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Beyond Stigma: Perceived Barriers and Enablers for Help Seeking for Mental Health Issues in Undergraduate Students in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

The higher onset of mental ill health occurs during the university period (Kessler et al., 2005). Around 32 Percent of university students have some kind of mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and overwhelming stress (Eisenberg, Hunt, Speer, & Zivin, 2007). Ryan et al., (2010) stated that the student population is the highest potential risk group for having mental health issues. When the untreated duration is longer, it may associate with worsen results (Dell’Osso, et al., 2013). Therefore, it is essential to understand the barriers and enablers for seeking help for mental ill health in university students. According to literature, many factors affect when students seek help for mental health issues. Guillver, et al., (2010) published a literature review on help seeking barriers, reviewing 15 qualitative and 7 quantitative studies. The purpose of this review was to identify young people’s experiences of help seeking for mental health issues. The key barriers identified were fear of stigmatization, lack of knowledge, lack of money, not believing the practitioner (Guillver, et al., 2010), feeling that the practitioner does not have cultural knowledge, and feelings of shame are main barriers for preventing from seeking psychological help (Tanskanen, et al., 2011; Kessler, et al., 2001; Harris, Collinson, & das Nair, 2012; Uebelacker, et al., 2012). Perceptions of over use of medicine to control mental health issues and fears about stigmatized reactions from health professionals can also be barriers for seeking help (Pettigrew, Donovan, Pescud, Boldy, & Newton , 2010; Tanskanen, et al., 2011).

Research Problem

According to the literature, there is a greater risk for having mental health issues during the period of studying in universities, which disturb students’ education and thereby future life chances. Nevertheless, students do not tend to seek help, in Sri Lankan context, the perceived barriers and enablers for seeking help is still relatively unexplored.

Objectives

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceived barriers beyond mental illness stigma and enablers for seeking help for mental health issues in university students. It further investigates how to promote the help seeking behavior among university students.

Methodology

This study is based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which is likely to be adapted across different cultures (Hagger, et al., 2007) to identify human behavior.

Qualitative data collection and analysis method was adopted. The convenience sampling method was used to select the sample. Three state universities were selected and 16 in-depth interviews with students and 3 in-depth interviews with students' counselors were carried out. Pre developed and tested questionnaires on help seeking behavior for mental health issues; perceived barriers and enablers were used to develop guidelines for the in-depth interviews.

Data Analysis

The data was categorized in to three main themes and eight sub themes. Main themes were barriers for help seeking, enables for help seeking and strategies for promoting help seeking. The triangulation method, the investigator triangulation, data triangulation and methodological triangulation were conducted to validate the findings of the study. The researcher transcribed the recorded data with help of a trained research assistant. Then, other expert on the subject did the rechecking of the transcriptions. It was done to eliminate the researcher's bias and the validation of the findings. The highlighted important points were double checked and coded independently by each, the researcher and the other expert on the subject for validation of the findings.

Findings

The first main theme was barriers for help seeking, which consisted of five sub themes: (1) stigma (2) Reluctance to share problems (3) Self dependency (4) Lack of trust on counselors (5) Lack of awareness about services availability. The second main theme that came out from the study was supporting factors for help seeking, which consisted of three sub themes: 1) receiving free counseling service, 2) proximity to the counseling service, 3) Trust on counselors and counseling services. The third main theme was strategies for promoting help seeking which consisted three sub themes: 1) promoting mental health education among students; 2) making easy access to counselors; 3) developing a good relationship between students and counselors.

Discussion and Recommendations

Findings revealed that students are reluctant to seek help for their mental health issues mainly due to mental illness stigma. It indicates that students with mental difficulties suffer from mental illness stigma as well as the symptoms of mental difficulties. This finding consists with the findings of previous studies (Bathje & Pryor, 2011; Corrigan, 2004; Wright, et al., 2011; Rickwood, et al., 2005; Hinshaw, 2007). Beyond mental illness stigma, identified most significant barrier for help seeking for mental health issues is unwillingness to share heir problems with others. This finding consists with previous research of Cantazaro (2009), which has stated that individual's comfort level to express their personal problems to others predicts the intention to seek help for mental health issues (Cantazaro, 2009). Lack of trust on counselors and counseling services, belief that counseling does not help for their mental health issues, self-dependency, and lack of awareness about mental health services availability are the rest of barriers identified through the study. Most significant enablers are availability of free counseling services, awareness about them, proximity and easy access to the counseling service. Promoting mental health education, making easy access to counselors, and developing a good

relationship between students and counselors were stated as strategies for promoting counseling services.

Findings recommend introducing educational and awareness campaigns about mental health issues and service availability. Educational campaigns should be focus on reducing mental illness stigma. It could be done changing the public opinion towards mental health problems, giving proper understanding about mental health. Appropriate distribution and taking necessary steps for easy access to the counseling services could be operated to encourage help seeking behavior among university students. Further, educational seminars, public talks and workshops may introduce. Such campaigns will help reducing the stereotyped negative prejudices on mental health disorders and thereby promote the help seeking behavior. Instead, such campaigns could be introduced through media. Nowadays, new media, such as internet, television and mobile phones play a vital role in the society in terms of changing public attitudes and beliefs. Therefore, media could be ideal for influencing people and change their negative stereotype attitudes towards mental health problems and thereby promote help seeking behavior. As respondents reported the counseling services should be accessible to all students. It could be done through introducing a hot line (easy access telephone line) to access counselors easily. As students have tight time schedule, it is recommended to introduce flexible time slots to meet councilors that may help promoting effective counseling service among students.

Keywords: Help Seeking; Mental Illness Stigma; Mental Health Issues; and University Students

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