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Using Social Normative Feedback to Promote Young Adults to Seek Help for Mental Health Problems

By Donnchadh Murphy and Eilis Hennessy
Mental Health Across the Lifespan

Prevalence of Serious Mental Illness Among U.S. Adults by Sex, Age, and Race in 2008

Percent

Overall
Female
Male
18-25
26-49
50+
White
Black
Hispanic
Asian
Al/AN*
2+ Races

*AI/AN = American Indian/Alaska Native

Data courtesy of SAMHSA
The onset of 75% of mental illnesses occur before the age of 24 (Kessler et al., 2005).

Nationally representative data on mental health problems in 18–25 year olds in Ireland (Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2012)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Normal</th>
<th>Mild</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Severe</th>
<th>Very Severe</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
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(Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2012)
Consequences of Mental Illness

- Poor mental health has been found to affect students' academic performance and academic vulnerability (Roberts et al., 2001)
- The stigma associated with mental illness may result in:
  - Poor social outcomes (Rüscher et al., 2005)
  - Poor occupational outcomes (Link et al., 1997)
  - Reduced long term well-being (Link et al., 1997)
Can Young Adults be Helped?

- Meta-analytic evidence indicates that a range of psychotherapeutic approaches are effective at significantly improving mental health in young adults (Lipsey & Wilson, 1993)

- Most 3rd level institutions offer free counselling to students (Gallagher, 2009). Therefore, students have access to accessible and affordable mental health treatments
But…

- Only 20% of young adults with a mental health problem actually seek formal help (Blanco et al., 2008)

- Not seeking help is the norm among young adults

“Too many Americans who struggle with mental illness suffer in silence rather than seek help.”

President Obama

#MentalHealthMatters MentalHealth.gov
27% of males and 39% of females said that in the past year they needed professional help. Of these individuals, only 12% of males and 17% of females actually sought help (Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2012).
A systematic review of the evidence identified 3 main approaches for promoting help seeking:

1. Promoting mental health literacy

Help Seeking Behaviour of Young Irish Adults

- Few or No Problems
- Had Problems But Did Not Need Help
- Needed Professional Help, Did Not Seek it
- Needed Professional Help, Sought Professional Help

Males | Females
A systematic review of the evidence identified 3 main approaches for promoting help seeking:

1. Promoting mental health literacy

   *Evidence for promoting mental health literacy

   Increases positive attitudes ✓

   Increase help seeking behaviour ✗

(Gulliver, Christensen, and Brewer, 2012)
A systematic review of the evidence identified 3 main approaches for promoting help seeking:

1. Promoting mental health literacy
2. Providing information on where to seek help
3. Providing destigmatising information

(Gulliver, Christensen, and Brewer, 2012)
Can Help Seeking be Increased?

- A systematic review of the evidence identified 3 main approaches for promoting help seeking:

  3. Providing destigmatising information

  *Evidence for providing destigmatising information

  - Increases positive attitudes ✔
  - Increase help seeking behaviour ✗

  (Gulliver, Christensen, and Brewer, 2012)
A systematic review of the evidence identified 3 main approaches for promoting help seeking:

1. Promoting mental health literacy
2. Providing information on where to seek help
3. Providing destigmatising information

NEW METHODS OF PROMOTING HELP SEEKING ARE NEEDED!
Why don’t young people seek help?

- The stigma associated with mental illness and help seeking has been widely cited as the most salient barrier to seeking help (Corrigan, 2004).

- Stigma is the perception of being flawed in a manner that is socially unacceptable (Blaine, 2000).

- Stigma is a complex construct that is argued to consist of attitudinal, affective, and behavioural components; these are often thought of as stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination (Hinshaw, 2005).
Psycho Ward - Adult Costume

Select UK Size

Manufacturer: Standard
Size: Chest: 38"-44" (96cm-112cm) Waist: 33"-38" (84cm-97cm) Inside Leg: Standard 31" (79cm)
Age: 18 - 100
Dress/Skirt: 0
Length:
Material: Polyester/cotton exclusive

Product Code: FANC1712
Price: £18.45

Add to Basket
Mental Patient Fancy Dress Costume

£20.00

Write the first review

Select colour, size & quantity:

Colour: White
Size: Select size
Quantity: 

ADD TO BASKET

Product Details Delivery Returns

Everyone will be running away from you in fear in this mental patient fancy dress costume. "Congratulations, not from blood stained shirt. Blood stained plastic for me!"
1,200 killed by mental patients
Shock 10-year toll exposes care crisis

Killed on duty... Christine Williams, 15, and later suicide. Someone who cared...
Do you have any history of mental illness in your family?

