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If we can't seek help, how can the kids?

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Objective. Teachers and School Counsellors have been identified as key gatekeepers within comprehensive school-based suicide prevention programs that encourage appropriate help-seeking. Social learning perspectives suggest that student help-seeking behaviour will be influenced by teacher and school counsellor help-seeking behaviour. Evidence also implies that teacher and school counsellor attitudes and beliefs about help-seeking will influence the inhibition or facilitation of appropriate student help-seeking. This paper presents teacher and school counsellor opinions about help-seeking in addition to self-report indications of their help-seeking intentions for suicidal and non-suicidal problems. It also examines school counsellors perceptions of important student barriers and student help-seeking behaviours.

Method. Three focus group discussions with 18 high-school teachers and one large group discussion with 25 primary and high-school counsellors obtained opinions about personal help-seeking barriers and behaviours. Self-report questionnaire data collected within each discussion, obtained indications of teachers and school counsellors personal help-seeking intentions, in addition to school counsellors perceptions of student help-seeking barriers and help-seeking behaviours.

Results. Transcript analysis revealed themes about teachers and school counsellors help-seeking approach and avoidance factors. Approach factors included positive prior help and trust in the potential help source. Avoidance factors included beliefs and knowledge deficits about appropriate help-seeking and the experience of aversive emotion. Questionnaire data indicated that teachers were most likely not to seek help from anyone for suicidal and non-suicidal personal-emotional problems. School counsellors were more likely to seek help from partners than mental health professionals for personal-emotional problems, and mental health professionals then partners for suicidal problems, before not seeking help from anyone. School counsellors indicated important student barriers that were not consistent with those previously identified by high school students.

Conclusions. The extent to which teachers and school counsellors influence students help-seeking beliefs, intentions and behaviours remains unclear. However, teachers beliefs and help-seeking intentions are such that they could profit from additional information about the processes and benefits of professional help-seeking. School counsellors perceptions of student barriers are such that they could benefit from information about barriers that students have identified as important. This may be essential for the development of school-based programs that address students social, emotional, and educational needs. It seems likely that training teachers and school counsellors in appropriate help-seeking would benefit future prevention initiatives.

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If We Can't Seek Help, How Can the Kids?

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Prevention of Mental Illness

- Schools are key delivery sites (Kalafat, 1997)
- They have the best access to at-risk youth, reduced stigma, and have preliminary evidence of effectiveness (Weist, 1999)
- They can span primary to tertiary prevention services (Kubiszyn, 1999)

Appropriate Help-Seeking

Encouraging appropriate help-seeking should be a key objective of **all** school-based prevention programs, particularly suicide prevention programs (e.g., Kalafat, 1997; Kalafat & Ryerson, 1993; Wilson & Deane, 2000c)

School-Based Prevention

School-based programs should include:

- administrative consultation
- student classes
- school and community gatekeeper training (Kalafat, 1997)

Teachers as Gatekeepers

- Teachers have a critical role
- Teachers provide a first point of contact for many distressed students
- Teachers can identify changes in student behaviours and facilitate help-seeking from appropriate sources

- Teachers and the school context are second only to parents and families in the strength of their influence on adolescent behaviour (Cowen et al., 1996; Evans, 1999)
 - Teachers provide behavioural models for their students
- ### Implications from a Social Learning Perspective
- Students learn by observation, imitation and reinforcement (Bandura, 1977)
 - If teachers are not help-seekers, they might intentionally or not, exhibit behaviours or attitudes that deter appropriate help-seeking in students

Wilson & Deane (2000b):

Teacher Opinions about Appropriate Help-seeking

- Participants 18 High School Teachers (Male and Female) from different faculties within one Illawarra High School
- Procedure 90 minute focus group discussions that included survey completion (GHSQ: Deane, Wilson & Ciarrochi, in press)
- Focus Group Data Saturation Three groups were necessary (Dey, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1997)

Focus Group Transcript Analysis & Themes

- Analysis Immersion and Crystallisation (Crabtree & Miller, 1992; Patton, 1990)
- Themes (a) Avoidance factors (cognitions and emotions); (b) Approach factors (prior help and relationship); (c) The meaning of suicide

Survey Analysis and Results

- Analysis General Linear Model repeated measures ANOVA
- Results Significant interaction effect between problem-type and help-source, $F = 3.75$, $df = 12$, $p < .001$ ($n = 14$)
- Patterns of help-seeking intentions similar to those found in college and high school samples (Deane, Wilson & Ciarrochi, in press; Wilson & Deane, 2000a)

School Counsellors as Gatekeepers

- School Counsellors have access to distressed students and are the predominant mental health figures students will see
- School Counsellors can encourage appropriate help-seeking and refer to outside agencies when necessary
- School Counsellors have an important role in supporting mental health promotion and prevention initiatives
- School Counsellors can strive to increase student help-seeking intentions and behaviours by reducing existing barriers to appropriate help-sources
- School Counsellors are the predominant mental health figures students will see
- School Counsellors can provide help for mental health problems and refer to outside agencies when necessary

Implications

- School Counsellors must have an accurate of student help-seeking barriers to reduce them
- School Counsellors need an accurate understanding of student's actual help-seeking behaviour
- If School Counsellors don't seek appropriate help, they might not be facilitating it and promoting it effectively to students

Wilson & Deane (2000d):

School Counsellors Opinions about Appropriate Help-Seeking

- Participants 21 Primary and High School School Counsellors from one Illawarra District.