



Help-seeking behaviour and the Internet: An investigation among Australian adolescents

Jonathan Nicholas¹, Kylie Oliver¹, Kylie Lee¹ and Matt O'Brien²

1. The Inspire Foundation, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

2. Centre for Adolescent Health, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effect of a brief school-based intervention on help-seeking behaviour among Australian adolescents. The aim of the intervention was to encourage adolescents to seek help, focusing on the use of the *Reach Out!* website (www.reachout.com.au) as a help-seeking source. Male and female adolescents were compared. The evaluation involved 243 students from ten government and non-government schools across rural and regional Victoria. They received a presentation that contained information on *Reach Out!*, what to do if they or a friend was going through a tough time, and help-seeking options. Questionnaires assessing help-seeking knowledge, intentions, behaviour, and use of *Reach Out!* to seek help were administered six months following the presentations. The majority of participants, with more females than males, knew where to go for help and who they could talk to. Almost half of the participants had been to the *Reach Out!* website following the presentation, and approximately two-thirds reported that they would use *Reach Out!* to seek help if they were going through a tough time. There were no significant gender differences in visiting *Reach Out!* or in intending to visit it. The results demonstrate that young people in Australia are likely to use the Internet, and especially *Reach Out!*, to seek help when they are going through tough times.

Keywords

help-seeking, internet, adolescents, gender differences, mental health, mental health literacy

Introduction

The Internet has the potential to be an important medium for delivering mental health information and services to young people. It is accessible, anonymous, engaging, and informative (Christensen & Griffiths, 2000; Morrison & Sullivan, 2002). In 2000, 74 percent of Australian households with children under 18 had computers and 48 percent had Internet

access (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). Eighty two percent of 14 to 17 year olds reported using the Internet in 2003 (National Office for the Information Economy, 2003). In one American study, nearly half of the adolescent sample reported that they approached the Internet for information about health issues (Borzekowski & Rickert, 2001). The anonymity and accessibility of the Internet may allay young people's concerns about seeking help, especially

Contact: Jonathan Nicholas, The Inspire Foundation, PO Box 1790 Rozelle, NSW, 2039 Australia jono@inspire.org.au

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their fears about lack of confidentiality and a need for autonomy (Gould, Munfakh, Lubell et al., 2002; Skinner, Biscope & Poland, 2003). These factors appear to be crucial in establishing the Internet as an accessible way for young people to find help.

Help-seeking refers to the extent to which individuals utilise different sources of support for overcoming personal difficulties. The sources of support may be informal (e.g. parents and peers) and formal (e.g. school counsellors and mental health professionals). Having access to support networks has been found to buffer the effects of stress and improve resilience (Billings & Moos, 1981; Cauce, Mason, Gonzales & Liu, 1994; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Resnick, Bearman, Blum et al., 1997).

The research conducted on help-seeking has typically examined the factors associated with help-seeking behaviour and the sources of support utilised by adolescents. There have been a number of consistent findings in the literature. First, female adolescents seek help more often than do male adolescents (e.g. Dubow, Lovko & Kausch, 1990; Fallon & Bowles, 1999). Second, adolescents are more likely to seek help from peers and family members than from more formal supports (e.g. Boldero & Fallon, 1995). Third, young people rarely seek help from mental health professionals (Rickwood, 1995). Fourth, the type of help-seeking source is influenced by a number of factors. These include the sex of the help-seeker, the characteristics of the source of help, and the type of problem (Kellam, Branch, Brown & Russell, 1981; Seiffge-Krenke, 1993; Wintre, Hicks, McVey & Fox, 1989).

One study has examined adolescents' use of the Internet to seek help. Gould et al. (2002) found that nearly one fifth of American adolescents had used the Internet in the previous year as a means to seek help when they felt "very upset, sad, stressed, or angry". Those authors reported that the rate of adolescents seeking help on the Internet was comparable with the percentage of adolescents who saw a mental health professional or a school counsellor in the previous year. Nonetheless, the use of the Internet as a source of help was found to be considerably lower than the use of informal

sources of support, such as friends and parents (Gould et al., 2002). Importantly, the authors found no significant gender differences in the prevalence of Internet help-seeking. Therefore, the Internet may be a crucial tool for increasing the rate of help-seeking behaviour among both male and female adolescents. To date, we have limited knowledge of Australian adolescents' use of the Internet to seek help and the factors associated with Internet help-seeking behaviour.

