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’ stigmatising 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-related) 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 vs 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Help source</th>
<th>Stigma</th>
<th>Alcohol misuse</th>
<th>Depression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Help source</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer</td>
<td>Weak-not-sick</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Dangerousness</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

References

Design and methods

Participants

• 2455 year 8 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 problem, yes/no)

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