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Help-seeking patterns for suicidal and non-suicidal problems in two high school samples

Abstract

Few distressed young people seek professional psychological help for either personal-emotional problems or suicidal ideation. This paper describes two studies that have examined help-seeking patterns in two contrasting high school populations. Two hundred and sixty four Illawarra public high school students and 307 Queensland private high school students completed a questionnaire measuring intentions to seek help from a variety of formal and informal sources, in addition to no-one for personal-emotional and suicidal problems. Students in both samples indicated they would seek help from different sources of help for different problem types, but friends were rated as the most likely source of help. Seeking help from no-one was a preference for many students for suicidal and non-suicidal problems. Helpseeking patterns are discussed in terms of implications for prevention and early intervention.

Keywords

school, two, problems, help, non, patterns, high, samples, suicidal, seeking

Disciplines

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ACADEMIC PAPER

TITLE: Help-seeking patterns for suicidal and non-suicidal problems in two high school samples.

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ABSTRACT: Few distressed young people seek professional psychological help for either personal-emotional problems or suicidal ideation. This paper describes two studies that have examined help-seeking patterns in two contrasting high school populations. Two hundred and sixty four Illawarra public high school students and 307 Queensland private high school students completed a questionnaire measuring intentions to seek help from a variety of formal and informal sources, in addition to no-one for personal-emotional and suicidal problems. Students in both samples indicated they would seek help from different sources of help for different problem types, but friends were rated as the most likely source of help. Seeking help from no-one was a preference for many students for suicidal and non-suicidal problems. Help-seeking patterns are discussed in terms of implications for prevention and early intervention.

INTRODUCTION: One of the most robust findings across the youth help-seeking literature is the preference that young people have for the informal help of friends and family before the formal help of medical or psychological professionals when psychologically distressed. This is true for personal-emotional and suicidal problems. Up to 90% of adolescents tell peers rather than an adult or professional about their distress or suicidal thoughts (e.g., Kalafat & Elias, 1995). Across previous research, friends are the most preferred help-source for personal-emotional problems with rates ranging from 21.1% (Boldero & Fallon, 1995) to 88.3% (Offer, Howard, Schonert, & Ostrov, 1991). Parents are most often ranked second to friends, with preference rates ranging from 19% (Boldero & Fallon, 1995) to 59% (Schonert-Reichl & Muller, 1996). Few young people however, prefer the formal help of psychological professionals for personal-emotional or suicidal problems. Preference rates for formal help-seeking range from 7% (Benson, 1990) to 29% (Naginey & Swisher, 1990). Rates of actual professional psychological help-seeking range from 1% (Boldero & Fallon, 1995) to 44% (Schonert-Reichl & Muller, 1995). Of the previous findings, providing the most concern, is the strong preference that young people have for

seeking help from “themselves” or “no-one” for personal-emotional and suicidal problems. Findings across studies suggest that young people prefer the help of no-one to that of formal sources. “No-one” as a help-source has been consistently ranked second to informal help. Reported rates of help-seeking from self or no-one ranged from 3% (Snell, 1991) to 93% (Offer et al., 1991) for personal-emotional problems and from 9% (Furr, Westefeld, McConnell, & Jenkins, 2001) to 27.7% (Culp, Clyman, & Culp, 1995) for suicidal ideation.

Certainly, a clear understanding of everyday patterns of help-seeking for suicidal and non-suicidal problems is fundamental to the identification of factors that can be modified to motivate young people to seek appropriate help when they are suicidal. However, as outlined above, the results of existing research are unable to provide conclusive statistical evidence about what young people do with regard to seeking help for personal, emotional or suicidal problems. There are substantial variations in across findings. Therefore the aims of the current study are two-fold. First, to measure the extent to which high school students from two samples with contrasting characteristics intended to seek help from different formal and informal help-sources, and no-one. Second, to measure the extent to which help-seeking intentions related to actual help-seeking from matched help-sources in the previous three weeks.

METHOD: Sample 1. Two hundred and sixty-four high school students were recruited from the junior to senior classes (grades 8 to 12) of an Illawarra public high school. The mean age was 16.10 years ($SD = 1.68$ years). Fifty four per cent of the sample was male ($n = 143$), 46% was female ($n = 121$). Sample 2. Three hundred and forty-five high school students were recruited from the junior to senior classes (grades 9 to 12) of a private Christian high school. The mean age was 15.83 years ($SD = 1.23$ years). Thirty seven per cent of the sample was male ($n = 131$), 63% of the sample was female ($n = 226$).

The self-report research questionnaire for both samples included measures of help-seeking intentions (GHSQ; Deane et al., 2001; Wilson et al., 2002) and actual help-seeking from matched sources in the previous three weeks (AHSQ; Wilson et al., 2002; Rickwood & Braithwaite, 1994). The GHSQ was developed to formally assess help-seeking intentions for suicidal and non-suicidal problems. Students rated the likelihood that they would seek help from different sources (see Table 1) for personal-emotional problems and suicidal thoughts on a 7-point scale (1 = extremely unlikely, 7 = extremely likely). Based on Rickwood and Braithwaite’s (1994) original measure, the AHSQ was developed to assess actual help-seeking from sources matched to those listed in the GHSQ. Students indicate their actual help-seeking from each source on a “yes-no” checklist.