This study was designed to examine Australian adolescents' use of the Internet to seek help. It focused on *Reach Out!* (www.reachout.com.au), a web-based initiative that seeks to improve young people's mental health and well-being. Designed in a youth-friendly way, *Reach Out!* provides information to assist young people in the management of a range of difficulties such as bullying, loss, and relationship problems, as well as mental health problems (including depression, anxiety, and suicide). The aims of *Reach Out!* are to increase young people's access to relevant mental health information and to promote positive help-seeking behaviours and coping skills.

In order to achieve these aims, young people's awareness of *Reach Out!* needed to be increased. Recent online research indicates that approximately 30 percent of young Australians are aware of *Reach Out!* (Inspire Foundation, 2003). One way to increase awareness of *Reach Out!* and other sources of support is through brief school-based interventions. The *MindMatters* project, for example, has demonstrated that schools are environments that support mental health promotion efforts (Sheehan, Cahill, Rowling et al., 2002).

The aim of this study was to examine the effect of a brief school-based intervention on Australian adolescents' help-seeking knowledge, intentions, behaviours and use of *Reach Out!* to seek help during a tough time. A second aim was to examine whether there were gender differences in help-seeking knowledge, intentions, behaviour, and use of *Reach Out!* to seek help. Based on the research findings of Gould et al. (2002), it was expected that there would be no gender differences in use of the *Reach Out!* to seek help.

Method

Participants

The participants were recruited from eighteen government, independent, and Catholic schools and colleges in rural and regional Victoria, Australia. The schools were chosen to represent different school types and different geographical regions in Victoria. Questionnaires were administered to 540 students. Of those, 243 students from ten schools returned completed questionnaires (45% response rate). Males comprised 51 percent of the sample ($n=125$). The participants' ages ranged from 13 to 18 years (mean = 15.02, $SD = 1.06$). There were no significant differences between younger (Year 7-9) and older (Year 10-12) participants on help-seeking knowledge, intentions, behaviour, and use of *Reach Out!* to seek help. Therefore, participants from all year groups were combined.

Materials

The materials involved a presentation and a post-presentation questionnaire. The presentation was brief (approximately 20 minutes), interactive and engaging. It was composed of information about what to do if you or a friend was going through a tough time and where to go for help. The *Reach Out!* website (www.reachout.com.au) was the focus of the presentation. Two young people (a male and a female) conducted all of the presentations. Following the presentation, the participants' stories, artwork, and music were collected, in order to create a town website linked to the *Reach Out!* website (<http://rorrt.reachout.com.au>). The town website was created to increase the participants' involvement in *Reach Out!* and to give the participants a reason to visit the website and familiarise themselves with it.

A questionnaire was developed specifically for this research. Participants were asked to respond to questions addressing help-seeking knowledge, help-seeking intentions, help-seeking behaviour, and the use of *Reach Out!* to seek help during a tough time. A "tough time" was defined as the experience of difficulties, such as splitting up with your boyfriend/girlfriend, fighting with your parents, or feeling down.

Help-seeking knowledge. Participants were asked what they learnt about helping a friend get

through a tough time. They were asked to select from a range of responses any that were relevant to them. The responses were "where to go for help", "who might be the best person to talk to", "what a 'tough time' is", and "didn't learn anything that could help a friend".

Help-seeking intentions. Participants were asked whether they were more likely to seek help for themselves after the *Reach Out!* presentation. They were asked to choose one of five responses. These were "I'm likely to keep it to myself", "I don't think it will make any difference to me", "I feel I have more of an idea of where I might go for help", "I'm not sure, it might depend on the problem", and "Yes, I think I would".

