# Australian adolescents' stigmatising attitudes towards peers experiencing alcohol problems: Influences on help-seeking intentions and behaviour

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## Introduction

- Stigma has been identified as one of the most prominent barriers to seeking help for mental health problems during adolescence (Gulliver et al., 2010)

- While studies have examined Australian adolescents' stigmatizing attitudes towards depression, less is known about attitudes towards alcohol abuse, or how alcohol-related stigma influences young people's willingness to help their peers.

- This is despite evidence from the adult literature that alcohol use disorders are more severely stigmatised than other (substance-unrelated) mental health conditions (Schomerus et al., 2011).

- A better understanding of stigmatising attitudes during adolescence will help inform interventions that aim to facilitate appropriate help-seeking and improve the quality of help that young people provide to their peers.

**Aims:**

(1) To compare adolescents' stigmatising attitudes towards alcohol misuse and depression

(2) To examine the relationship between stigma and (a) intentions to encourage a peer to seek help, and (b) past helping behaviour

## Results

### Comparison of attitudes towards alcohol misuse and depression
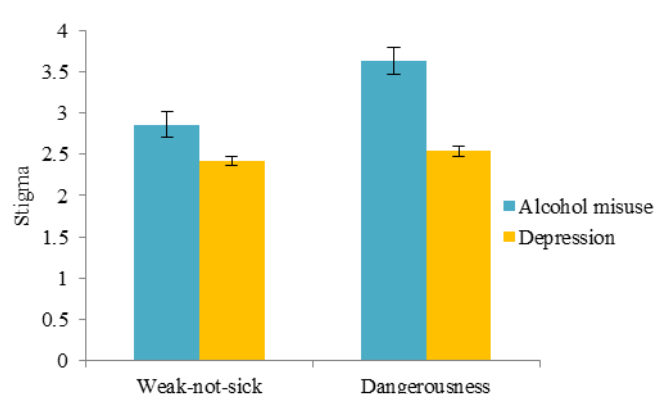


Participants held more stigmatising attitudes towards a peer experiencing symptoms of alcohol misuse compared to a peer experiencing symptoms of depression.

- More likely to be seen as 'weak' rather than sick (M=2.86 to M=2.42, $t(2418)$= 28.765, $p$< 0.001)

- More dangerous and unpredictable (M=3.63 to M=2.53, $t(2417)$= 54.35, $p$< 0.001)

### Relationship between stigma and intentions

- 'Weak-not-sick' attitudes were associated with weaker intentions to encourage help-seeking

- Perceptions of dangerousness were associated with weaker intentions to encourage help-seeking from informal help sources (peers and the internet), but *stronger* intentions to encourage help-seeking from formal sources (for alcohol misuse only)

Table 1. Relationship between stigma and intentions to encourage a peer to seek help

| Help source | Stigma | Alcohol abuse | | | | | Depression | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | B | SE(B) | β | t | p | B | SE(B) | β | t | p |
| Peer | Weak-not-sick | -.065 | .027 | -.052 | -2.398 | .017 | -.074 | .024 | -.067 | -3.122 | .002 |
| | Dangerousness | -.080 | .023 | -.071 | -3.429 | .001 | -.072 | .023 | -.066 | -3.213 | .001 |
| Family | Weak-not-sick | -.064 | .029 | -.048 | -2.216 | .027 | -.036 | .023 | -.034 | -1.596 | .111 |
| | Dangerousness | .004 | .025 | .003 | .141 | .888 | -.038 | .022 | -.036 | -1.747 | .081 |
| Formal | Weak-not-sick | -.165 | .022 | -.161 | -7.648 | <0.001 | -.094 | .018 | -.109 | -5.150 | <0.001 |
| | Dangerousness | .069 | .019 | .075 | 3.670 | <0.001 | .013 | .018 | .016 | .765 | .444 |
| Internet | Weak-not-sick | -.077 | .030 | -.056 | -2.578 | .010 | -.017 | .027 | -.013 | -.622 | .534 |
| | Dangerousness | -.100 | .026 | -.080 | -3.882 | <0.001 | .031 | .026 | .024 | 1.171 | .242 |

All analyses controlled for gender, SES, and age

### Relationship between stigma and past helping behaviour

Participants with more stigmatising attitudes were less likely to have helped a friend seek help in the past

- Weak-not-sick: OR=0.649, CI=0.572-0.737, $p$<0.001
- Dangerousness: OR=0.727, CI=0.639-0.829, $p$<0.001

## Design and methods

**Participants**

- 2455 year 9 students (49.6% male; M age=14.93 years, SD=0.45) were recruited as part of a randomized controlled trial of *MAKINGtheLINK,* a school-based intervention that teaches adolescents how to overcome barriers to accessing professional help for mental health and substance use problems.

**Procedure**

- Participants were presented with two vignettes describing a young person experiencing symptoms of alcohol misuse ("Samuel") and depression ("Sarah") before completing measures of stigma and help-seeking intentions.

**Measures**

- Stigma: participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with statements reflecting stigmatising attitudes towards the vignette character (6 items assessing 2 components of stigma: 'weak-not-sick' and 'dangerousness/unpredictability;' Yap et al., 2014)

- Intentions to encourage a peer experiencing similar problems to seek help: a modified version of the General Help Seeking Questionnaire-Vignette (Wilson et al., 2011)

- Past helping behaviour (ever helped a friend seek help for mental health or substance use problems, yes/no)

## Conclusions

- Previous research has highlighted the importance of understanding adolescents' stigmatising attitudes towards mental illness in their peers, however few studies have examined the stigma associated with alcohol abuse during this period.

- Consistent with the adult literature, adolescents stigmatised alcohol misuse more severely than depression, with a peer experiencing alcohol problems more likely to be viewed as 'weak' and potentially dangerous.

- While adolescents with more stigmatising attitudes generally demonstrated weaker intentions to encourage their peers to seek help, perceptions of dangerousness may facilitate formal help-seeking.

- However, this may not translate into an increase in actual helping behaviour, as both components of stigma were higher amongst adolescents who had never encouraged a peer to seek help for mental health problems in the past.

- These results provide information that may be beneficial to intervention efforts aimed at reducing stigma and facilitating help-seeking amongst young people.

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## References

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