

Information-seeking Behaviors of Adolescents and Young Adults with Anxiety or Depression

Literature Review

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The onset of many mental health disorders and their highest incidence come during adolescence and young adulthood, the period of time defined as 12-26 years of age (Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, & Ciarrochi, 2005). Anxiety and depression are two of the most common mental health issues young people face, with nearly 32% of teens suffering from anxiety disorders and over 14% from mood disorders (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). This is of great concern as untreated and undertreated mental health issues are costly to economies and society in terms of diminished employment opportunities and poorer education outcomes. They are also associated with higher likelihoods of drug and alcohol abuse and antisocial behavior (Burns & Birrell, 2014, p. 303).

Teens and young adults with anxiety or depression fit Fisher and Durrance's (2003) definition of information communities. From the message boards of a decade ago to keyword searches on Tumblr today, one can find community members focused on specific topics related to mental health. These youth are transcending geographical barriers and making use of technology to seek, create, and share 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.

The scholarly literature by researchers in both the library and information science (LIS) and mental health professions discusses the variety of information needs of young people, the information sources they commonly use, barriers to accessing information, and how the Internet is changing the ways young people seek and share information about their mental health. All of these topics will be addressed in detail in this review.

Review of Literature

Theoretical Frameworks

In the literature, the information-seeking process is often referred to as help seeking. Help seeking is defined as “obtain[ing] help in terms of understanding, advice, information, treatment and general support in response to a problem or distressing experience” (Rickwood et al., 2005, p. 4). The literature and community resources show that young people seek all of these types of information. This definition also fits Dervin’s (1983) sense-making model of information seeking (as cited in Savolainen, 2010). Dervin employs the terms ‘situations,’ ‘gaps,’ and ‘uses’ to describe the behavior of information seekers. When a situation arises, it leads to a realization of a gap in understanding or a lack of adequate information. One example she gives is a need to know how to get out of a bad situation. For young people this situation might be experiencing feelings of anxiety or depression or recognizing a desire to inflict deliberate self harm (DSH). The gap then is the need to understand or get control of the feelings, and the uses are the ways youth go about seeking information from various sources to bridge the information gap.

Information Needs

The literature reveals that young people seek a variety of types of information regarding mental health. In terms of content-based information, a Canadian survey of 521 young people found their most pressing information needs to be related to symptoms, interventions, and treatment (Wetterlin, Mar, Neilson, Werker, & Krausz, 2014). In contrast, an observational study of over 3,600 posts on Kooth, an online counseling service based in the United Kingdom, revealed that the most important needs of its young users were advice on how to cope with a mental health issue and where to find additional help (Prescott, Hanley, & Ujhelyi, 2017). The

disparity in the results of these two studies might be explained by the differing methods researchers used. Prescott et al. (2017) conducted an inductive study of actual information-seeking behaviors, while Wetterlin et al. (2014) surveyed youth about their past experiences with mental health information seeking and their future intentions. It is generally recognized in the scientific community that intended behaviors measured by survey questions may not equate to actual actions.

Shenton and Dixon (2003) studied the information needs of young people as a whole. They described 12 categories of information needs, many of which qualified as emotional needs. This nuanced concept acknowledges that when young people seek information regarding their struggles with depression or anxiety, they are not just seeking facts. For example, Prescott et al.'s (2017) analysis of the Kooth posts also revealed that many posters were searching for empathy. Posters often gave extensive background information on their problem. Individuals' responses to these posts disclosed similar experiences and offered advice. Another inductive study analyzed a website dedicated to people who engaged in DSH¹ and sought to understand users' motivations for discussing their behaviors. Though it was rare for the forum users to actively seek help, there were many offers of support and acknowledgments that one user understood how another user was feeling, suggesting that offering and receiving empathy was an important information function of the website (Rodham, Gavin, Lewis, St. Denis, & Bandalli, 2013).

