

## *Understanding Help-Seeking Behavior Among Filipino University Students*

Jaymee Abigail K. Pantaleon, De La Salle University, Philippines  
Luzviminda L. Uy, De La Salle University, Philippines  
Eduarda V. Dino, De La Salle University, Philippines

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### **Abstract**

There is an increase of mental health concerns among university students, compared to previous generations, as relationships and academic demands become more complex. The researchers explored students' perceptions and the experiences they go through in seeking help, specifically problem awareness, decision to seek help and support system. 14 respondents from different colleges and universities in Metro Manila participated in this qualitative study. Thematic analysis was used to process data gathered from the interviews. Key results were help-seeking can come from both informal (family and friends) and professional help (counselors, psychologists), one's outlook towards help-seeking can be connected to the individual's decision to seek help and quality of support system is evident in the process of help-seeking, from problem recognition to decision to seek help. Hence, help-seeking behavior is an important psychological process to understand to effectively deliver counseling services and advocate progressive mental health programs in our universities and counseling centers. The findings highlight the crucial role of practitioners and policy makers to explore the relevance of its guidance programs in relation to the needs of the stakeholders, university students.

Keywords: Help-Seeking Behavior, University Students, Mental Health

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## Introduction

There is an increase of mental health concerns among university students, compared to previous generations, as relationships and academic demands become more complex. Dramatic increase in mental health concerns among university guidance centers (Zivin, 2008) Psychological conditions such as anxiety (41%), depression (36%), relationship issues (35%) and suicidal thoughts (16%) are prevalent among university students and appear to be increasing in number and severity (Hunt, 2010). In a study conducted by Vogel, Wade, Wester, Larson & Hackler (2007), less than 40% of individuals seek professional help within a year of the onset of a psychological disorder. Goh and Ang (2007) posit that adolescents tend to underutilize mental health services provided by the schools and over utilize informal sources of support. Mental health services in the country are inaccessible and monetarily prohibitive, and beliefs about the etiology and nature of mental illness are inconsistent with the medical model (Tuliao, 2014). Other cultural variables such as shame, stigma, and collectivist beliefs such as social outlook, also discourage Filipinos from seeking help from mental health professionals. The researchers explored students' perceptions and their experiences they go through in seeking help, specifically problem awareness, decision to seek help and support system.

Help-seeking behavior (HSB) is defined as "any action or activity carried out by an adolescent who perceives herself/himself as needing personal, psychological, affective assistance or health or social services with purpose of realizing this need in a positive way" (Barker, 2007). Help-seeking behavior is also known to be an important subset of coping, which includes requests for assistance and advice from friends, relatives, neighbors and as well as professional agents (Bolero, 1995). Understanding the kind of adolescents who live in today's generation is an important recipe for society to be able to recognize their needs and address their concerns (Patel & Fisher, 2007). The scope of help-seeking behaviors covers the use of health and other psychological services both counseling and clinical in nature. Help-seeking behavior also includes cases of serious or severe mental health issues, substance abuse, depression and suicide (Barker, 2007).

In a study conducted by Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra & Weintraub (2005), they articulated the three phases of help-seeking behavior among survivors of intimate partner violence. These are awareness of the problem, decision to seek help and support selection. These stages are nonlinear, and that the process can be influenced by interpersonal and sociocultural factors. Having an understanding about links between behavior and health, specifically help-seeking, is an essential factor in an informed choice concerning a healthy lifestyle. These factors include perceptions of psychological health risk, potential efficacy of behaviors in reducing this risk, perceived social pressures to perform the behavior, and control over performance of the behavior (Connor & Norman, 2015). The Filipino youth nowadays also tend to be comfortable at constructing themselves as individuals with unique characteristics, personal wishes and goals and as individuals who value others' expectations and wishes (Puyat, 2003; Miralao, 2003). The literature indirectly tells us that people's help-seeking behavior differs from one person to another. Age, self-worth and environment of a person affect an individual's vulnerability in facing and handling pressure. It is noted that young people who feel good about themselves tend to be less vulnerable to pressures from various sources to engage in high-risk behaviors. Achievement in school elevates this general sense of self-worth, underscoring the importance of schooling itself and a school environment that is conducive to the experience of success (Fernandez, 2012). Saunders (1993) and Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra & Weintraub (2005) believe that support selection is the stage

