

# Help-seeking among Indigenous Australian adolescents

Exploring attitudes, behaviours and barriers

What prevents Indigenous young people from seeking professional help for emotional and/or psychological problems, and how can counselling support services, such as Australia's youth counselling service, Kids Helpline, assist in overcoming these barriers? To explore these questions this paper draws on qualitative feedback from group discussions with 60 Indigenous young people (aged 10–24 years) living in rural, regional and metropolitan Australia. Findings reveal many barriers, including shame, fear, intergenerational stigma and limited awareness. The paper suggests that addressing cultural competency in services, hosting school-based education sessions and embracing offline and online contact points are helpful steps youth services can take to encourage formal help-seeking among Indigenous young people.

by Megan Price &  
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**Y**oung Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians (referred to hereafter as 'Indigenous young people') are currently recognised as a high-risk group for emotional and/or psychological problems, with a great likelihood of needing access to relevant support services. They are overrepresented in child protection and youth justice; experience poorer outcomes than other Australian youth in areas of neglect and abuse, health, education and social development (Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian 2009); are disproportionately exposed to risk factors, such as grief, loss and discrimination, which greatly affect their social and emotional wellbeing (Zubrick et al. 2005); and experience higher rates of suicide and risk of suicide than other Australian youth (Parker & Ben-Tovim 2002). Despite these risks and the proven benefits of seeking help (Billings & Moos 1981), the propensity of this group to reach out for external assistance is considerably lower than that of mainstream youth.

Data from Australia's 24/7 youth counselling service, Kids Helpline, show that only 3.0% of the 42,151 contacts to the service in 2011 from young people whose cultural identity was recorded<sup>1</sup> were Indigenous. In comparison, Indigenous young people represent 4.6% of all Australians of this age (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2011). Interestingly, Indigenous young people appear more likely to contact Kids Helpline for indirect help-seeking (e.g. a general yarn, information seeking, joke telling) than direct help-seeking (i.e. counselling),

representing 4.0% and 2.5% of all contacts respectively. The more informal, indirect interaction is thought to be particularly important to this cultural group as it allows for initial exploration of the service's trustworthiness and cultural competence.

Help-seeking is defined as "any communication about a problem or troublesome event which is directed toward obtaining support, advice, or assistance in times of distress" (Gourash 1978). Farrelly (2008) categorises help-seeking as either: i) formal help-seeking – involving services and professionals who have been formally trained as help sources, such as counsellors, psychologists and general practitioners, or ii) informal help-seeking – involving untrained help sources, such as family, friends or other community members. The act of help-seeking is said to have three stages: i) problem recognition, ii) belief that external help is needed, and iii) initiated contact with a help source. Stage one is often the most fundamental hurdle for young people to overcome, particularly Indigenous young people, where it relates to mental health concerns (Kessler 1981, as cited in Centre for Suicide Prevention 1999).

While little is published in relation to Indigenous young people's help-seeking behaviour, mainstream youth studies highlight the types of barriers that affect the general population of young Australians. The desire to self treat problems, the belief that formal help (or any help) will not assist (Sheffield, Fiorenza & Sofronoff 2004; Centre for Suicide Prevention 1999), poor help-seeking experiences in the past, emotional competence (Ciarrochi et al. 2002), a lack of familiarity with support services (Deane, Wilson & Russel 2007) and concerns regarding confidentiality and/or being misunderstood (Sheffield, Fiorenza & Sofronoff 2004) are all barriers that exist for young people in general, and most likely affect Indigenous young people also. We do know that concerns regarding confidentiality and being misunderstood were found to be particular issues for Indigenous young people in one study (Adermann & Campbell 2007).

Studies involving Indigenous adults also provide culturally specific insights

that may transfer to this younger group. Specifically, studies have identified a fear of potential ramifications, such as government intervention (Farrelly 2008), and being ostracised by community (Lumby & Farrelly 2009) as help-seeking barriers more pronounced among Indigenous adults than non-Indigenous adults. Conversely, the typically close-knit nature of many Indigenous communities encourages higher use of informal help sources than in non-Indigenous communities (Farrelly 2008). Indigenous adults also have a greater likelihood than non-Indigenous adults to wait until their problem is at a more chronic stage before engaging in formal support services (Farrelly 2008). Lastly, a cultural tendency to conceptualise mental illness (and what constitutes a mental "problem") quite differently to more western-world conceptualisations also exists and can serve as a barrier. Some claim the concept of mental illness is often unfamiliar to Indigenous people, symptoms more accepted and/or the topic considered taboo, particularly among people living in remote and regional communities (Deane, Wilson & Russel 2007; Vicary & Bishop 2005).