Studies also reveal that feeling a sense of belonging to a community was an information need fulfilled by using DSH websites. In a unique study, Baker and Fortune (2008) recruited participants for their qualitative study by placing ads on websites dedicated to DSH. Through

¹ According to one estimate, 13-21% of depressed youth also engage in DSH (Tuisku et al., 2006).

email interviews with the recruits, the researchers highlighted this need as a major motivation for young people's information seeking. One interviewee commented, "I find it to be a very supportive community . . . and everyone there has something in common" (p. 120). The sense of belonging was also revealed by posters' tendencies to refer to others, such as therapists, as 'outsiders' (Rodham et al., 2013). Users of these types of websites are leveraging the Internet to create what Elfreda Chatman called "small worlds" where young people's everyday life information seeking leads them to participate in "fringe information worlds." Their information needs make traditional sources of information like the library less relevant since the information need is related to experience (Fulton, 2010, p. 241).

Pathways

Within the literature, information sources are often referred to as pathways that are either informal or formal in nature. Informal pathways include a young person's social network: their family, friends, and others close to them. Formal pathways include crisis hotlines, school counselors, physicians, and mental health professionals. Many researchers have shown that young people overwhelmingly prefer to seek help from informal sources, especially their friends and, to a slightly lesser extent, their parents (Goodwin, Mocariski, Marusic, & Beautrais, 2013; Rickwood et al., 2005; Wetterlin et al., 2014; Wilson & Deane, 2001). One way to explain this tendency is with Kirsty Williamson's ecological model of information seeking which posits that information from one's personal network is deemed more important and is seen as the most accessible (as cited in Savolainen, 2010, p. 1784.) These findings also fit with Chatman's theory of information poverty which suggests that within "small worlds," people prefer information from those within the community and see information sources such as professionals or

institutions as irrelevant and often reject them (as cited in Savolainen, 2010, p. 1783). The research has repeatedly demonstrated that young people reject mental health professionals as information sources.

With the rise in accessibility of the Internet, the definitions of formal and informal pathways have broadened. Information-seeking practices that involve search engines like Google are included in the informal category and a young person's social network now includes the use of social networking sites. Formal pathways on the Internet consist of evidence-based websites dedicated to e-mental health care defined as "mental health services and information delivered or enhanced through the Internet" (Younes, Chollet, Menard, & Melchior, 2015).

Despite the proliferation of e-mental health websites, young people also show a preference for the informal pathways available on the Internet. Younes et al. (2015) found that fewer than 20% of young people who had self-identified as having had a psychological problem within the previous 12 months had consulted an e-mental health website. Young people are, however, using the Internet to search for information. As early as 2001, Rideout found that 23% of young people had researched depression or mental illness online. Two recent studies show a marked increase in that rate. Wetterlin et al.'s (2014) survey indicated that over 61% of Canadian youth had used the Internet for mental health information or help seeking. A Spanish study of university students found that nearly 50% of those surveyed had done so (Montagni et al., 2016). There is a huge discrepancy in the total number of youth using the Internet for mental health information and those who use evidence-based websites in their seeking. The most common method of mental health information retrieval by young people was a keyword search in a search engine (Best, Gil-Rodriguez, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2016; Montagni et al., 2016). Despite the

fact that many young people report low levels of trust in the information they find on the Internet, they are not using known evidence-based sites to a high degree (Montagni et al., 2016; Wetterlin et al., 2014).

Privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity

Because of the stigma in being labeled as having a mental health issue, confidentiality and privacy are very important to young people. An increased level of privacy or confidentiality afforded by a pathway acts as a facilitator in young people's use of information sources. Best et al.'s (2016) focus group study revealed that though young people use social media regularly, they preferred not to use social media sites like Facebook for their mental health information seeking out of fear that posted material could be copied and shared, thereby removing their control over the information. Wetterlin et al.'s (2014) more comprehensive survey revealed a similar finding. Most participants (nearly 90%) said their online privacy was very important, which may explain their finding that less than 11% of those surveyed had ever used social media to seek information or help for anxiety or depression.

Informal online pathways such as search engines and formal online pathways like government-run health websites or e-mental health websites are perceived by young people as offering both privacy and confidentiality. They also describe better image control and a reduction in the embarrassment felt at disclosing the problem when using these types of sources (Best et al., 2016). Essentially, these sources of information allow young people to 'save face' and begin the process of treating a mental health issue. This is good for the community because users of e-mental health care sites are also more likely to take later steps toward seeking mental health care through more traditional pathways (Younes et al., 2015).

