

Information Sources Survey:

Adolescents and Young Adults with Anxiety or Depression

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Many mental health disorders have their highest incidence in adolescence and young adulthood, the period of time defined as 12-26 years of age (Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, & Ciarrochi, 2005). Two of the most common mental health issues young people face are anxiety and depression, with nearly 32% of teens suffering from anxiety disorders and over 14% from a mood disorder (Merikangas et al., 2010). Unfortunately, because of the stigma surrounding mental illness and a lack of awareness and education, the majority of young people do not seek professional help (Merikangas et al., 2011). Instead, overwhelmingly, young people seek information via informal pathways (Rickwood et al., 2005). These informal information sources include family, friends, and the Internet. My research focuses on these youth and the variety of ways in which they seek, use, and share information.

Because of its nearly ubiquitous reach in the lives of Western adolescents, much research has been done in recent years surrounding the role of the Internet and social media in the mental health information-seeking behaviors of adolescents and young adults. Nearly 62% of young adults have used the Internet to seek information or help for distressing feelings they have experienced (Wetterlin, Mar, Neilson, Werker, & Krausz, 2014). Over the past decade researchers have also found that youth are using social media to disclose and seek information via message boards, and social networking sites like Facebook and Tumblr (Whitlock, Powers, & Eckenrode, 2006; Moreno et al., 2011; Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2017).

Teens and young adults with anxiety or depression fit with Durrance and Fisher's (2003) definition of information communities. From the message boards of a decade ago to the keyword searches on Tumblr today, one can find members focused on specific topics related to mental

health. These youth are transcending geographical barriers and making use of technology to seek and create information, and to build connections within the community. Many “places” where teens hang out online allow for anonymous interaction, overcoming the trust barrier that is associated with revealing sensitive personal information.

Research-based source

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. (n.d.). Retrieved from

<http://www.aacap.org/>

Position within the information cycle

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) is a professional website that falls into several phases of the information cycle. It includes resources that assist families and clinicians in supporting young people coping with immediate traumas. It also provides resources for physicians to use throughout their careers.

Scope and content

The AACAP website provides resources for youth and their families, as well as physicians who work within the field of child psychiatry and medical students interested in working with this population. Its youth and family sections seek to destigmatize mental illness and provide resources for treatment. For professionals, it provides peer support, continuing education, and certification management. The AACAP also promotes advocacy efforts intended to educate legislators and improve policies affecting children and adolescents with mental illness.

Credentials and authority

The AACAP has over 9,000 members internationally. The organization publishes the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (JAACAP)* monthly issue which boasts a Journal Impact Factor of 6.442. (<http://www.jaacap.com/>) All of the members of the 2016-17 Executive Committee hold MDs, as do the members of its 2017 Council.

Purposes and uses

The purpose of the website is to promote the healthy development of children, adolescents, and their families. The organization hopes to achieve this through training, education, and promotion of research-based prevention and treatment plans. Teens and families can use the website on an as-needed basis, and professionals can utilize its resources to improve their practice throughout their careers.

Design

This is an authoritative website with an online professional community component. Aside from its mission, the website also encourages membership for professionals, donations, and advocacy surrounding mental health policy in the the U.S. Furthermore, it offers online education to practicing physicians on a fee basis.

Currency and frequency of update

The website is regularly updated with new resources that address current needs of the community. For example, I accessed the website on October 3, 2017, two days after the mass shooting in Las Vegas. The homepage featured a link entitled “Talking to Children About Violence” which contained links to professional articles advising parents and clinicians on communication with youth struggling to cope with the tragedy.

Biases and gaps

The website is published solely in English and embraces the Western approach to understanding mental health.

Value for the information community

The website is an approachable resource for community members in need of mental health information and resources. It's more robust sections serve the continuing educational needs of professionals and provide them with a community in which they can further hone their skills.