Additional barriers that may be more prominent for Indigenous youth include intergenerational stigma and feelings of shame associated with help-seeking, particularly regarding mental illness. These barriers exist for young people in general (Ciarrochi et al. 2002) and are more pronounced among Indigenous adults than non-Indigenous adults (Lumby & Farrelly 2009). For Indigenous adults, they are particularly apparent in small communities where the chance of support staff knowing (and possibly telling) friends or family is increased. Cited evidence relates to issues of violence; however, it is suspected this also applies to other problems such as physical health, relationships, and financial and legal concerns.

Lastly, given 26% of Indigenous youth live in rural and remote Australia (compared to 2% of non-Indigenous youth) (ABS 2009), geographic location is likely to be another barrier more pronounced for Indigenous

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young people. Remoteness has contributed to low rates of adults' formal help-seeking due to limited accessibility to services, long wait times, increased concerns regarding confidentiality (Deane, Wilson & Russel 2007) and limited internet access (Hunter & Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research 2006).

With so many potential barriers, the aim of this paper is to understand which ones actually relate to Indigenous young people. It explores help-seeking behaviours among this group, their motivations and barriers to using formal support services, preferences for different help-seeking modalities (e.g. phone, email and real-time web), and awareness and perceptions of the Kids Helpline service. The study was initiated to inform Kids Helpline's practice around engaging and supporting Indigenous young people by helping them to overcome barriers. Given that most participants had not previously used Kids Helpline, one might assume that many of these findings could be generalised to other mainstream youth counselling services, providing useful insight for government and other services looking to support this group in their help-seeking.

## Research method

### Data collection

Data was obtained via six focus groups conducted in 2010 among 60 young people aged 10 to 24. Most participants were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. A handful of participants did not identify as being Indigenous but were included in the session with fellow classmates to avoid being excluded. Most participants reported to have not previously accessed Kids Helpline.

Each session involved the moderator talking with young people either in their classroom or in an after-school community care facility. A BoysTown worker and, for schools, at least one teacher were present to provide support. With the exception of the remote sessions, support personnel were Indigenous people often known to participants. Following a half-hour group discussion regarding help-seeking attitudes and behaviour, participants

engaged in an interactive demonstration of Kids Helpline's web counselling service.

For ethical reasons, methods used within the sessions were designed to be participative and non-directive to avoid young people divulging any personal problems or concerns. The limited attention span and low literacy level of many participants meant that dynamic and creative age-appropriate research methods were sought. For younger participants this involved a 'Helper Plan' exercise (Steinberg et al. 1997) where discussion was generated after participants individually coloured in paper hands and listed their help-seeking sources on each finger and thumb. For older participants, hypothetical problems were workshopped in small groups to identify help-seeking sources and generate discussion about motivations and barriers to accessing various sources. The structure for all sessions was first reviewed and approved by Indigenous staff at BoysTown and, in some instances, senior management at participating organisations.

### Participants

Participants represented a mix of ages, genders and geographic locations (refer Table 1). Participating organisations were selected because of their pre-existing connection with BoysTown.

### Procedures

Consent to run sessions was obtained from senior management and guidance staff at each participating organisation. Parental consent was obtained for young people participating through the after-school care centre, and school guardian consent obtained for all others.

Staff from each organisation invited young people to join the session. Final numbers were based on willingness to participate and school attendance on the day. Participants were able to enter and leave at their discretion, with most electing to stay the entire session. With the exception of the remote sample, participants were each given a movie voucher as a gratuity for participating. As cinemas were not easily accessible for remote participants,

TABLE 1

## Sample breakdown by age, gender and geographic location

Age	Gender	No. of participants	Location
10–14 yrs	Male	5	Rural (QLD)
	Male	7	Remote (WA)
	Female	6	Rural (QLD)
	Female	3	Remote (WA)
	Female	8	Metropolitan (QLD)
15–17 yrs	Male	4	Remote (WA)
	Female	2	Remote (WA)
	Female	15	Metropolitan (QLD)
18–24 yrs	Male	3	Metropolitan (QLD)
	Female	7	Metropolitan (QLD)
Total participants:		60	

they received hats and wristbands instead.