What is clear from much of the recent literature is that young people are opting to use social networking sites like Tumblr and YouTube which allow users to post content and engage with others using a screen name to which very little or no demographic information is attached. Oliphant (2013) analyzed search results for the keyword “depression” on YouTube and found that the level of engagement with videos was highest for those produced by individuals with personal experience with depression. Here, again, young people are operating in “small worlds” on the Internet, in search of information based on experience, via an anonymous pathway.

In their study of the most popular depression-based blogs on Tumblr, Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2016) found that the owners of fewer than half of the accounts they analyzed had provided any kind of demographic information, but the level of engagement (re-blogging, liking, and direct interactions) with these blogs showed that the bloggers were “connecting with a sizeable audience” (p. 50). These anonymous forums help users to overcome the stigma associated with mental illness. Young people disclose deeply personal information about their mental health and wellbeing, and in so doing provide the many types of information that others are seeking, all while keeping their privacy intact.

Other Facilitators and Barriers

While much of the literature focuses on barriers to help seeking among young people, a couple of factors beyond confidentiality have been identified. Emotional competence, “being aware of one’s internal, personal world and having a language with which to express it” was one noteworthy facilitator in both formal and informal pathways (Rickwood et al., 2005, p. 17). Positive past experiences with a mental health professional also indicated a greater likelihood of seeking help when a need arose in the future (Rickwood et al., 2005).

The lack of research about what facilitates information seeking is a large gap in the literature, but because so many young people don't seek help, the fact that this gap exists makes sense. A recent study by Rickwood, Mazzer, and Telford (2015) showed that many young people are now self-referring for online counseling services. However, it is unclear what specifically triggers help seeking. By scaling up studies like Baker and Fortune's (2008) in which researchers interview young people about their motivations behind seeking information or help, we could illuminate trends in this area. We may also be able to gain a more thorough understanding of the stages of information seeking young people go through.

Studies related to barriers to help seeking are abundant in the literature. Young people's need to feel self-reliant is one major barrier (Best et al., 2016; Rickwood et al., 2005; Wilson & Deane, 2001). The gender gap is also well-documented. (Best et al., 2016; Rickwood et al., 2005). While young women and men both report that being able to solve their own problems is important, women seek help far more frequently. One possibility for this discrepancy is that along with being taught the importance of self-reliance, many men have also been taught that masculinity equates to toughness. They may interpret feelings of depression or anxiety as a sign of weakness, and as a result, choose not to acknowledge them. Alternatively, some males may feel that their innate toughness will be enough to see them through a challenging time. Both possibilities gel with Wilson's (1999) theory of information-seeking in which he explains that some information needs, though understood by the person, go unmet as a result of role-related or psychological barriers.

Finally, attention is being paid to the various literacies, such as information and health, necessary for effective information and help seeking. Adolescents have trouble understanding the

language used on the Internet related to health and have trouble spelling terms and formulating cogent questions (Gray, Klein, Noyce, Sesselberg, & Cantrill, 2005). Young people's struggle to evaluate information critically is also a barrier to finding reliable information, and their heavy reliance on search engines further exacerbates this issue (Best et al., 2016; Gray et al., 2005; see also boyd, 2014).

Conclusion

To the chagrin of many mental health professionals, young people rarely use formal pathways for help and information seeking, preferring instead to reach out to their social networks or to do nothing at all. Several theories, including Chatman's theory of information poverty, help to explain this phenomenon. However, the Internet is driving big changes in the ways in which young people seek, share, and create information. The anonymity it provides allows young users to connect and fulfill some of their biggest needs, those for empathy and belonging. It remains to be studied what initially triggers information seeking. There is also the question of whether triggers differ from one information source to another. What situations or gaps exist for the young person who seeks information via an online forum or from YouTube, versus speaking to a friend? Did the young person self-referring for online counseling services have several other information-seeking events prior? Are there trends in the series of steps young people take? Answers to these questions will help us better understand what facilitates youth mental health help seeking and in so doing assist professionals in providing better information and help services.

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