that sustains the whole help-seeking process. In a study conducted by Bolero (1997) on adolescent help-seeking behaviour most of the adolescents ask help from family and friends. This is in contrast to seeking professional help that they visit infrequently. This reinforces Understanding Help-Seeking Behaviour among Filipino University Students 8 the conclusion that adolescents rarely ask professionals for help even when they are distressed. When ranked, consulting peers came in first (51%), followed by parents (42%), professional help (41%) and teachers (37%). Social support among Filipino adolescents is conceptualized mainly as hands-on support (Fernandez, 2012). Advice, personal assistance, and being challenged are conceptualized as expressions of care and concern, rather than as intrusive acts. Less than 40% of individuals seek professional help within a year of the onset of a psychological disorder (Vogel, Wade, Wester, Larson & Hackler, 2007).

### Conceptual Framework

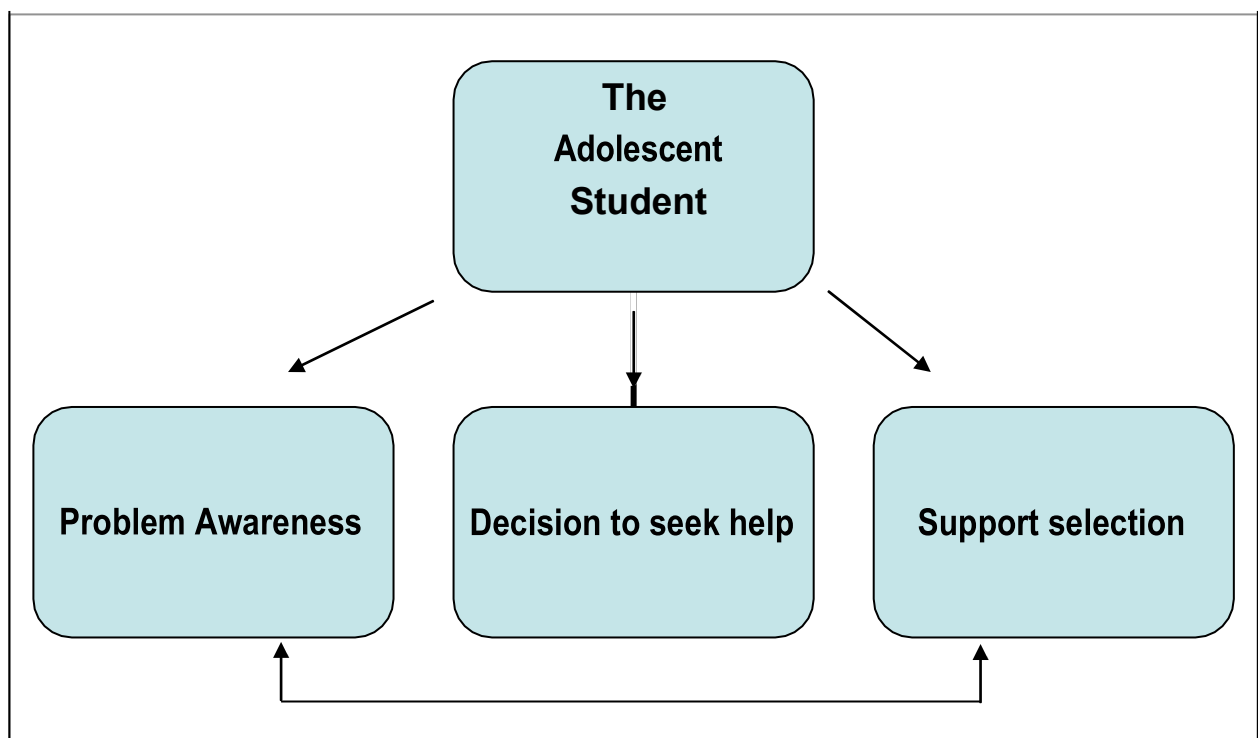


Figure 1: Model on Help-Seeking

This study adapted the model on help-seeking and change developed by Liang, Goodman, Narra and Weintraub (2005). There are four concepts that were identified as areas of discussion in this study: (1) a background of the college student, his/her understanding of what help-seeking behavior, and the process of help-seeking which includes three stages; (2) problem awareness; (3) decision to seek help; and (4) support selection. This process is non-linear since there may be stories that would start with the decision to seek help, choose their help giver then the realization of the problem to follow suit. However, these concepts are interrelated with one another as problem awareness and support system are crucial stages for the help-seeker to formulate the decision to seek help. In this study, help-seeking behavior (HSB) is operationally defined as “any action or activity carried out by an adolescent who perceives herself/himself as needing personal, psychological, affective assistance or health or social services with purpose of realizing this need in a positive way” (Barker, 2007).

