

Original article:

Help-seeking attitudes for depression among first year medical undergraduates

**Samin Sameed¹, Ravichandra Karkal¹, Rohan Mendonsa¹, Sowmya Shriyan¹,
Anitha Maria Thomas², Varikara Mohan Chandran¹**

¹Department of Psychiatry, Yenepoya University

²Department of Biochemistry, Yenepoya University

Corresponding author : Dr Samin Sameed

Abstract:

Background: The ever-increasing rates of depression and poor help-seeking behaviour among adolescents are major barrier in tackling the 'depression epidemic'. This study explores the help-seeking attitudes for depression among first year medical undergraduates in medical college in southern India

Methods: Questionnaires were administered among 137 medical undergraduates, which involved a hypothetical case scenario of moderate depression with suicidal risk. The students were asked to identify if the teenager has a serious condition and what kind of help their condition would warrant.

Results: Only 13.1% of the participants identified the condition as 'Depression'. 59.9% of the participants did not feel the need of help from a mental health professional. 30.7% of participants suggested seeking help from a counsellor whereas only 11.7% of the participants endorsed seeking help from a psychiatrist.

Conclusion: Help seeking attitudes for depression among first year medical undergraduates are unfavourable towards mental health professionals and is a matter of concern, considering the burden of depression and rates of suicide among adolescents. There is a need to develop educational programmes for adolescents to enhance depression literacy and develop positive help-seeking attitudes.

Keywords: Depression, help-seeking attitudes, depression literacy, mental health, adolescents.

Introduction

Depression is a leading cause of disability and a significant contributor to the global disease burden (1). Depression is quite common among adolescents. Studies have found that 3 to 11 % of teenagers meet criteria for depression at any one time, and at the end of adolescence, as many as 20 % teenagers report a lifetime prevalence of depression (2). A study from South India reported a prevalence of 3% among school-attending adolescents (13-19 years) (3).

One of the challenges in the treatment of adolescents with depression is their

unwillingness to seek professional help (4). Help-seeking for mental disorders like depression has been an area of research gaining importance in recent times. Help-seeking is a complex process which involves the individual's conceptualization of the mental distress and what meaning society assigns to their help-seeking. Help seeking has 3 components: Help-seeking attitudes, which are beliefs or inclination towards seeking help, help-seeking intentions and actual help-seeking behaviors (5). A study done on adolescent's knowledge and beliefs revealed a strong preference for 'talking to a friend' if

one was depressed. Adolescents rarely endorse professional help from a psychologist, psychiatrist or a doctor. Research has shown that mental health professionals provide treatments with empirical evidence than general practitioners or counselors. It is sad that the laypersons are not knowledgeable about training and background of different mental health professionals and do not differentiate non-specific help from counselors and scientifically validated treatment from professionals(6).

Studies have shown that a majority of severely distressed undergraduates, many of whom may be depressed do not seek help for their problems(7)(8)(9). Studies on depression among medical students in the Indian subcontinent are scanty(10)(11)(12). Despite the availability of effective medications and confidential mental health services, previous studies show a poor utilization of these services by medical students(13)(14). This may be explained to some extent by the stigmatizing attitudes they have towards depression(15). Some of the factors which may be hurdles to use of mental health services were fear of unnecessary intervention, cost of treatment, lack of time, lack of confidentiality, stigma associated with mental health services and fear of documentation on academic record(14).

Assessment of help-seeking attitudes among adolescents is significant given the increased vulnerability of this age group to develop depression. In this study, we set out to assess the help-seeking attitudes for depression among first year medical undergraduates

majority of whom were between the age group of 17-19 years. First year medical undergraduates are not exposed to psychiatry and are more representative of the general adolescent population.

Methods

It was a cross-sectional observational study. The sample came from a larger survey of more than 300 first year students of various constituent colleges of a health and allied university in South India. The sample of this study consisted of 137 first year medical students. These students were given a specially designed semi-structured questionnaire to collect the socio-demographic data. Participants were given a vignette describing a teenager in a certain life situation. They were asked to identify if the teenager has a serious condition and what kind of help their condition would warrant. The hypothetical case scenario was of moderate depression with possible suicidal risk.

Results

Sociodemographics

Sociodemographics of the sample is given in table 1. One-hundred and thirty seven first year medical students participated in the study. The mean age was 18.39, majority of them in the 17-19 age group. 56.2% (n=77) of the study subjects were females and 43.8%(n=60) were males. 81.8%(n=112) of the study subjects had their preliminary education from India, 18.2%(25) from abroad. All the study participants were Indian nationals. 18.2%(n=25) belonged to rural background, 81.8%(n=112) belonged to urban background.