RESULTS: As presented in Table 1, the means and standard deviations of students’ help-seeking intentions indicate that students in both samples were most willing to seek the informal help of friends and family before formal help for personal-emotional and suicidal problems. Further analyses examined whether there were any differences in high school students’ preferred help-source, and whether there were any help-seeking differences across problem-types. A GLM repeated measures MANOVA was used to examine the impact of help-source (boyfriend/girlfriend, friend, parent, other relative, mental health professional, phone help-line, GP, teacher, Pastor/Priest, Youth Worker/Youth Group Leader, no-one) and problem-type (personal-emotional problem and suicidal thoughts) on intentions to seek help for

each sample. There was a significant main effect for helping source for public high school students, $F(10, 1780) = 75.55, p < .001$. However, this effect was qualified by a significant interaction with problem-type, $F(10, 1780) = 19.10, p < .001$. Similarly, there was a significant main effect for helping source for the private high school students, $F(10, 2160) = 166.38, p < .001$. This effect was also qualified by a significant interaction with problem-type, $F(10, 2160) = 29.09, p < .001$, indicating that even with different school characteristics, students' preferred source of help depended upon the type of problem they were facing.

Table 1. Means (M) and standard errors (SE) of help seeking intentions (GHSQ¹) for personal-emotional problems (Per-Emot), suicidal thoughts (Suicide-Thts), and different sources of help for two a high school samples (Public and Private).

Help Source	Problem Type (Public)				Problem Type (Private)			
	Per-Emot		Suicide-Thts		Per-Emot		Suicide-Thts	
	M	SE	M	SE	M	SE	M	SE
Boy/girlfriend	4.53 _a	.15	3.73 _a **	.16	4.41 _a	.12	4.01 _a *	.14
Friend	5.04 _b	.10	4.24**	.13	5.84 _b	.01	4.82**	.11
Parent	4.89 _{a,b}	.12	3.68 _a **	.15	4.81 _a	.11	3.90 _{a,b} **	.13
Family (non-parent)	3.92 _a	.12	3.28 _{a,b,c} **	.13	4.00	.10	3.33 _{b,c,d} **	.12
Mental Health	2.57 _c	.10	2.90 _{c,d} *	.12	2.62 _c	.01	3.20 _{b,c} *	.12
Help Line	2.11 _d	.01	2.50 _{d,e} *	.12	1.38 _d	.01	2.78 _c **	.12
GP	2.66 _c	.10	2.50 _d	.11	1.50 _d	.01	1.70 _c	.01
Teacher	2.62 _c	.10	2.14 _{e,f} **	.01	2.54 _c	.01	2.37 _{d,e} *	.01
Religious Leader	1.83 _d	.01	1.82 _f	.01	2.02 _c	.01	2.52 _{d,e}	.11
Youth Worker	2.09 _d	.01	2.16 _f	.10	2.56 _c	.01	2.68 _{c,d}	.12
Would not seek help	2.69	.13	2.62	.13	1.68	.11	1.83	.12

n (Public) = 264, n (Private) = 351.

Note. Evaluations were made on a 7 point scale (1 = extremely unlikely, 7 = extremely likely). "Would not seek help" was not included in the contrasts.

¹GHSQ refers to the General Help-Seeking Questionnaire (Wilson, Deane, Ciarrochi, & Rickwood, 2002).

**Means differ between personal-emotional problems and suicidal ideation in the same row for each school at $p < .001$ and * $p < .05$ using Bonferroni correction.

_{a,b,c,d,e,f} Means within columns differ from each other at $p < .05$, with the exception of those that share a letter.

To evaluate the interaction between problem-type and help-source further, pairwise comparisons were conducted within each school sample using a Bonferroni adjustment to control for Type I error at $p < .05$. These results are also presented in Table 1. Pairwise comparisons between help-seeking intentions across sample-types are presented in Table 2. There were significant between-group differences in intentions to seek help from some sources (e.g., "religious leader" and "would not seek help") (Table 2). However, these differences were qualified by the finding that students in both samples indicated they were most likely to seek help from friends for all types of personal problems but less likely to seek help from friends for suicidal

thoughts than non-suicidal problems (Table 1). Students in both samples indicated that when experiencing suicidal ideation rather than non-suicidal problems, they were less likely to seek help from parents and other relatives but more likely to seek help from mental health professionals and telephone help lines. When experiencing suicidal and non-suicidal problems, students indicated they would seek some form of informal help before that of no-one, mental or health care professionals, or teachers and other community welfare help-sources (Table 1). Both these interactions indicated that students' preferred source of help depended upon the type of problem they were facing.

Table 2. Pairwise comparisons (t) between the help seeking intentions of public and private high school students for personal-emotional problems (Per-Emot) and suicidal thoughts (Suicide-Thts).