This research aims to explore the experience of university adolescent students in the help-seeking process, specifically in the areas of problem awareness, decision to seek help and support selection.

Furthermore, it forwards the following research questions:

1. What is the perception of a university adolescent student on help-seeking behavior?
2. When does a university adolescent student recognize that he/she is need of help?
3. What are the factors that lead a university adolescent student to seek help?
4. How does the university adolescent student define support system?

## **Methodology**

Because the primary aim of this study is to understand the process that transpires before the actual help-seeking occurs, qualitative study using thematic analysis was conducted. Help-seeking is a complex behavior that needs a systemic approach in order to understand the process that goes with it. Webster (2008) affirmed that qualitative research done in this area of help-seeking behavior is comparatively rare. There has also been a growing interest in pursuing qualitative research in understanding experiences of service users and mental health problems, which includes their perceptions and interactions with healthcare services. Thematic analysis gives this research the opportunity to also understand the social context of the participant and how it can play an important role in the cognitive process without imposing pre-conceived expectations. The nature of this research is to capture the process of help-seeking through the personal accounts of the participants.

This study involved 14 university students, both male and female, ages between 18-20 years old. All were able to articulate in Filipino and/or English, have accomplished needed consent forms and agreed to have the interviews tape-recorded. At the time of the interviews, all were enrolled in private or state universities across Metro Manila. Prior to the interview, all participants have experienced seeking assistance either from their guidance counselor (professional) or peers and family (personal). Out of the 14 participants, 7 of them sought professional help through their university/college counselor, 7 sought the assistance of their family and friends. From the 7 participants who went through professional help, 5 were able to finish therapy, 2 were ongoing. These participants were asked of their personal background (beliefs, values, social relations), how they perceived themselves and current concerns that they experience in relation to help-seeking behavior. These participants came from diverse family backgrounds, upbringing and social status which presents a wide array of personalities.

## **Results and Discussion**

An individual's background on how one formed his/her beliefs and behavior came from his/her experiences. The participants came from different backgrounds and upbringing. During interviews, they have disclosed their respective roles in the family, their interpersonal roles in the home and school setting, past and current experiences that led them to seek help. Majority of the participants were open in sharing their own experiences, with professional and personal help. 7 participants who sought the help of their peers, teachers and family members are also opened to receive professional help once the need arises. Self-presentation, how the participants described themselves and their situation also connected with their narratives regarding the whole help-seeking process. According to Hess and Tracey (2012), the belief that they can solve their mental health concerns can be a strong predictor of their

decision to seek treatment. Family dynamics and peer relations also play an important role in one's perception and behavior on help-seeking. Some participants disclosed that they did not want to burden their parents, which is the reason why they prefer going to their friends. There were also participants who would prefer an expert, over family and friends in listening to their problems.

Attitudes and beliefs play an important role in solving problems (Wilson 2002). Perception gives a mental impression of how one understands a concept. Outlook directs us to general point of view, attitude towards life. Thus, one's perception and outlook of help-seeking, has a connection in recognizing their problems and decision to seek help.

Most of the responses from the participants defined help-seeking behavior as people they can approach in times of difficulty. Two participants identified counselors and psychologists as helping professionals and are considered experts in the field. Most participants are more open to seek help from family and friends before going to a helping professional. If the problem is not solved, then that is the only time when they would see their school counselor. Based on the responses given by the participants, professional help means "seeing a person who knows what he's talking about", and expert in the concerned topic, who knows the background of the problem and how it can be treated. This may both mean mental health professionals and at the same time, their family and friends. As Goh and Ang (2007) posit, adolescents tend to underutilize mental health services provided by the schools and overutilize informal sources of support (helper) in help-seeking behavior. Most of the participants claim to have a positive outlook towards help-seeking, that this would help them in dealing with their everyday problems. The difference would always be the people they would approach for psychological help, both professional and informal sources. There were also a few participants hesitant in disclosing their problems regardless of social support available. With this, two main themes surfaced: positive and negative outlook towards help-seeking. Examples of positive outlook towards help-seeking are: heightened level of self-awareness, no harm in asking help, clarity and enlightenment, and maximizing guidance services. For negative outlook on help-seeking, the following subthemes surfaced: ongoing stigmatization and issues of trust.