### Data analysis

Thematic coding was used to analyse the qualitative feedback and artwork from the sessions. Data were charted so that patterns or relationships between the different genders and age groups could be identified. To improve the credibility and objectivity of this phenomenological study, an “investigator triangulation” method (Johnson 1997) was also used. This involved consulting with several Indigenous BoysTown staff and considering their interpretation of ideas and explanations of the data based on their ongoing engagement with and observation of Indigenous young people.

### Results

The results are presented under three sections:

- i) current help-seeking sources;
- ii) motivations and barriers to seeking help from Kids Helpline; and
- iii) preferred communication methods for formal help-seeking sources.

#### Current help-seeking sources

Consistent with research among mainstream youth (Mission Australia 2008), participant feedback indicated that current help-seeking sources were predominantly informal, most

commonly involving a network of helpers including parents, carers, siblings, uncles and aunts, grandparents, friends, neighbours, teachers and church representatives. Females typically reported wider networks than males. For males, particularly older males, keeping silent, “toughening up” or finding distractions until things settled were common alternatives to consulting networks:

*I'd go to the pub with my mates to just think about something else.*

Male, 18–24 years

*Just get over it.* Male, 18–24 years

*I'd go to my mum, sister, cuz, aunty or granma.* Female, 10–14 years

*Friends and family because that's who you talk to and trust.* Female, 18–24 years

*Friends, because you tell them EVERYTHING and they aren't going to judge.*  
Female, 15–17 years

For both genders, formal sources would only be considered in the event that all informal sources were exhausted or inaccessible and for more serious problems relating

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to things such as relationships, bullying, grief and loss, and drugs and alcohol. In these instances, police, nurses or counsellors from school or Kids Helpline were considered. In addition, some talked of going online to websites that provide self-help information and/or peer support opportunities through social networking. This last method was mentioned only by teenage females living in metropolitan areas and was reportedly preferred over formal sources due to its autonomous, confidential and less “official” nature:

*The only place I'd be going is Google. I'd be too shame to ask anyone else.*  
Female, 15–17 years

*If it was real serious I'd go to the school counsellor because that's what they're there for.* Female, 10–14 years

For a number of participants, particularly young males, formal sources were simply not considered as an option:

*I'm not going to no-one.*  
Male, 10–14 years

*If it was real bad, I'd talk to my brother or fiancé, but that's about it.*  
Male, 18–24 years

*Nah. You just wouldn't do it. It's too shame.*  
Male, 15–17 years

### **Motivations and barriers to seeking help from Kids Helpline**

When asked what benefits could come from seeking formal help, participants said that counsellors were more likely to listen as they were paid to. The fact counsellors were specifically trained and qualified was also thought to increase the quality of assistance. Conversely, some older participants believed there would be less risk of judgement than if they confided in someone known to them or their community, including local Indigenous-specific formal help sources because of the

perceived likelihood that these workers may know (and tell) their family.

*I guess counsellors would be pretty helpful. That's what they're trained to do.* Female, 18–24 years

Despite the acknowledged benefits in seeking formal help from a service such as Kids Helpline, barriers to doing so were readily provided by participants. Many of the stated barriers echoed previously cited help-seeking research and supported the proportionately low rates of Indigenous young people contacting Kids Helpline. In addition, a lack of understanding about the service, namely whom it targeted, how and what it could assist with and the various pathways to the service were barriers for many. Some did not think Kids Helpline was for Indigenous youth or anyone older than 17. Many were not aware of the phone number or the specific options offered by Kids Helpline, such as the ability to specify a counsellor's gender or repeatedly speak to the same counsellor.