Table 1. Sociodemographics of the Sample

Sample size	137
Age	Mean-18.39 years, SD 0.99, range 17-22 >95% were in 17-19 age group.
Gender	Male – 60(43.8%), Female-77(56.2%)
Place of Priliminary Education	India- 112 (81.8%) Abroad-25 (18.2%) Nationality- Indian (100%)
Rural vs Urban	Rural- 25 (18.2%) Urban-112 (81.8%)

Perception of life situation

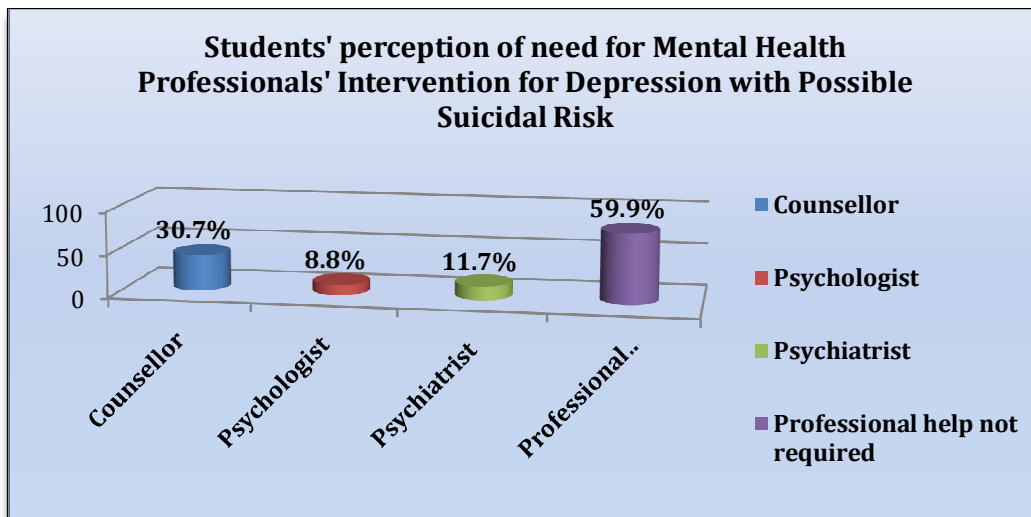
The vignette describing the teenager with moderate depression associated with suicidal risk was perceived as ‘depression’ by a meagre 13.1% of participants. 86.9% of the participants failed to identify the vignette as ‘depression’.

Help-seeking attitudes

Participants were asked what kind of help the subject in the vignette would require. 59.9% of the participants did not feel there was a need

for the subject to seek help from a mental health professional. Instead they recommended help from parents, siblings, friends and teachers. 30.7% of the participants felt that the subject should seek help from a counsellor. Only a small chunk of the participants endorsed seeking help from a psychiatrist (11.7%) and a psychologist (8.8%) despite the subject having a serious mental health condition with possible suicidal risk.

Fig.2



Discussion

The present study showed that majority of the participants (59.9%) did not feel the need for help from a mental health professional and felt that advice from family, friends and teachers was enough. This is in accordance with previous studies which have showed that adolescents believe that confiding in a friend was enough to overcome difficult life situations(6).

The second most common source of help recommended was a counsellor (30.7%). Studies conducted in Australia have shown that seeing a counsellor was the most common source of help endorsed by students. This was because Australian schools have ready access to school counsellors(6). But, in the Indian scenario access to a school counsellor and referral of children to school counsellors is not commonplace. Many schools do not have school counsellors and adolescents may not have adequate knowledge about the work of school counsellors. Also, laypersons are not well-informed about the training background and differences in treatment approaches between various mental health professionals like a counsellor, psychologist and psychiatrist(16)(17); even some confuse one for the other. Thus, there is a possibility that respondents who opted for counsellor may have meant to recommend help from a professional rather than a non-specific counsellor. This becomes important in view of research which has shown that help from a mental health professional is more effective than non-specific counselors(6).

The study also revealed that psychiatrists (11.7%) and psychologists (8.8%) are not popular choices for seeking help among adolescents as shown by previous studies.

Stigma, negative attitudes towards mental health professionals and fear of being labelled 'mental' may be the top reasons for unfavourable attitudes towards psychiatrists and psychologists(18). Fear of 'breach of confidentiality' may also act as a barrier to help-seeking(19).

The low preference of psychiatrists and psychologists may also be explained by the fact that only miniscule proportion of participants identified the difficult life situation as 'depression' (13.1%) and participants may have perceived the vignette as a 'transient emotional issue' which did not warrant serious professional help. This highlights the low levels of depression literacy among adolescents and the urgent need for awareness programmes which can enhance mental health literacy. Mental health literacy comprises the ability to recognize mental health problems; knowledge and beliefs about risks, causes and effective treatments; and knowledge of how to seek mental health information and services(20). Research has shown that lack of mental health literacy among adolescents is an important hurdle in recognition and timely help-seeking(4). Mental health literacy regarding depression among adolescents and public in general will promote recognition and enhance help-seeking attitudes as adolescents with depression may first approach family and friends for help.

Our study was limited by the fact that the sample size is relatively small and the sample was taken from first year medical undergraduates of a single medical college. But first year students are not exposed to psychiatry and most were between the age group of 17-19 years. Thus they can be considered representative of the adolescents of

the region. Other limitation is that the participants of the study might not have adequate knowledge about the training and treatment methods used by different mental health professionals, thus opting for counsellors instead of psychiatrists and psychologists. Also, it is difficult to ascertain if they would seek help from the same source, that they have recommended to the teenager in the vignette if they become depressed. Thus, help-seeking attitudes may not be equated to help-seeking behaviours if the participants themselves were depressed. Despite these limitations, this is one of the few studies which have looked into the help-

seeking attitudes towards depression among adolescents in India.

Conclusion

Help seeking attitudes towards depression among first year medical undergraduates are unfavourable towards mental health professionals and is a matter of concern, considering the burden of depression and rates of suicide among adolescents. There is a need to develop educational programmes for adolescents to enhance depression literacy which will help them to recognize depression and seek help from appropriate mental health professionals.

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