

# Research in Action: Boys help seeking behaviour

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In 2021, we conducted a survey as part of our research work with Swinburne University students, to explore issues faced by young males (aged 12-18), their coping strategies and help seeking behaviour for their mental health and wellbeing. We received just over 2,500 responses, with young males telling us that the most common issues they were concerned about were:

92%  
Coping with stress

90%  
School or study problems

85%  
Depression

80%  
Body issues

"Pressure from everything. School, family and friends. I think what would they think of me if I sought help."

"People will judge me on how I look because of my body shape and my face."

".....The stress of everything is too much for some kids to handle these days, and it's not about hardening up because then you wouldn't understand. Social media ideologies mixed with stress and the weight of trying to be successful, having parents on your back, also while balancing a job, having no friends to rely on, not being good enough, can really hurt sometimes."

"I can't handle with stress and when I get stressed I freak out and get very short tempered, which has resulted in a lot of suspended time from school, this may be caused by my sensory processing disorder."

"Seems like all the time nowadays. I always feel stressed, anxious, depressed but I don't tell anyone."

"Seeking help has never crossed my mind. No one cares about boys' emotions in today's day and age."

## Coping Strategies

When the young males were not feeling their best they engaged in a range of activities both by themselves or with others. The following were the most common responses:

- 83% - Listened to music,
- 48% - Played games online with others,
- 40% - Used social media,
- 35% - Spent time outside by themselves,
- 30% - Played games/sports outside with others, and
- 30% - Hung out with family and/or mates.

89%

would have a conversation with a friend struggling with their mental wellbeing

48%

would suggest a friend talks to a counsellor or support service

"I don't really seek help but music and working out helps."

"I usually listen to music when I'm anxious or depressed and it calms me down before I ask for help."





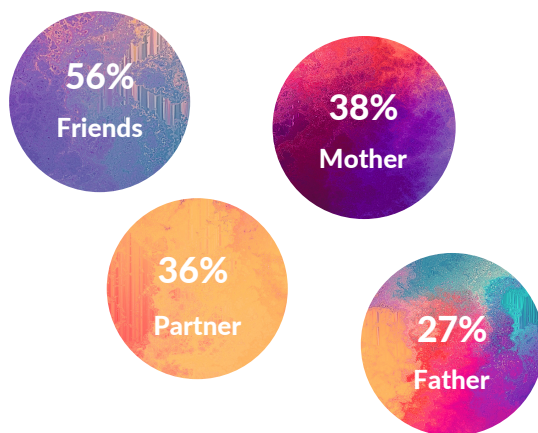
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## Support Systems

Young men were more likely to reach out to supports around them before seeking help from a mental health professional. The survey found most young men turn to friends for support or advice about their personal or emotional problems, followed by their mother, partner and father.



"When I'm struggling my parents including my teachers encourage me to seek help which then I feel stronger to get and seek help from a professional."

"I have never thought to seek help, if everything gets too much I will call my girlfriend and let out all my emotions."

"Usually after I talk about it maybe with a friend, I truly realise the seriousness and extent of my emotions which makes me think I need to seek more help."

## Barriers to Help Seeking

When young men feel they will not get adequate support from those around them or feel asking for help will impact others they are less likely to seek help. Strengthening the resources available to these supports, to allow them greater capacity to respond to the young men and help facilitate earlier connections with professional supports may be an area for intervention.

"Don't want help, don't want to hurt anyone else. I don't want to bother anyone, I don't want to make anyone else sad. If Mum or Dad ask me how I'm going I will just say good even if I'm not because seeing them in pain is worse than my own."

"I don't know what to do when I need help. It's an endless pit of all my feeling and I have no way to tell anyone cause if I do something my dad will yell at me and if I say anything after that he threatens to hit me sometimes."

"Well drama when my mum found out I was sad. I got yelled at and my family kinda bullied me because I felt anxious, they say it's not real."

Young men told us they only reach out when they cannot fix the problem themselves or it is increasingly impacting their daily lives. Many felt their issues were not serious enough to warrant seeking help.

"I don't want to seek out help as I feel like my problems are insignificant."

"There are people who need it more than me and I am wasting resources by going to seek help for trivial matters."

"[I don't seek help] if I can solve the problem or it's an internal problem."

"The fact that my concerns are "to minor to be seen by a professional" according to my mother."

There is a lack of knowledge around what mental health and wellbeing means, and where young men can seek help or resources from.

"What could anyone do that would be helpful?"

"I do not know when I am struggling mentally."





