techniques, empathetic validation, and referral mechanisms to professionals (Barus et al., 2025; Syafitri & Rahmah, 2021). The effectiveness of this approach has been empirically proven; peer counseling integrated with stress management strategies has been shown to significantly reduce academic stress and burnout among students (Febrianti et al., 2023; Kushendar & Maba, 2022). At the national level, peer counselor training programs in various Indonesian secondary schools have also shown promising results in expanding access to psychological support for adolescents (Chahyanto et al., 2023).

What sets this program apart from similar initiatives is its comprehensive integration: peer counselor training is not a standalone component, but is systematically integrated with stress management modules, a digital bullying reporting system that guarantees the reporter's anonymity, and the active involvement of guidance counselors and parents in the overall program design. Thus, a multi-layered support ecosystem is created, rather than a single intervention. By empowering students as agents of change, it is hoped that an easily accessible first-aid support system will be established, while simultaneously raising the collective awareness of all school stakeholders regarding the urgency of mental health (Amirullah et al., 2024; Kusumaratna et al., 2025).

The implementation of this activity is strategically aligned with the Higher Education Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This program contributes to the achievement of KPI 2 (students gaining off-campus experience), KPI 3 (faculty engaging in off-campus activities), and KPI 5 (research/community service outputs utilized by the community), while also supporting SDG Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and Goal 4 (Quality Education). Based on this background, this article aims to describe the design, implementation process, and outcomes of a peer counselor empowerment program at a state high

school in Bulukumba as a school-based mental health intervention model that can be replicated in similar contexts

## IMPLEMENTATION METHODS

This community service activity was carried out at a high school in Bulukumba using the Community-Based Participatory (CBP) approach, a framework that positions the school community not merely as the object of intervention, but as an active partner in every stage of program design and implementation. The form of partner participation was specifically designed for each stage: the principal and guidance counselors were directly involved in focus group discussions (FGDs) to identify priority issues; guidance counselors played a key role in selecting peer counselor candidates based on their in-depth understanding of student characteristics; and student representatives were involved in developing the schedule and adapting training materials to ensure they were relevant to their actual needs. This approach is systematically designed to address the partners' priority issues, namely high levels of academic stress and bullying. Overall, the activity flow is divided into five main, mutually integrated stages: socialization and coordination, competency training, technology integration, intensive mentoring, and program sustainability strategies.

The first phase began with outreach and coordination, aimed at establishing a collaborative foundation between the service team and all school stakeholders. This phase kicked off with a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) attended in person by the principal, both guidance counselors, and student representatives from each grade level. This FGD serves not only as a forum for aligning perspectives but also as a space for negotiating needs, where the school plays a role in determining the focus and priorities of the intervention. The selection of peer counselor candidates is conducted entirely by the guidance counselors based on students' behavioral records and interpersonal skills, while the service team acts as facilitators of the process. Outreach then continues to all students and parents through face-to-face meetings and the distribution of informational brochures. The success indicators for this phase are: (1) the successful conduct of the FGD with the attendance of all key stakeholders, (2) the compilation of a mutually agreed-upon list of peer counselor participants, and (3) the formation of a joint implementation team with a clear division of roles among faculty, students, and school representatives.

The second phase constitutes the core of the intervention: training and capacity building focused on strengthening the competencies of peer counselors. The training is conducted intensively using role-playing, group discussions, and case studies. The training materials focus on mastering basic counseling skills, including active listening, empathetic validation, and referral procedures to school counselors for handling severe cases. The development of this training material refers to the peer counseling module framework that has been developed for the context of secondary schools in Indonesia, which emphasizes the alignment of content with adolescent developmental stages as well as ease of independent application by trained students (Fitriyah et al., 2023).

The third phase involved the initial development of a digital technology-based reporting system. During this phase, the service-learning team initiated the design of an online reporting form using Google Forms as an initial prototype, enabling students to submit complaints regarding academic pressure or signs of bullying anonymously. It should be emphasized that at this phase, the system is still in the early stages of development and outreach to participants; it is not yet fully operational. Active use and impact evaluation are planned for the follow-up support phase. Additionally, trained peer counselors are encouraged to begin designing mental health campaign content for social media and class WhatsApp groups as educational platforms relevant to the communication styles of adolescents.

