Chapter 1

The Provision of Online Counselling for Young People

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ABSTRACT

A substantial group of young people experience mental health problems, which impact their educational development and subsequent wellbeing. Of those who do suffer from mental health issues, a minority of these seek appropriate professional assistance. This paucity of help seeking behaviours among young people is a challenge for counsellors. Whereas adults who suffer mental health issues have increasingly turned to the internet for assistance, it is interesting that when young people, whose social lives are increasingly dependent on the communication technologies, are not catered to as much as adults by online counselling. One small online counselling pilot program conducted at a Queensland secondary school for three years (from 2005-2007) (Glasheen & Campbell, 2009) offered anonymous live-time counselling from the school counsellor (via a secure chat room) to students through the school’s website. Findings indicated that boys were more likely to use the service than girls. All participants transitioned to face-to-face counselling, and all reported it was beneficial. This pilot study attested to the potential of online counselling. However, school counselors, as a professional group, have been hesitant to utilise online counselling as part of their service delivery to young people in schools. This chapter concludes by identifying reasons for this reluctance and possible initiatives to increase online support for young people in schools.

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INTRODUCTION

Young people face many challenges as they seek to develop their independence and way in the world. For many, this is made more difficult by the presence of mental health difficulties. A majority of these afflicted young people do not seek appropriate professional assistance. They may turn to their peers with whom they often communicate through technology. The importance of the communication technologies for this generation poses a challenge to those who provide support services for young people. Support services have been slow to utilize online services such as online counselling and surprisingly those in school settings have largely dismissed this medium of offering help to young people.

BACKGROUND

The increasing prevalence of mental health difficulties among young people is of major concern in Australian society (Sawyer, et al., 2001). Major mental health problems and mental disorders have their peak period of onset during adolescence with half of all lifetime cases of mental disorders starting by age 14 (Kessler, Avenevoli, & Merikangas, 2005). Onset in early adolescence is also increasing (Mitchell, 2000) and has profound and long-lasting implications for the health and wellbeing of Australian adults: their productive engagement in society and achievements.

Young people with mental disorders and emotional and behavioural problems have lower academic achievement (Ialongo, Edelshon, Werthamer-Larsson, Crocker, & Kellam, 1995), peer relationship problems (Strauss & Forehand, 1987), impairments in general social competence (Messer & Beidel, 1994), more suicidal ideation and behaviour (Sawyer, et al., 2000), and engage more in smoking, harmful alcohol, and other drug use. The incidence of depression and anxiety amongst adolescents has profound consequences for their school performance, self-esteem, and relationships (Avenevoli, Knight, Kessler, & Merikangas, 2008; Woodward & Ferguson, 2001). More so than their urban peers, rural youth who are often isolated from appropriate professional help are more at risk of suicide (Boyd, et al., 2007; Molloy & Fox, 2002).

Reluctance of Young People to Seek Help

However, young people are reluctant to seek professional help for personal and psychological problems (Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, & Ciarrochi, 2005). In fact it has been estimated that only one in four of those with clinical symptoms of mental illness seek professional assistance (Birleson, Sawyer, & Storm, 2000). The barriers to help-seeking include stigma, fears regarding confidentiality, embarrassment, and lack of appropriate youth-friendly services (Rickwood, et al., 2005). Problems, such as depression and suicidal ideation, often negate seeking help in conventional ways (Wilson, et al., 2008). Further, the culture of rural communities, such as social visibility, lack of anonymity, rural culture of self-reliance, and lack of information about available services, mitigates against help-seeking (Boyd, et al., 2007). It has been established that boys are socialised to seek less help than girls and adolescent males seek less professional assistance than adolescent females (Rickwood, et al., 2005). A survey of young male callers to Kids Help Line, a national telephone and online counselling service for youth, found that although nearly half (49%) wanted to discuss their emotional experiences but were concerned that people would react negatively, and they would be judged as crazy or uncool. Additionally, they were afraid of being seen as weak and therefore concerned about being teased (Glasheen, 1998). This is of concern as young men in Australia experience poorer educational outcomes, and higher rates of incarceration, illness and completed suicides than young women.
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