Distrust around information being kept confidential, and associated fears of being punished by their parents/carers or having authorities intervene, were also key barriers for most. Similarly, a considerable barrier was the fear of shaming themselves and/or their family if their counselling session was exposed. This was apparently regardless of whether the problem related to relationships, drugs, school stress, mental health or suicidal ideation. Phone counselling was considered at greatest risk of breaching confidentiality due to the perceived possibility of someone tracing the Kids Helpline number on their phone bill. The (then) high cost of calling from a mobile phone also presented a barrier:<sup>2</sup>

*What's to say they'll keep your stuff private? Then you'd get the cops coming over, your parents going crazy ... No way.*  
Female, 15–17 years

*Your Dad would kill you if he found out.*  
Male, 18–24 years

Similar to non-Indigenous youth, there was also discomfort around the idea of confiding in someone unknown. Not only did participants believe this could result in the counsellor not understanding their issue but there was also the potential of being judged and ridiculed. This was of particular concern to older participants (15+ years old), and was reportedly intensified by Kids Helpline's lack of face-to-face contact:

*I can't see them so they're just going to laugh behind my back.*  
Female, 15–17 years

*I'm not going to talk about that shit with someone I don't know.* Male, 15–17 years

Linked to the above, while young people acknowledged the disadvantages in contacting a culturally specific service, the reverse was that many participants doubted that a non-specific service would be able to understand their issues and life experiences. Because of this, it was commonly thought that talking with an Indigenous counsellor would be more comfortable and beneficial, as other staff would not have sufficient cultural competence:

*How can they help, they don't know anything about me or my culture.*  
Female, 18–24 years

### **Preferred communication methods for formal help-seeking**

Of Kids Helpline's various contact methods (i.e. phone, email and real-time web), phone was the preferred method overall, despite the aforementioned confidentiality risks. This finding was consistent across all age groups and geographic locations, although less pronounced in the metropolitan groups, which perhaps reflects higher rates of comfort and accessibility in using the internet among metropolitan residents compared to non-metropolitan residents. Conversely, the limited access to private internet in rural and remote areas is a likely contributor to the phone's appeal among those living outside

metropolitan areas. The phone was typically thought to be quicker, more accessible, more personal, more anonymous, more readily available and less complicated to use. Interestingly, seeking help via SMS was raised by some older males as an appealing concept, as it was perceived as less of a commitment, thus less daunting. The belief that SMS is less expensive than a phone call (and possibly internet) also appealed:

*(With SMS) You could easily stop if you wanted to.* Male, 18–24 years

## **Discussion**

Findings from this study highlight the significant crossover in the help-seeking behaviours and barriers experienced by mainstream youth and Indigenous young people, particularly in relation to their tendency to use informal sources and their concerns regarding confidentiality, trust and judgement. However, as indicated by current help-seeking rates, these barriers appear to be more restricting for Indigenous than for non-Indigenous young people. Conversely, barriers found to be more pronounced among Indigenous adults than non-Indigenous adults appear to also apply to Indigenous young people, particularly intense fears of shame, social ostracism and intervention. While limited access to private internet (and limited internet literacy) are barriers likely to influence many young Australians living in remote Australia, the high proportion of Indigenous young people in these areas suggests that the barrier relates mostly to them. Lastly, concerns regarding a service's lack of cultural competence are likely to apply to many cultural minority groups.

As noted, most participants had not used Kids Helpline services, therefore their feedback could be assessed as being their general view about similar community and government services. This study subsequently reinforces the significant challenges that government, support services and community face in encouraging Indigenous young people to seek external help. Understanding factors that motivate and inhibit help-seeking by Indigenous young people can assist services



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to reach those who are not currently seeking formal assistance. Cultural nuances identified in this report and past research should be considered and used to inform specific engagement strategies, giving particular attention to the stark gender imbalance among Indigenous help-seekers, and the need to target young Indigenous males as those most susceptible to complex high-risk problems yet least likely to seek help. Given the limited amount of data in this area, further research into how to specifically engage this gender is recommended.

The relatively low rates of Indigenous young people seeking formal help, and their limited understanding of the support services available to them, highlight the need for services to increase awareness of and clarify their offering and service pathways. Building and strengthening relationships with Indigenous communities and developing culturally appropriate marketing collateral are steps in the right direction. As past research has shown (Nicholas et al. 2004), services may also do well to engage Indigenous young people in education seminars to help inform expectations of what the service offers and provide a sense of hope that seeking formal help can be of assistance. Including counsellors in this process will likely be key in helping Indigenous young people build a relevant connection and sense of familiarity with the service.