The fourth and fifth phases involve mentoring, evaluation, and ensuring the program's sustainability. Mentoring is conducted through regular monthly meetings with peer counselors and guidance counselors to monitor competency development and discuss challenges encountered in

the field. Program effectiveness evaluation at this stage focuses on directly measurable aspects, namely participants' level of understanding and readiness following the training, which is assessed through systematic observation and structured reflection at the end of each session. Meanwhile, medium-term impacts such as changes in the school climate and a reduction in bullying cases are recognized as outcomes requiring a longer measurement period and will be the focus of evaluation in the next program phase. To ensure sustainability, the program concludes with the formation of a permanent School Mental Health Team and the initiation of external collaboration with professional psychologists, so that mental health support mechanisms can operate independently and be integrated into the school system after this community service activity concludes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of the program demonstrated that peer counselor training was effective in enhancing students' readiness to provide initial mental health support at school, while simultaneously strengthening a more inclusive psychological ecosystem within the environment of SMAN x Bulukumba. The following is a description of the implementation results along with their discussion. The preparatory phase yielded a number of concrete outcomes that served as the foundation for program implementation. Through focus group discussions (FGDs) involving the school principal, both guidance counselors, and student representatives, it was confirmed that the limited ratio of guidance counselors is the primary structural constraint in school mental health services. The consensus reached in this forum then became the basis for determining the program's focus: the formation and empowerment of Peer Counselors. The participant selection process, entrusted entirely to the guidance counselors, resulted in the selection of 30 representative students from grades 10, 11, and 12, who were assessed as possessing natural leadership potential and sufficient empathy to fulfill this role. This phase also established a joint implementation team structure with clearly defined roles, as well as a mutually agreed-upon schedule for core activities to be carried out on August 14, 2025. The initial commitment established during this phase serves as a vital social capital for the program's overall sustainability.



**Figure 1.** Group Photo with the Principal the Guidance Counselors and the Presenters

The core training was held on August 14, 2025, in the auditorium of SMAN x Bulukumba, attended by 30 selected students and directly supervised by the two guidance counselors. The 120-minute presentation session covered an overview of adolescent mental health, the basic principles of peer counseling, as well as referral procedures and role boundaries. What was interesting was the participants' initial state of mind: most expressed doubts and concerns that they would give the wrong response to a friend in distress. In response to this, the speaker shared an analogy that proved effective in shifting the participants' perceptions: that the role of a peer counselor is essentially like a first-aid kit its purpose is to provide initial assistance to prevent the situation from worsening, not to take over the role of a professional. After this analogy was presented, a noticeable

shift in attitude emerged: participants became more relaxed, asked questions more actively, and began to develop a more realistic understanding of the boundaries and responsibilities of their role.



**Figure 2.** Training discussion session (left), Presentation of course material (right)

The training session then continued with experiential learning through paired role-playing simulations, in which participants were divided into small groups to act out real-life scenarios: one student played the role of a peer counselor and their partner played the role of a friend facing a problem (De Beer et al., 2024). This approach is designed to bridge cognitive understanding with practical skills, so that participants not only know the theory but are also directly skilled in responding to real-life situations. Observations during the simulation revealed significant changes in communication behavior. Before the training, participants tended to immediately offer advice or pass judgment on the problems their friends described. After the session, participants began shifting toward emotional validation techniques: actively listening without interruption, acknowledging the emotions felt by the speaker, and refraining from the tendency to judge. The participants themselves expressed that this experience opened their eyes to the realization that genuine presence and non-judgmental listening constitute a form of psychological support far more meaningful than merely offering solutions. This finding aligns with several studies affirming that empathy skills are a core competency in effective peer counseling approaches (Halim & Djuwita, 2019; Rahmawati et al., 2025), and also serves as a protective mechanism in breaking the cycle of bullying by fostering students' sensitivity to others' perspectives and experiences (Daniele et al., 2022; Kusumaratna et al., 2025).

