

Help seeking and mental health service utilization among college students with a history of suicide ideation

MAJOR FINDINGS:

Mental health problems among college students are increasingly common and can have serious consequences. Researchers sought to examine the prevalence of help seeking behavior among college students who had thoughts of suicide sometime in their life. Participants were asked to recall times in their lives when they experienced problems with emotions, nerves, or mental health, broadly defined as episodes of “psychological distress.” One pattern that emerged is the large degree of continuity in psychological distress experiences between adolescence and young adulthood. As shown below (see Table 1), nearly two thirds (62%) of these participants had their first episode of psychological distress in adolescence and a majority (91%) experienced an episode since starting college. More than half (54%) reported that they experienced at least one episode in both adolescence and college. Finally, out of the 138 students who experienced psychological distress in college, 81 (54%) also had an adolescent history of psychological distress.

Out of the 151 participants who had ever experienced an episode of distress, 73% received professional treatment, 87% received informal help, and 61% received both. Only two people (1%) neither sought nor received any type of help. Not surprisingly, individuals who obtained professional treatment had more lifetime episodes of distress, were younger at the time of their first episode, and had a history of depression and anxiety as compared with individuals who only sought informal help.

Common sources of seeking help included family (65%), friends (54%), private psychiatrists (38%), and private psychologists (33%). Few accessed the Internet for help (9%) and only one participated in an Internet group. Of the 138 individuals who experienced an episode of distress after starting college, less than half (41%) accessed campus-based resources. Thus, an unmet need for mental health services in college was observed, in that students did not necessarily seek professional treatment every time it was needed. The reason most cited for not obtaining professional treatment was uncertainty about the need for help, treatment effectiveness, or importance of treatment. Other common barriers to professional treatment were fear of stigma related to treatment (39%), financial concerns (33%), and logistical barriers (24%) such as not knowing where to get treatment.

Table 1. Experiences of psychological distress during adolescence and college among college students with a history of suicide ideation.

Experience of psychological distress		During college?		TOTAL
		NO	YES	
During adolescence?	NO	--	57 (38%)	57 (38%)
	YES	13 (9%)	81 (54%)	94 (62%)
TOTAL		13 (9%)	138 (91%)	151 (100%)

Of major interest to:

- College Administrators
- Parents
- Educators
- Health Professionals
- Students
- Law and Policy Makers



Practice and Policy Suggestions: Educational outreach might help to raise awareness about the benefits of mental health services, in order to overcome some of the negative attitudes that interfere with seeking professional treatment. Given that financial concerns were another important barrier to treatment seeking, efforts need to be made to ensure that young adults have access to affordable mental health services.

Because a majority of students who experienced an episode of psychological distress during college also experienced at least one episode during adolescence, college mental health providers should conduct careful lifetime assessments rather than attributing problems to immediate environmental or social circumstances. Providers who facilitate an ongoing connection to their patients may increase the probability that an individual will seek help should the need arise again in the future.

Given that most students sought informal help, trusted figures such as parents, friends, and significant others have the opportunity to facilitate access to professional treatment. Parents are especially important because they can encourage their children to access treatment when they need it: those whose children who have a history of suicide ideation and/or psychological distress might want to encourage periodic mental health “check-ups.” Additionally, when their child is away at college, parents are urged to maintain communication regarding mental health issues and assist in identifying treatment resources on- or off-campus.

The complete publication referenced in this research brief can be found here: Arria, A.M., Winick, E.R., Garnier-Dykstra, L.M., Vincent, K.B., Caldeira, K.M., Wilcox, H.C., O’Grady, K.E. (2011). Help-seeking and mental health service utilization among college students with a history of suicide ideation. *Psychiatric Services*. 62(12), 1510-1513. doi:10.1176/appi.ps.005562010



About the College Life Study (CLS)

The CLS is a longitudinal study of 1,253 college students at a large, public, mid-Atlantic university. This study is one of the first large-scale scientific investigations that aims to discover the impact of health-related behaviors during the college experience. Any first-time, first-year student between 17 and 19 years old at the university in the fall of 2004 was eligible to participate in a screening survey. The researchers then selected students to participate in the longitudinal study, which consisted of two-hour personal interviews administered annually, beginning with their first year of college. A full description of the methods used is available.^{1,2} Inherent to all self-reporting research methods is the possibility for response bias. Because the sample is from one large university, the ability to generalize the findings elsewhere is uncertain. However, response rates have been excellent and attrition bias has been minimal.

For more information about the study, please visit www.cls.umd.edu or contact Amelia M. Arria at the University of Maryland School of Public Health at aarria@umd.edu.

¹ Arria, A.M., Caldeira, K.M., O’Grady, K.E., Vincent, K.B., Fitzelle, D.B., Johnson, E.P., Wish, E.D. (2008). Drug exposure opportunities and use patterns among college students: Results of a longitudinal prospective cohort study. *Substance Abuse*. 29(4), 19-38.

² Vincent, K.B., Kasperski, S.J., Caldeira, K.M., Garnier-Dykstra, L.M., Pinchevsky, G.M., O’Grady, K.E., Arria, A.M. (2012). Maintaining superior follow-up rates in a longitudinal study: Experiences from the College Life Study. *International Journal of Multiple Research Approaches*. 6(1), 56-72.

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