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ABSTRACT

The role of hopelessness and prior help-seeking in help-negation for suicidal thoughts amongst adolescents.

Coralie J. Wilson*, Frank P. Deane, & Joseph Ciarrochi.

Illawarra Institute for Mental Health, Department of Psychology, University of Wollongong.

Few distressed young people seek professional psychological help for either personal-emotional problems or suicidal ideation. While avoidance of appropriate help is common in acutely suicidal samples, only recently has this pattern of help-negation for suicidal thoughts been confirmed in non-clinical samples (see Deane, Wilson & Ciarrochi, 2001). The current study extends help-negation to a sample of 269 non-clinical Australian high school students. Participants completed a questionnaire measuring suicidal ideation and help-seeking intentions. A strong help-negation effect was found, such that higher levels of suicidal ideation significantly predicted lower help-seeking intentions. The impact of hopelessness and prior help on the help-negation relationship was also examined. Neither hopelessness nor prior help could fully account for help-negation in non-clinical high school students. However, extending previous help-negation results (i.e., Deane et al., 2001), hopelessness was found to moderate the relationship between suicidal ideation and help-seeking intentions, such that higher levels of hopelessness were significantly associated with greater adolescent reluctance to seek help for suicidal ideation. This finding raises important implications for clinical practice in addition to suicide prevention programs. While there is a need to clarify the specific elements of hopelessness which are important for strengthening adolescent help-negation, the results suggest that clinicians and prevention programs must strive to impart a sense of hope about professional mental health care. Results are also discussed in terms of problem-solving and directions for further research.

*Presenter

Powerpoint presentation:

Hopelessness and Prior Help-Seeking in Help-Negation for Suicidal Thoughts Among Adolescents

Coralie J. Wilson, Frank P. Deane,
Joseph Ciarrochi.

*Illawarra Institute for Mental Health,
University of Wollongong*

Help-negation in acutely suicidal samples

A unique pattern shown by acutely suicidal clients to “soundlessly abandon, politely terminate, or angrily reject treatment”

(Clark & Fawcett, 1992, p.40)

Help-negation in non-clinical samples?

- Implications:
 - If the help-negation effect can be found in non-clinical samples, it clearly acts as a risk-factor for youth suicide.
 - If factors contributing to help-negation can be identified, it may be possible to prevent the process.

Four studies have found patterns consistent with help-negation in non-clinical samples....

Saunders, Resnick, Hoberman, & Blum, (1994)

- Suicidal students were less likely to seek formal help than those who were not suicidal.

Deane, Skogstad, & Williams, (1999)

- Inmates had lower help-seeking intentions for suicidal rather than personal-emotional problems.

Carlton & Deane (2000)

- Students with higher levels of suicidal ideation had *lower* help-seeking

intentions.

Deane, Wilson & Ciarrochi (2001)

- Specifically examined the help-negation effect, i.e., impact of suicidal ideation on intentions to seek help from a number of different sources, in 302 Australian university students.
- Higher levels of suicidal ideation significantly predicted:
 - Lower intentions to seek help from specific sources,
 - Higher intentions to seek help from “no-one”.

Possible Explanations

- Function of psychopathology associated with suicidal ideation? (*Rudd et al., 1995*)
- Hopelessness? (*Moilanen, 1993*)
- Prior Help-Seeking Experience? (*Rickwood & Braithwaite, 1994*)

Hopelessness

- Earlier forms of cognitive development have been associated with higher levels of hopelessness.
- Adolescents cognitive development may mean hopelessness explains or strengthens the help-negation relationship in this population.

Prior Help-Seeking

- Few adolescents with a mental health problem seek professional advice (*Sawyer, 2000*).
- Low levels of previous help-seeking experience are linked with little future help-seeking behaviour (*Rickwood & Braithwaite, 1994*).
- Adolescents’ lack of experience may explain or strengthen help-negation.

Aim

- To extend help-negation to a non-clinical high school sample.
- To examine the extent to which hopelessness and prior help-seeking experience explain or strengthen the help-negation relationship.

Method

- Sample:
 - 269 high school students (36% male, 64% female).
 - Mean age: 15.86 years (SD = 1.26).
- Measures:
 - Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire (*Reynolds, 1988*).
 - Beck Hopelessness Scale (*Beck et al., 1974*).
 - General Help-Seeking Questionnaire (*Wilson et al., 2003*).

Help-Negation Results

- Correlational and multivariate analyses confirmed a significant help-negation effect in this sample:
 - Suicidal ideation significantly predicted help-seeking intentions for suicidal thoughts and personal-emotional problems

Hopelessness and Prior Help Results

- Multivariate analyses were also used to examine the extent to which hopelessness and prior help could explain the help-negation effect.
 - Neither hopelessness or prior help-seeking experience could explain the inverse relationship between suicidal ideation and help-seeking intentions over and above suicidal ideation (Table 1).

Hopelessness and Prior Help Results (*cont'd*)

- Regression analyses were used to examine the extent to which hopelessness and prior help-seeking experience strengthened the help-negation relationship.
 - A significant moderation effect was found for hopelessness but not prior help.
 - Higher levels of hopelessness significantly associated with greater adolescent reluctance to seek help for suicidal thoughts as levels of suicidal ideation increased.

Conclusions

- Help-negation has been extended to a non-clinical high school sample.
- Neither hopelessness or prior help-seeking experience could explain the help-negation effect. However...
- Hopelessness (but not prior help) made a contribution to the

overall strength of the help-negation relationship.
If hopelessness and prior help can not fully account for
help-negation, what might?

- Problem recognition?
- Problem-solving appraisal?
 - Problem-solving is linked with suicide and help-seeking.
 - Problem-recognition and appraisal are common components of the help-seeking and social problem-solving processes.

Possible Explanations

- Aspects of the suicidal state might impede the recognition of suicidal thoughts as cues for help.
- Suicidal young people might appraise adaptive solutions such as help-seeking, negatively
- Suicidal young people might appraise maladaptive solutions such as avoidance, as effective for managing distress.

Implications for Research and Prevention

- The influence of problem-solving on the help-negation relationship needs to be examined.
- Prevention might be improved by providing young people explicit information about:
 - a mental health consultation
 - benefits of seeking professional support
 - processes of solving problems with counselling

Research Reports Available as PDFs (*NHMRC Grant YS060*):

- *Youth Barriers to Help-Seeking and Referral from General Practitioners*. Wilson, Deane, Biro, & Ciarrochi. (2003).
- *Mental Health Help-Seeking in Young People*. Deane, Wilson, Ciarrochi, & Rickwood (2002).

Email: Coralie.Wilson@uow.edu.au

Phone: 0421 378 257