Help-seeking behaviour for emotional or behavioural problems among Australian adolescents: the role of socio-demographic characteristics and mental health problems

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A thesis submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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May 2010
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DECLARATION

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

I give my consent to this copy of my thesis being made available for photocopying and loan if accepted for the award of the degree.

Signed,

Kerry A. Ettridge

Date:
ABSTRACT

This thesis describes the relationship between the socio-demographic characteristics and level of mental health problems experienced by young adolescents and three different stages of help-seeking through which adolescents may progress when seeking professional help for self-perceived emotional or behavioural problems: (i) Problem recognition; (ii) Perception of a need for professional help for problems; (iii) Having received the help they needed for these problems. The thesis provides new information about help-seeking by separately examining the relationship between the key predictor variables and each of these different stages of help-seeking.

Participants were 5,634 adolescents recruited for the beyondblue Schools Research Initiative. Adolescents completed measures of help-seeking behaviour, several measures of mental health problems (emotional and behavioural difficulties, depression and anxiety) and several measures of psychosocial functioning (interpersonal skills, constructive problem solving and perceived levels of social support).

Forty percent of all adolescents perceived that they had experienced emotional or behavioural problems in the previous six months and 18% perceived they had more of these problems than their peers. Eight percent of all adolescents perceived a need for professional help with their problems. Only 3% of all adolescents reported receiving the help they needed for their problems, despite perceiving a need for professional help.

Adolescents with higher levels of mental health problems were more likely to perceive they had emotional or behavioural problems, more problems than their peers and a need for professional help with these problems beyond that explained by their levels of psychosocial functioning. Perceiving emotional or behavioural problems was more common among
females compared to males, adolescents from a non-English speaking background compared to those from an English speaking background, and among adolescents from families where parents did not live together compared to those from families with parents living together. Adolescents from families with separated or divorced parents were more likely to perceive they had more problems than their peers and a need for professional help with their problems compared to those from families with parents living together. These associations were maintained after adjusting for adolescents’ levels of mental health problems.

Socio-demographic characteristics and level of mental health problems explained little variability in the extent to which adolescents reported that they received the help they needed. However, results of subsidiary analyses revealed that adolescents with higher levels of constructive problem solving skills and perceived levels of family support were more likely to report they had received help.

These results highlight a need for intervention programs aimed at increasing adolescents’ ability to recognise when they have emotional or behavioural problems and the point at which these problems require professional help, for example, by increasing levels of emotional competence and mental health literacy. These programs should also equip adolescents with resources to assist them in seeking professional help (e.g. problem solving skills and interpersonal skills) for their emotional or behavioural problems.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people, all of whom supported me throughout my PhD journey:

My supervisors, Professor Michael Sawyer, Dr Jeanie Sheffield and Associate Professor Peter Baghurst, for their guidance, support and patience over the last six years.

Particular thanks to Dr Jeanie Sheffield for the weekend phone calls and morale building when my PhD time was limited to working late nights and weekends.

Vikki Preston for her editing services, encouragement and support.

beyondblue for allowing me to use this data to investigate adolescent help-seeking behaviour, and all those involved in implementing the beyondblue schools research initiative (bbSRI) and conducting the evaluation.

To the bbSRI and Adelaide University for jointly funding my scholarship to conduct this research.

My friends at the Research and Evaluation Unit, Women’s and Children’s Hospital, South Australia, for their support and camaraderie over the years. Particular thanks to Jo, your accompaniment on this journey made it much more tolerable.

My friends and work colleagues at Cancer Council SA, for their support and encouragement, which made continuing to work on my PhD while juggling full time employment possible.

My family, Gayle, Fred, Melinda and Troy, and their partners, Dani and Tim, for providing me with love, support and encouragement throughout my PhD and previous studies. Thank
you for your patience over the years and for making me laugh during my much needed breaks.

My friends and extended family, for understanding my absence in the last few years and for supporting and listening to me for the last six years.

My partner in life, best friend and most ultimate source of support, Dylan. I owe you months of dishwashing, housework and cooking dinners, and all the precious moments we missed from working around the clock to finish this thesis. I only made it across the line because of your love, support and encouragement.

My warmest thanks go to the adolescents who participated in this study. I hope this research serves to raise awareness of the difficulties that young people face when seeking professional help for emotional or behavioural problems.
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