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Young men told us that the fear of stigma especially around masculine norms or being judged was a major barrier for seeking help. Being perceived as weak and feeling embarrassed were other common themes that arose.

**47%**

have never sought help for personal or emotional problems

**50%**

took longer than 4 months to reach out

**ONLY 6.7%**

sought help immediately

"I'm a man and men don't seek help."

"When I'm struggling mentally, things that make me not want to seek help is me thinking that I'm hopeless, my friends thinking I'm weak. I feel as if I can't do anything if I reach out for help."

"I guess the worry that I'm gonna be seen as weak, because I should be able to deal with my own problems and not make others have to deal with me. And I usually downplay my own issues."

"I feel like I would be less of a man and I would be embarrassed if I sought help."

"I may be judged or seen differently. People may only be asking for information to relay it back to my parents, which would result in more stress and family problems. I might just find out that there is something wrong with me. People will dismiss my concerns because they think I'm playing up my problems to feel special."

"The male stigma and the fear of completely losing it and sacrificing stability and productivity to sadness. The stone pillar may crack and crumble but at least it is still standing."

"I don't want to admit to someone I need help."

"That I would be considered weak and get laughed at by others."

"Fear of being turned away for 'overreacting' or attention seeking."

"Stigma around men seeking help or that I should be self sufficient. Another thing is I sometimes feel silly asking for help or feel that my issues are less than those who would need a service more than me."

Young men often felt that a mental health service would not be able to assist them with their needs and concerns. Others told us they had had poor experiences when using a mental health service in the past.

"Judgement. Bad experiences. Stuck in the constant loop so can't even think about seeking help. Gotten to comfy within where I am, would rather struggle and be comfortable."

"I don't want people to know I'm struggling and I feel overwhelmed and anxious talking to health professionals as I've had bad experiences with them as a trans man (FtM)."

"Previous bad experiences with that particular person or organisation. If I believe a person or organisation will not be equipped to help me with an issue, I will not generally seek help from them. I will likely try another support source."

"When the negative emotions are associated with something trivial, or I know from past experience that the feelings will resolve themselves."





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## Differences in Help Seeking Behaviour between Younger and Older Teenage Boys

The survey results consisted of close to 1,350 boys in the younger teenage cohort (aged 12-15) and 1,100 from the older teenage cohort (aged 16-18). We found differences in help seeking behaviour between these age groups.

Compared to the the younger cohort, the older cohort told us they were more concerned about:

- Depression,
- Suicide,
- Alcohol, and
- Drugs.

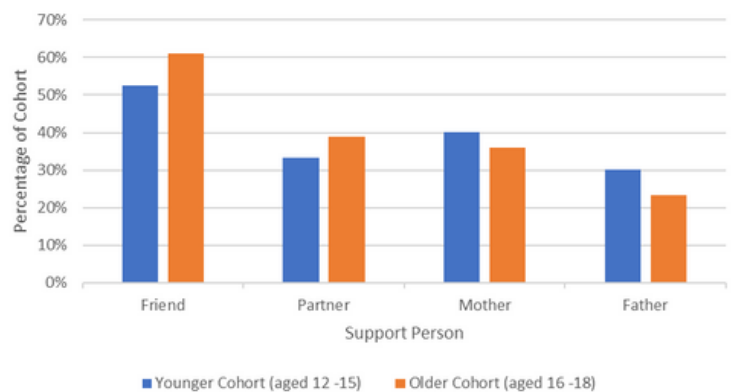
In comparison the younger cohort were more concerned about personal safety.

**"If I am genuinely concerned for my safety due to suicidal thoughts I might start to think about talking to others. Or if I take a test and there is a strong recommendation to seek help I might consider it as well."**

The older cohort were more likely to seek help for personal or emotional problems than the younger cohort.

The younger cohort, compared to the older cohort were more likely to reach out to their parents. The older cohort, in comparison to the younger cohort, were more likely to seek support from their friends and partner.

Source of support for personal and emotional problems based on cohort



When the younger cohort were not feeling their best they were more likely to engage in activities with social connections. This includes:

- Playing games online with others,
- Playing games or sports outside with others, and
- Using social media.

In comparison the older cohort were more likely to listen to music or go outside by themselves.

**"When I feel mentally distressed I usually hide myself away a little bit and pretend I'm fine."**

**"I feel like I can rely on myself and it's better if people don't know what I am going through."**

**"I will get told to "be a man" when I'm just trying to show how I feel or [asked] "how old are you? Yeah that's right 12, you are grown up now, other 12 year olds don't cry"."**

**51%**

of boys aged 16-18 had sought help

**39%**

of boys aged 12-15 had sought help