Help-seeking behaviour. Participants were asked whether they had been to the *Reach Out!* website following the presentation. If they responded "no", they were asked to select the responses that best accounted for why they had not been to the *Reach Out!* website. These responses included "I don't need to look for help", "The information isn't relevant to me", "I'd go elsewhere for help", "The website isn't cool enough", "I don't get depressed", "I'm not interested in how other people get through tough times", and "I'm not interested in where other people are at in life".

Use of Reach Out! to seek help during a tough time. Participants were asked whether they "would you use the *Reach Out!* website if you were going through a tough time". If "no", they were asked to provide a reason for why they would not visit the website.

Procedure

Eighteen presentations were given to participating schools from August to November 2001. Students were encouraged to participate by asking questions and providing feedback. Following the presentation, the presenter's spent up to an hour talking informally with the participants and obtaining their artwork, stories, and music for the *Reach Out!* town website. The questionnaires were completed six months after the presentations. The questionnaires were sent to the participating schools and were administered by the teacher during class time. The questionnaires were returned in stamped, self-addressed envelopes.

Results

This study sought to examine the effect of a brief school-based intervention, the *Reach Out!* Rural and Regional Tour, on Australian adolescents' help-seeking knowledge, intentions, behaviours and use *Reach Out!* to seek help during a tough time. The responses of male and female adolescents were compared. Given that there were multiple planned comparisons, a Bonferroni critical adjustment was used to control for inflated Type I error rates. The critical p value, therefore, was $p_{.05/14} = 0.003$.

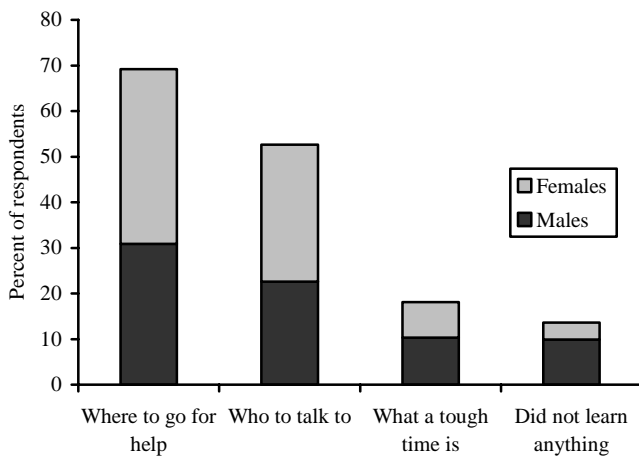


Figure 1: What male and female adolescents learnt from the *Reach Out!* presentation about helping a friend through a tough time.

Help-seeking knowledge

Figure 1 presents the participants' responses to what they learnt about helping a friend get through a tough time. Approximately 70 percent of participants reported that they had learnt where to go for help if a friend was experiencing a tough time, and approximately 50 percent reported that they knew who they could talk to. Only 18 percent reported that they knew what a tough time was, and 13 percent reported that they did not learn anything. Females were more likely than males to report that they knew where to go for help if a friend was experiencing a tough time ($\chi^2 = 11.91, p < .001$). There were no other significant differences.

Help-seeking intentions

Figure 2 presents the participants' responses to whether they were more likely, following the presentation, to seek help for themselves when they were going through a tough time. Approximately one third of participants reported that the likelihood of them seeking help depends on the nature of the problem. Interestingly, 23 percent of the sample reported that they would keep their problems to themselves, and 19 percent reported that the presentation did not alter the likelihood of them seeking help. Importantly, 15 percent reported that they now know where to go to get help, and 7 percent reported that they would be more likely to seek help following the presentation.

Males were more likely than females to report that they would keep to themselves and that the presentation did not alter the likelihood of them seeking help. Females, on the other hand, were more likely than males to report that help-seeking depended on the nature of the problem. These differences were significant ($\chi^2 = 36.35, p < .001$).

Help-seeking behaviour

In response to the question, "Have you been to the *Reach Out!* website since the presentation?", almost 45 percent of participants ($n=109$) responded "yes". As expected, there were no significant gender differences in going to the *Reach Out!* website ($\chi^2 = 1.69, n.s.$). The participants who responded "no" were asked why they had not been to the website. They could select any responses that were applicable. The percentage of participants who endorsed each response can be seen in Figure 3.