Help Source	Problem Type			
	Per-Emot		Suicide-Thts	
	t	df	t	df
Boy/girlfriend	-.64	472	1.31	467
Friend	3.23*	613	3.45*	592
Parent	-.50	611	1.08	594
Family (non-parent)	.48	609	.27	589
Mental Health	.35	613	1.67	585
Help Line	-3.19*	614	1.70	594
GP	-6.60**	613	-2.88	595
Teacher	-.59	610	1.58	594
Religious Leader	3.99**	615	4.60**	595
Youth Worker	3.28*	606	3.26*	584
Would not seek help	15.47**	593	14.00**	567

\bar{n} (Public) = 264, \bar{n} (Private) = 351. ** $p < .001$, * $p < .01$.

Finally, the relationship between students' help-seeking intentions and their actual help-seeking was examined. Preliminary pairwise comparisons revealed little variance between groups' actual help-seeking. Therefore, since students' general help-seeking intention patterns were similar (Table 1), for the following analyses, student samples were combined. Correlational analyses were conducted between all students' intentions to seek help from each help-source and their actual help-seeking for a personal-emotional or suicidal problem from that source in the previous three weeks. As presented in Table 3, intentions to seek help from each help-source significantly associated with actually seeking help from that source in the previous three weeks, indicating that students' actual help-seeking behaviours matched their intentions.

Table 3. Correlations (r_s) between all students' intentions to seek help from different sources (GHSQ) and their actual help-seeking from that source in the previous three weeks (AHSQ¹).

Help Source	Problem Type	
	Per-Emot	Suicide-Thts
Boy/girlfriend	.43**	.34**
Friend	.44**	.29**
Parent	.47**	.29**
Family (non-parent)	.37**	.31**
Mental Health	.26**	.14**
Help Line	.17**	.14**
GP	.24**	.20**
Teacher	.32**	.27**
Religious Leader	.32**	.28**
Youth Worker	.39**	.33**

$n = 608$. ** $p < .001$. ¹Actual Help-Seeking Questionnaire (Wilson et al., 2002).

DISCUSSION: As expected, the high school students from both samples reported higher help-seeking intentions for informal rather than formal help-sources (Table 1). Intentions to seek help from friends were significantly higher than for any other help source. Students reported they were most likely to seek help from friends then family for problems that were not suicide related and most likely to seek from friends then no-one for suicidal thoughts (Table 1). Consistent with our previous findings in a university sample, help-sources were different for different problem-types (Deane et al., 2001). As might be reasonably be expected from the nature of the sample differences, there were significant differences in help-seeking intentions between groups on some items. Students from the Christian high school reported significantly higher intentions to seek help from religious leaders and youth workers/youth group leaders for suicidal and non-suicidal problems than public high school students (Table 2). In contrast, public high school students reported significantly higher intentions to seek help from telephone help-lines and General Practitioners for personal-emotional problems. The difference was not significant for suicidal problems. Students from the Christian high school were significantly more likely to seek help from friends for suicidal and non-suicidal problems and significantly less likely to seek help from no-one (Table 2). Despite the between-group sample differences, it is particularly noteworthy that students from both samples reported general help-seeking intention patterns that were consistent between the samples and with previous findings. All students indicated they were likely to seek help from parents (e.g., Offer et al., 1991), and different adults for different problems (e.g., Benson, 1990; Naginey & Swisher, 1990). Students also reported help-seeking intentions that were different for suicide and non-suicide related problems (e.g., Schweitzer et al., 1995).

A particularly important finding for suicide prevention and early intervention is the strong positive association found between all help-seeking intentions and

actually seeking help from the corresponding source for suicidal and non-suicidal problems in the previous three weeks (Table 3). In terms of suicide prevention and early intervention, there is evidence that risk for suicide completion is exacerbated if young people do not seek and receive appropriate treatment or advice (Rosenberg et al., 1989). Therefore, the current findings highlight the importance of targeting young peoples' help-seeking intentions and proximal attitudes and beliefs about seeking appropriate help, particularly for distressing personal-emotional and suicidal problems (Carlton & Deane, 2000). It is concerning that students in both samples indicated a preference for informal help-sources and no-one for personal-emotional or suicidal problems. Reluctance to seek help raises serious concerns about suicidal risk that can be increased by cognitive distortion or maladaptive problem-solving (Weishaar, 1996). Informal help-seeking also raises serious concerns about the accuracy of advice that might be given and the willingness of informal help-sources to promote or facilitate appropriate help-seeking for distressed or suicidal young people (Frederico & Davis, 1996; Offer et al., 1991; Wilson & Deane, 2000b).

As indicated by Table 1, high school students make decisions about to whom they will talk on the basis of their specific problem. There is evidence that these decisions are based at least in part, on a relationship between the young person and a potential help-provider or a perception of help-source effectiveness (Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Wilson & Deane, 2002). At a minimum, strong positive relationships need to be promoted and nurtured between help-providers and young people (Wright & Martin, 1998; Wilson & Deane, 2002). Appropriate, particularly professional mental and medical help-seeking needs to be promoted as a suitable problem-solving option that should be used when young people are distressed or suicidal. The extent to which such promotion would impact on problem-solving, appropriate help-seeking and ultimately, mental health remains to be examined in future research.

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