Peer counselor training was also combined with efforts to strengthen digital literacy in mental health as a supporting component of the program. At this stage, the service team initiated the initial development of an online reporting form based on Google Forms as a prototype for an anonymous reporting system that allows students to submit complaints regarding academic pressure or signs of bullying without having to reveal their identities. This anonymity feature is promoted as a solution to the psychological barriers commonly experienced by adolescents, namely shame, fear of stigma, and reluctance to report in person (Goodwin et al., 2023). It should be noted that at this phase, the system is still in the initial introduction and awareness-raising stage; full implementation and impact evaluation are planned for the program's subsequent support phase. On the other hand, trained peer counselors are also encouraged to begin designing mental health educational content relevant to adolescents' communication styles, to be disseminated through school social media and class WhatsApp groups as an effort to build a positive and supportive digital environment.

Overall, the 30 students who participated in this program demonstrated high enthusiasm and active engagement, as evidenced by the dynamic two-way discussions, their willingness to ask critical questions, and their seriousness in participating in the simulation sessions. These achievements align with the results of similar programs implemented in various schools across Indonesia, where systematically designed peer counselor training successfully equipped students to become confident and competent agents of psychological support within their respective school environments (Chahyanto et al., 2023; Putri et al., 2024). Furthermore, the initial success of this

program also reinforces findings that efforts to improve adolescent mental health through a school-based community service approach can produce measurable changes in participants' knowledge and attitudes (Fadila et al., 2026; Mawaddah & Prastya, 2023). From cognitive and psychomotor perspectives, participants demonstrated substantial improvements in recognizing early indicators of psychological issues among their peers, such as tendencies toward social withdrawal, drastic mood swings, and sudden declines in academic performance. They have also gained a clearer understanding of the ethical boundaries of their role, including when to provide initial support independently and when the situation requires immediate referral to a school counselor or professional.



**Figure 3. Exercise Administration**

Nevertheless, the implementation of the program has not been without a number of challenges that must be honestly acknowledged as part of a critical reflection. From a participatory perspective, the involvement of students' parents has not yet been maximized as planned in the program design. The busy schedules and travel distances of some parents have become barriers to their attendance at the orientation sessions, so that the promotion of mental health awareness within the family environment has not been fully realized. This aligns with the findings of Butler et al. (2022), which emphasize that family involvement is a significant protective factor in school-based adolescent mental health programs. In terms of time and resources, the limited duration of the training conducted over a single day is not entirely sufficient to build mature and standardized counseling skills. In-depth competencies, such as crisis intervention or complex case management, require more structured follow-up sessions. Additionally, reliance on Google Forms as a prototype reporting system has functional limitations when compared to more integrated case management systems.

In response to these challenges, several mitigation strategies have been initiated or recommended for further action. Limitations in parental involvement are addressed through the distribution of informational materials online and the creation of digital communication groups connecting the school with parents, given that family involvement is a significant protective factor in the sustainability of school-based adolescent mental health programs (Butler et al., 2022; Luvira et al., 2023). To address the time constraints of training, the program designed periodic follow-up mentoring sessions with guidance counselors, in line with recommendations that the effectiveness of school-based counseling services depends heavily on the continuity of structured mentoring, rather than a single intervention (Mukhlisin & Muda, 2024). Meanwhile, the potential for expanding anti-bullying programs through a more systematic school-based approach is recommended as a priority agenda for the next phase, based on empirical evidence of the success of similar interventions in the Indonesian context (Noboru et al., 2021).

## **CONCLUSION**

The empowerment of peer counselors at one of the public high schools in Bulukumba has proven effective as a responsive strategy for bridging the gap in the ratio of guidance and counseling services and improving mental health literacy within the school environment. Based on the results of the program, there was a significant increase in students' enthusiasm and competence in mastering basic counseling skills such as active listening techniques, stress

management, and referral mechanisms which are crucial for early identification of academic stress and bullying issues. This program has not only succeeded in cultivating change agents ready to provide initial psychological support to their peers but has also made a tangible contribution to creating an inclusive and supportive educational ecosystem aligned with the university's institutional key performance indicators. To ensure long-term impact, the institutionalization of school mental health teams integrated with the use of technology is key to sustainability in maintaining students' psychological well-being independently and systematically.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The organizing team would like to express its gratitude for the assistance provided by Makassar State University (LP2M UNM) as well as to our partner, the Bulukumba State High School No. 9 (UPT SMA Negeri 9 Bulukumba), for their collaboration throughout the event.

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