The majority of participants who had not been to the *Reach Out!* website reported that this was because they did not need to look for help. Approximately 19 percent of participants reported that the information was not relevant to them, 23 percent stated that they do not get depressed, and 23 percent reported that they have no interest in where other young people are at in life. The least selected responses were "I would go elsewhere for help" (15 percent), "The website is not cool enough" (12 percent), and "I have no interest in how others get through tough times" (14 percent). Compared to females, males were more likely to report that the website was

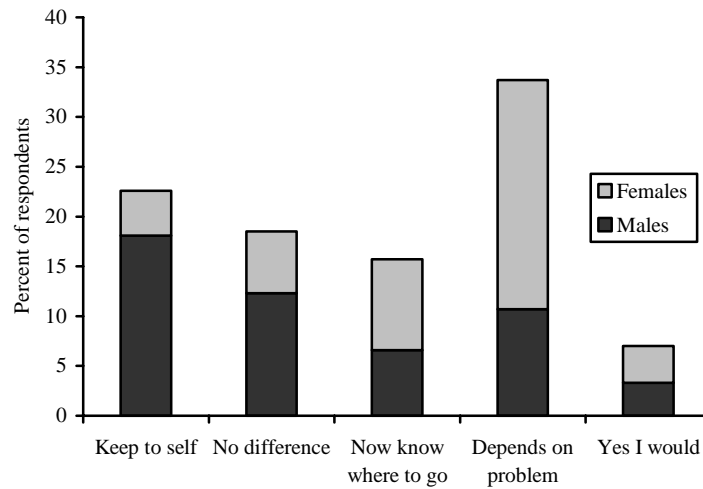


Figure 2: Male and female adolescents' intentions to seek help following the presentation.

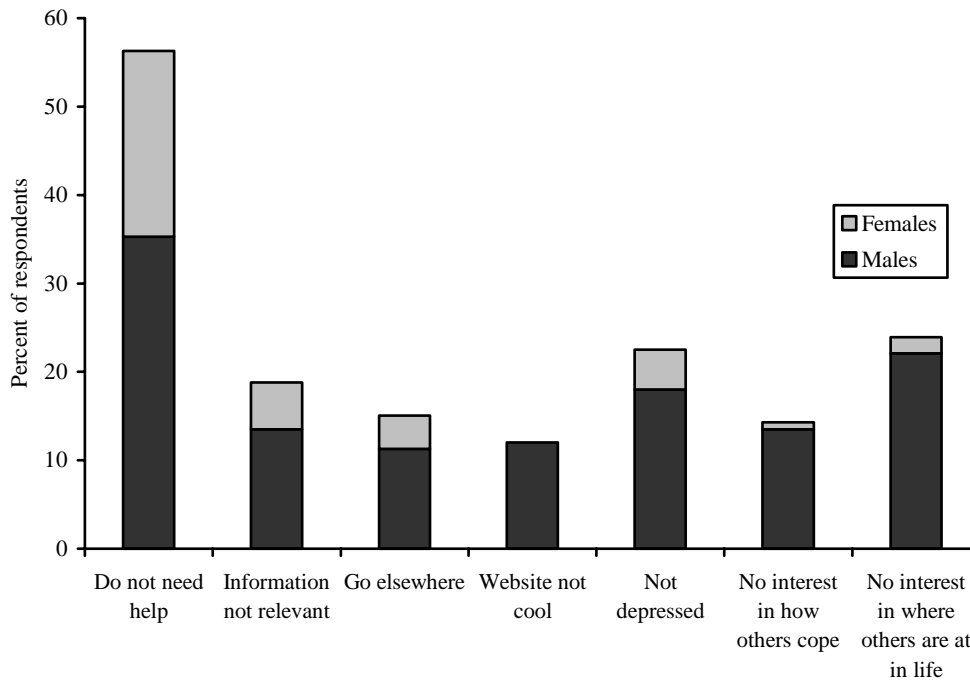


Figure 3: Reasons why the male and female adolescents had not been to the Reach Out! website following the presentation

not cool enough ($\chi^2 = 14.04, p < .001$), that they have no interest in how others get through tough times, $\chi^2 = 13.45, p < .001$, and that they are not

interested in where others are at in life ($\chi^2 = 20.41, p < .001$). There were no other significant gender differences.