In addition, research shows that initiatives to reduce help-seeking barriers would do well to address common negative perceptions related to formal help-seeking (Sheffield, Fiorenza & Sofronoff 2004); in particular, concerns relating to quality, trust, confidentiality, judgement and shame (Carlton & Deane 2000). Recognising the value of “yarning” (i.e. initial non-counselling engagements with the support service) and encouraging its practice is one aspect of this. Allowing young people to trial the service in a supported group environment may also provide an effective opportunity for increasing familiarity and generating positive help-seeking experiences. Similarly, providing young people with case studies and/or engaging known help-seeking peers to act as advocates is likely

to provide a powerful message of encouragement for reluctant help-seekers. Given the comprehensiveness of such a strategy, staging school-based liaisons over numerous visits may assist retention and rapport building, and have a greater, longer-lasting impact. These liaisons should aim to include clear information for young people on the services’ methods for contact, target audience and types of problems responded to by counsellors. Reassurances addressing concerns regarding confidentiality, anonymity and judgement should also be included.

Moreover, expressed doubts regarding the cultural competence of mainstream counsellors reinforce the need for services to strengthen and then promote their competence in understanding the concerns of Indigenous young people. Indigenous-specific cultural training for counsellors on cultural behaviours and appropriate communication strategies is one important initiative, as is the implementation of a proactive recruitment strategy to engage Indigenous counsellors. Partnering with Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services, as practiced in the drug and alcohol sector, is another means of strengthening cultural competence. To be most effective, such initiatives require appropriate planning and support mechanisms (Lumby & Farrelly 2009).

With regard to contact methods offered by formal help-seeking services, the resounding preference among Indigenous young people for phone counselling, and the comfort and familiarity with which they converse using mobile phones, particularly SMS, cannot be ignored. Supporting this is recent data from Kids Helpline and other international child helplines that suggests young people with complex issues, such as thoughts of suicide, feel more comfortable seeking help via more “private” modalities such as mobile conversation and SMS. Such insights highlight the importance of not only maintaining a strong network of phone counsellors, but also removing cost barriers to ensure all young people can access these services via mobile phones free of charge. Strategies that enable a service’s number to be listed as unidentifiable on all mobile and landline bills should also be

pursued and communicated to young people once in effect. Furthermore, government and services would do well to recognise that SMS communication may be a less threatening way for young people, particularly reluctant help-seekers, to initially engage with the service.

The increasing role that online communication is playing in the help-seeking behaviours of young people generally, particularly metropolitan-based Indigenous young people, is notable. The internet is seen to provide a less-threatening environment for some reluctant help-seekers, despite it posing accessibility and literacy barriers for others. For those who are “internet enabled”, education strategies should aim to increase awareness of the service’s email and web counselling capabilities, and its online fact sheets, which can support those young people who may prefer to self-help using published information online. For those not yet “internet enabled”, particularly those Indigenous young people living in rural and remote areas, services need to continue working with government to help provide communities with increased private internet access and computer literacy training.

Last, while this small study provides some useful insight into the help-seeking behaviours of Indigenous young people, larger scale research is needed. Specifically, research to further inform the development of targeted early intervention and prevention programs in education and community settings that encourage and support Indigenous young people to seek formal help, particularly those identified to be at greatest risk of self-injury and/or suicide. Conversely, the overrepresentation of Indigenous young people with concerns such as emotional and behavioural issues, child abuse, homelessness matters, sexual assault, drugs and alcohol and grief (Bodkin-Andrews & Craven 2006; Keel 2004; Rothstein, Heazlewood & Fraser 2007) reinforces the need for government, support services and communities to prioritise working together to address this situation.

## Notes

1. Cultural identity was recorded in 15.9% of the 265,578 contacts received in 2011. The large number of contacts whose ethnicity

was unaccounted for suggests the number of Indigenous clients reported may be an underrepresentation of actual contact numbers.

2. All calls to Kids Helpline made from mobile phones within Australia are currently free.

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