Community-based source

Tumblr. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.tumblr.com/>

Position within the information cycle

Tumblr falls into the immediate category position of the information cycle.

Scope and content

Tumblr is a micro-blogging, social media site in which almost all content is user-created. Members can create their own blogs, follow others' blogs, "like" posts, and message and chat with other members. The range of blog content is wide: from libraries to sports to fashion. As of October 2017, Tumblr had over 390 million bloggers and over 150 billion posts (<https://www.tumblr.com/about>). For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the content related to anxiety and depression. Searches for either term return related blogs and posts in which users can find information on where to get help, inspiration for a positive mindset, or others dealing with similar situations with whom they can connect.

Credentials of the authors

The bloggers on Tumblr have no credentials of which to speak. In order to create an account with blogging privileges, one need only provide a verifiable email address.

Purposes and uses

Tumblr allows members to connect around topics of interest. Users who suffer from anxiety or depression may use the forum for self-expression or may seek to help others struggling with similar experiences. Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2017) studied 17 popular depression-related Tumblr accounts and found that over 80% of the content on the blogs was related to depression, including topics such as self-loathing, loneliness, self-harm, and suicide. Their study showed high levels of community engagement (re-blogging or liking) with the content. Users employ a screenname and are therefore anonymous, a characteristic that would appeal to those concerned about the confidentiality or stigma associated with disclosing sensitive information regarding their mental health.

Intended audience

As Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2017) discuss, many teens and young adult users may be switching their social media presence to Tumblr because of the growing popularity of Facebook among older adults. Though Tumblr may wish to appeal to users of all ages, Brenner (2014) reported that 40% of Tumblr's users were between the ages of 13-25 (as cited in Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2017). Teens and young adults are seeking a supervision-free environment, and Tumblr's policies support that.

Design

Tumblr is a website and online community. Users have open access to all content created on the site.

Currency and frequency of updates

Tumblr's users update at various rates.

Biases and gaps

Because Tumblr's content is user-created, there is a constant risk of gaps in information. Tumblr also exhibits a bias by suggesting blogs for users to follow. In the case of searches for anxiety or depression, Tumblr recommends those that present positive affirmations of well-being and encouragement.

Value for your information community

Tumblr's value to the community is controversial. Because Tumblr allows posting of material related to self-harm, pro-anorexic behaviors, and suicidal ideation, in many ways Tumblr can be viewed as dangerous place for those suffering from anxiety and depression. However, youth seek information from others with similar experiences, and this is Tumblr's big draw. Teens and young adults can message and chat with one another, checking in and providing encouragement, or they can simply read the experiences and thoughts of others. One indication that Tumblr is aware of the potential dangers of its lenient posting practices is its commitment to providing targeted mental health resources to users searching for blogs related to depression, anxiety, cutting, and suicide (Hinduja, 2016).

Comparison

These two sources offer users a very different experience. While both provide resources to anonymous seekers of information, this is the established aim of the AACAP. Tumblr simply provides links to several national volunteer crisis intervention websites upon specific keyword searches. These users may be encountering information they were not seeking and may not be

interested in. Tumblr's users, instead, are seeking a place for anonymous self-expression and to connect with others. While some users seek to support each other, the potential of Tumblr to normalize feelings of anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicidal ideation is a grave danger that exists for its users, a danger Whitlock et al., (2006) first warned of in relation to message boards over a decade ago.

The graphic nature of photographs and the sense of hopelessness expressed in many posts were a shock to me. Teens are making invisible illnesses very visible on social media, and though acknowledging and sharing this pain may be healthy, research continues to show that very few teens seek professional help from sources like the AACAP or trained mental health professionals. (Rickwood et al., 2005; Merikangas et al., 2011; Goodwin, MocarSKI, Marusic, & Beautrais, 2013; Best, Gil-Rodriguez, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2016). With the high incidence of mental health issues within this population, it is imperative that authoritative and professional information providers improve their outreach and make their resources more attractive and user-friendly.

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