Use of Reach Out! to seek help

In response to the question, "Would you use the *Reach Out!* website to seek help if you were going through a tough time?", 63 percent of the sample stated that they would use the website. As was expected, there were no significant gender differences in the use of *Reach Out!* to seek help ($\chi^2 = 0.18$, n.s.). Of the 85 participants who stated that they would not use the website, 69 gave reasons. The responses included that they would prefer to talk to someone (35%), that they would prefer to keep their problems to themselves (19%), that it depends on the problem (10%), and that they did not think the site would be helpful (9%).

Discussion

This study sought to determine the effects of a brief school-based presentation on help-seeking knowledge, intentions, and behaviours, focusing on the use of *Reach Out!* as a help-seeking source. Male and female adolescents were compared. This study demonstrated that the majority of participants had learnt from the presentation where to go for help if a friend was going through a tough time. However, only 18 percent of participants reported that they had learnt what a tough time is. As the presentation was predominantly concerned with where to go for help, this finding reflects the content of the presentation and not the participants' knowledge about tough times.

The results of this study showed that the likelihood of seeking help depends on the nature of the problem. This finding is consistent with previous research in the help-seeking literature (Seiffge-Krenke, 1993; Wintre et al., 1989), which has found that young people prefer to go to their peers for impersonal and interpersonal problems, and to their parents for personal problems. Future research needs to investigate the help sources that adolescents' use for different types of problems. Whilst there is some evidence that young people will seek information and help on the Internet for problems that they perceive to be stigmatised or extremely personal (Borzekowski & Rickert, 2001), this requires further investigation in the Australian context.

Nearly half of the participants had been to the *Reach Out!* website following the presentations.

This finding indicates that a brief school-based intervention can affect help-seeking behaviour. It further indicates that young people will seek help using the Internet once they are aware of relevant web-based services. Nonetheless, alternative methods of increasing awareness and use of *Reach Out!* and other web-based services need to be examined. Of those participants who had not been to *Reach Out!* following the presentation, the majority reported that it was because they did not need to look for help. The appearance and content of the website were infrequently endorsed reasons for not going to the website, although males were more likely than females to report that the website was not "cool" enough.

Approximately 10 percent of the participants in the current study indicated that, as a consequence of the presentation, they were more likely to seek help. Furthermore, almost two-thirds of the sample reported that they would use the *Reach Out!* website to seek help if they were going through a tough time. Whilst intentions have been shown to be good predictors of behaviour under volitional control (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1975), future research needs to ascertain whether intentions to use *Reach Out!* predict behaviour. Nonetheless, this finding indicates that the provision of an Internet-based help-seeking source may increase adolescents' help-seeking behaviour. The anonymity and independence offered by the Internet may make it a powerful medium to deliver mental health information to adolescents.

The results of this study demonstrated that there were gender differences in help-seeking intentions, but there were no gender differences in help-seeking behaviour or in the intended use of *Reach Out!* to seek help. These findings are consistent with previous research, which has found that males are less likely to recognise or acknowledge they have a problem (Saunders, Resnick, Hoberman & Blum, 1994). Once a problem has been recognised, however, males are just as likely as females to seek help (Saunders et al., 1994). Of great practical importance is the finding that there were no significant gender differences in the use or intended use of *Reach Out!* to seek help during tough times, which is consistent with data from the United States examining Internet help-

seeking (Gould et al., 2002). This finding indicates that young men are as likely to seek help as young women if appropriate help sources are available. Internet-based services like *Reach Out!* may be particularly appealing to young men because they offer anonymous and autonomous ways to seek help.

The results of this study invite replication, in order to ascertain whether help-seeking knowledge, intentions, and behaviours increase following the presentation and whether the findings are generalisable to students from other rural and regional areas in Australia. Nonetheless, the results indicate that young people in Australia would use the Internet to seek help when they were going through difficulties. Web-based mental health services can, therefore, play an important role in improving the mental health and well-being of young Australians.

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