I have an uncle who does yoga
How Stigma Affects Help Seeking

Perceived Public Stigma
- Subjective norms (TPB) influence help seeking attitudes and intentions
- Concern about stigma from peers, employers and mental health professionals affects help seeking
- Perceived stigma from socially distal groups does not affect help seeking

Personal Stigma
- Personal stigma directly affects help seeking

(Skogstad, Deane & Spicer, 2006; Chew-Graham, Rogers & Yassin, 2003; Biddle et al., 2006; Eisenberg et al., 2009; Corrigan, 2004)
We know that perceived stigma affects individuals’ willingness to seek help.

But

Young adults perceive other students to be significantly more stigmatising of mental health and help seeking than is actually the case (Eisenberg et al., 2009).
Mental Patient Fancy Dress Costume

£20.00

Write the first review

Select colour, size & quantity:

- Colour: White
- Size: Select size
- Quantity:

ADD TO BASKET

Product Details Delivery Returns

Everyone will be running away from you in fear in this mental patient fancy dress costume. It consists of a long white straight coat. White stained nappy-covered pants.
We know that perceived stigma affects individuals’ willingness to seek help. But young adults perceive other students to be significantly more stigmatising of mental health and help seeking than is actually the case (Eisenberg et al., 2009). Therefore, correcting the normative misperception that there is widespread stigma associated with help seeking may promote young adults to seek help.
Social Normative Feedback

- Social normative theory argues that our perception of what is *normal* among peers influences our behaviour (Nolan, 2011)

- For help seeking, widespread perceived stigma among peers is considered *normal* (Eisenburg et al., 2009)

- Social normative feedback is a technique which involves asking individuals about how *normal* a target behaviour is, and providing them with corrective feedback to challenge misperceptions.
The perception of what is normal has been found account for some of the variance in behavioural intentions in the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Rivis & Sheeran, 2003)

Social normative feedback has been found to be effective at altering:
- alcohol consumption among students (Neighbors et al., 2010)
- hand washing behaviour (Lapinski et al, 2013)
- the practice of safe sex (Chernoff & Davison, 2005)
- and others too.
Research Question

Does providing social normative feedback promote positive help seeking intentions and attitudes in young adults?
Participants

- 203 students aged 18–25 years (M=20.48; SD=1.95; 137 females, 66 males).

- Participants were recruited via social media, lecture addresses in the UCD campus, and on spunout.ie (national youth website).

- Inclusion criteria included being aged 18–25 years and being enrolled in a 3rd level course.
Methodology

**Design**

Independent group design

Participants were randomly assigned to either condition based on their date of birth

- Control: n = 115
- Experimental: n = 88

**Between Group Differences**

Groups were comparable on:
- Age
- Gender
- History of mental illness
- History of seeking formal help
- Contact mental illness

**Measures**

- General Help Seeking Questionnaire (Wilson et al., 2011)
- Attitudes towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help (Fischer & Farina, 1995)
Please indicate how you think MOST MALE STUDENTS would answer these questions.

I would recommend a friend receive professional help if I suspected that he might have a mental health problem?

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree
Most male students answered: Agree

Disagree

Only 17% of male students surveyed said that they 'Disagree' or 'Strongly Disagree' with the above statement.
Results

Changes in Attitudes

- A statistically significant difference was observed between the participants who received the SNF ($\bar{x} = 29.14$) and those who did not ($\bar{x} = 26.85$); $t(203) = 3.74; p < .01; \eta^2 = 0.043$.

Social normative feedback is effective at promoting positive help seeking attitudes among young adults.
Results
Changes in Behavioural Intentions

- There is a general trend in the data indicating that those who received the SNF have more positive help seeking intentions.

- There is a statistically significant difference between the SNF group (11.2) and the control group (9.6) for intentions to seek help for depression, $Z = -2.81; p < .01$. 

![Diagram showing changes in anxiety, depression, and suicide intentions between experimental (Exp) and control groups.](image-url)
Social normative feedback is effective in promoting positive help seeking attitudes and behavioural intentions to seek help for depression, but not suicide or anxiety.

Why depression and not suicide or anxiety?
- Social norm theory suggests that people look for information to validate the norm (Nolan, 2011).
- Anecdotally, perhaps young adults have more experience or contact with depression compared to anxiety or suicide.
Social normative feedback has previously be delivered in a variety of methods:

- Posters
- Emails
- Lecture slides
- College newspapers
- Media campaigns.

College Newspaper

Mental Health Bulletin:
Most male students say that they would seek help if they experienced depression... so why wouldn’t you?
Other Applications

- Normalising help seeking doesn’t have to be done through structured and formal intervention. Creating positive dialogue around the issues of mental health and help seeking may help to normalise help seeking also.
Stigma is the perception of being flawed in a manner that is *socially unacceptable* (Blaine, 2000).

We challenged the perception that help seeking is socially unacceptable by providing the message that ‘most people think’ that help seeking is normal.

Normalising help seeking by communicating the message that *most people think* that help seeking is normal, is associated with more positive help seeking attitudes and more positive intentions to seek help for depression, among young adults.
"Mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of, but stigma and bias shame us all."

– Bill Clinton
References

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