Some participants carry the belief that there is no harm in asking for help. According to Owen et.al (2013), individuals may internalize or form beliefs about the value of seeking mental health services through the labels and perceptions of others and adopt them as their own. Parental models can also play an important part in forming help-seeking attitudes and beliefs (Connor and Norman, 2015) There were also respondents who wanted clarity and enlightenment with the current challenges they are going through, which led them to seek the help of a counselor. There were participants who believe that counselors are there to listen to their concerns.

From the participants' responses, the definition of help-seeking can relate to how they perceive when and who they go to for psychological assistance. The participants who saw benefit in asking for help, had more motivation to either go to therapy or disclose their concern with their family and friends. Moreover, several participants saw the difference of seeking professional help compared to approaching informal sources of help. Connor and Norman (2015) posit how individual makes sense of their personal situation can be best understood in how they make sense of others (person perception) and oneself (self-regulation). Their outlook towards help-seeking (positive and negative themes) connects to their responses in deciding to seek help (motivations and prevention). Furthermore, one's intention to act can be a proximal determinant of behavior (Hardeman, 2012)

Awareness of the problem is seen to be a crucial step in the whole help-seeking process. Two main themes were established, how participants realized that they are in need of help: changes in thoughts and changes in one's behavior. Changes in one's thoughts had two subthemes, knowing oneself and not wanting to burden family members. On the other hand, subthemes under changes in behavior were, lethargy and depression, bouts of anxiety and low academic grades.

