Research Result Summaries

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The Role of Attachment, Emotion Regulation, and Distress Disclosure in Seeking Help Online in Emerging Adults

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Objectives: The primary purpose of the present study was to examine the relations of emerging adults' attachment style (attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety) with their intentions and behaviours of seeking help online for an emotional or personal problem. As part of this endeavour, a questionnaire (Online Help-Seeking Questionnaire; OHSQ) was developed to assess online help seeking from various sources of support via different online tools of communication. Another objective of the study was to investigate the connections of attachment style with both intentions and behaviours of seeking help from informal (e.g., family, friends, and romantic partners) and formal sources of support (e.g., psychologists, social workers, and doctors). In addition, a final goal was to explore the potential mediating role of emotion regulation and distress disclosure in the relations between attachment style and both help-seeking intentions and behaviours in young adults.

Method: The sample was 354 undergraduate university students (299 females; 53 males; and 2 who identified as genderqueer) who were 17 to 25 years old ($M = 19.94$, $SD = 1.62$). Participants completed an online survey of questionnaires, including measures related to their background information, attachment style in close relationships (Experiences in Close Relationships – Relationship Structures; Fraley et al., 2011), difficulties in emotion regulation (Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale; Gratz & Roemer, 2004), tendency to disclose distress to other people (Distress Disclosure Index; Kahn & Hessling, 2001), general help-seeking intentions and behaviours (modified General Help-Seeking Questionnaire; Deane et al., 2001; Wilson et al., 2005), and intentions and behaviours of seeking help online for an emotional or personal problem (OHSQ).

Results: An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was completed on items of the OHSQ. Based on results of the EFA, four factors were identified: online help seeking by directly messaging close others via social networking sites or smartphones; online help seeking by posting to anonymous sources of support (help-seeker identity is unknown); online help seeking by posting to large audiences (help-seeker identity is known); and online help seeking by searching for and reading information.

Correlation analyses revealed that higher levels of attachment avoidance were significantly associated with lower intentions to seek help online by way of directly messaging close others (e.g., via text message), posting to large audiences (e.g., on social networking sites), and searching for and reading information relevant to the problem, as well as with engaging in fewer help-seeking behaviours of directly messaging close others. Similarly, greater attachment avoidance was significantly related to lower intentions to seek help from informal and formal sources of support, as well as to engaging in fewer help-seeking behaviours from informal and formal sources. Conversely, higher levels of attachment anxiety were significantly associated with greater intentions to seek help online by way of posting to anonymous sources of support and searching for and reading information, as well as with engaging in more online help-seeking behaviours of searching for and reading information pertaining to the problem. Greater attachment anxiety was significantly related to lower intentions to seek help from informal sources, but also to engaging in a greater number of help-seeking behaviours from professional sources.

A series of significant mediation analyses revealed that higher levels of attachment avoidance predicted greater difficulties in emotional awareness, which in turn, predicted lower intentions (directly messaging close others and searching for/reading information) and fewer behaviours (directly messaging close others) of seeking help online. In contrast, higher levels of attachment anxiety predicted greater difficulties with access to effective emotion regulation strategies, which in turn, predicted a greater number of online help-seeking behaviours (searching for/reading information). Yet, higher levels of attachment anxiety predicted lower tendencies to disclose distress to others, which in turn, predicted lower intentions to seek help from informal sources. Similarly, higher levels of attachment avoidance predicted lower tendencies to disclose distress, which in turn, predicted fewer help-seeking behaviours from informal sources. However, higher levels of attachment avoidance predicted greater difficulties with access to effective emotion regulation strategies, which in turn, predicted a greater number of help-seeking behaviours from formal sources.

Conclusion: The current study findings offer valuable practical implications for engaging young people in the help-seeking process via online platforms and computer-mediated technology, namely that trusting relationships with close others and greater awareness of emotions continue to be crucial facilitators of seeking help in an online context. Taken together, the results highlight the fundamental role of the attachment relationship in how emerging adults view themselves and others in the context of their relationships, which in turn, influences whether emerging adults anticipate that they can go to other people for support and also whether and from whom they choose to ultimately seek help for a personal or emotional problem. These findings also underline the connection between individuals' attachment style and the degree to which individuals are aware of their feelings and tend to share their distressing feelings with others – both of which influence emerging adults' help seeking online and from informal sources, respectively.