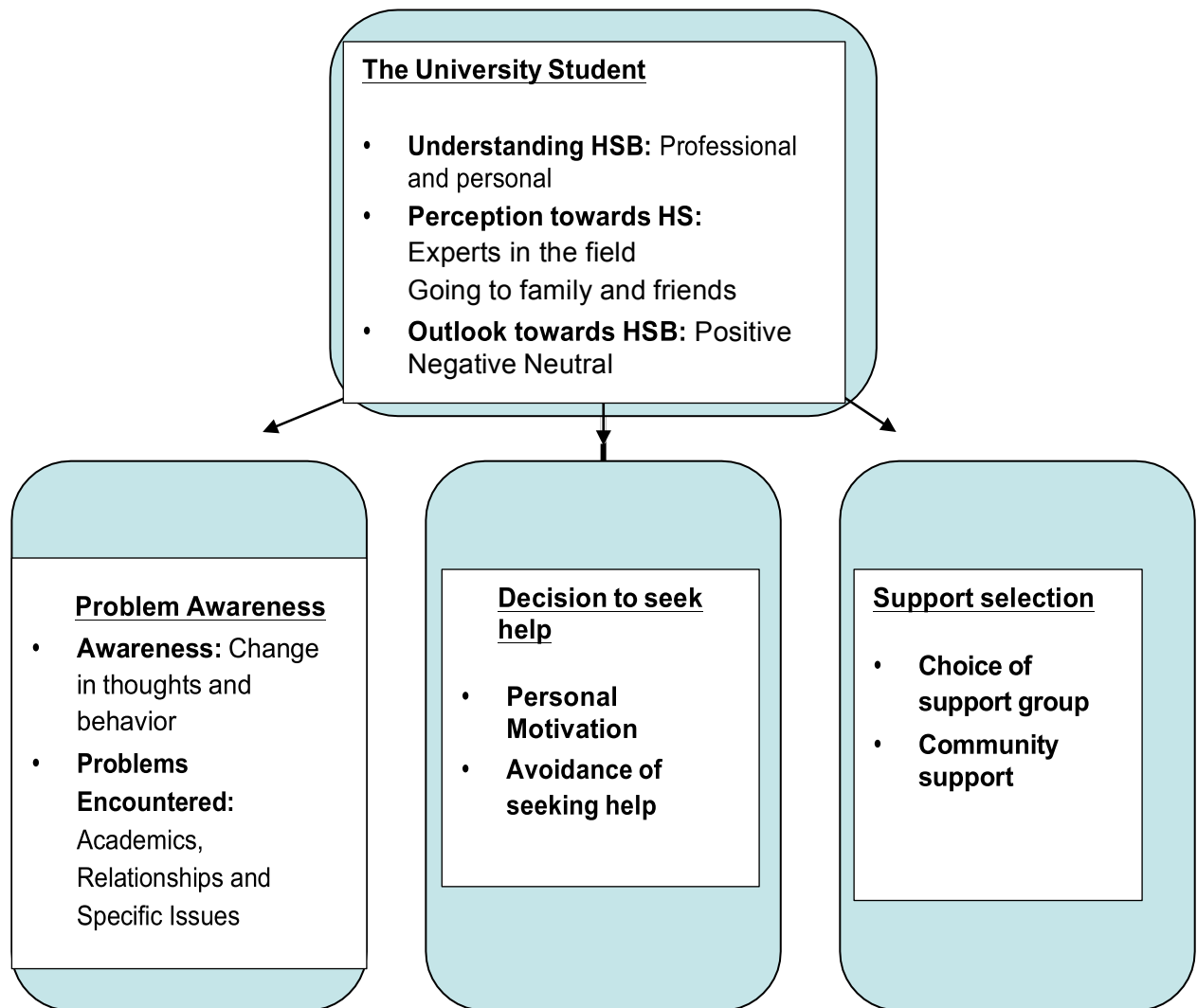
Knowing oneself, strengths and limitations is seen to be helpful in realizing that one needs help already. One participant is very conscious of monitoring his thoughts knowing that he has a tendency to have recurring thoughts "sometimes, because I have this tendency to wake up one day overthink and these thoughts can drown you. It's good to have someone listen. I don't want to, realizing that I am suicidal already (due to overthinking)." Two participants mentioned that acknowledging one's limitations played an important role in their decision to ask for other people's participation. One mentioned, "if my self-confidence is already affected and you get this feeling of being overwhelmed, then you know you need help." Another was self-aware that he "was in a mess, when everything felt caving in. Right then, I know I needed to see someone." When asked what "in a mess" meant, the participant described this as "not functioning well, having difficulty sleeping and couldn't focus on academics." Another recurring response from several participants is that they don't want to burden their family members with their problems, that is why they seek professional help. One participant mentioned that "it is best to seek professional help, then burdening family members with my problems. A mature person (other than family and friends) made me decide to see a counselor." On the other hand, the following are some observed behaviors from the participants that prompted them to seek professional help. A participant said that when he/she keeps on repeating the same behavior, then this person may need to seek "professional help". She believes that one needs help if something cannot be out of your mind to the point that it affects one's daily life. One participant said that the feeling of lethargy and depression, difficulty in sleeping can be an indicator that a person is in need of professional help. There was another participant who disclosed that she had non-suicidal self-injurious behavior. In relation to this, most of the participants try to manage their anger outbursts. Another participant shared that when students have these long lapses of silence, glassy stares and is unusually quiet can be indicators that a person may need professional help.

The problems encountered by adolescents which led them to seek professional help are academics and relationship issues. From the individual's decision to seek help, two main themes demerged: their personal motivation and their avoidance in seeking help. Under personal motivation, there are five subthemes identified: self-realization, solid support system, and characteristics of the counselor, positive outlook in asking for help and routine interviews and referrals. On the other hand, there were four subthemes gathered under avoidance in seeking help: thoughts on not being able to handle problems, being "broken or mental", and feelings of mistrust, fear and shame and obligatory function of counselor to help. Another thing that motivates students from seeking help is sharing their stories which makes them feel lighter inside. The fear of being stuck with a problem is also something that pushes them to share with other people.

Another source of motivation is a solid support system that an individual can trust. This is defined as friends, family other than professional help. Characteristics of the counselor is defined as the counselor being warm, friendly, and trustworthy and open to situations. Some

participants see these traits, helpful in their decision to seek help. Majority would still consult peers, because they can empathize and understand the situation better.

### Theoretical/Conceptual Implications



### Conclusion

Based on the interviews conducted among selected college students, understanding help-seeking behavior can be a complex endeavor for the help-seeker. The decision to seek psychological help often begin from problem awareness and support system. Though the definition of psychological help-seeking is more general, describing the help-giver from informal sources (eg. friends and family) to going to professional help (eg. counselors, psychologists), there is an observed level of sensitivity from the participants in distinguishing psychological issues that may warrant the need for professional help. While it is true that help-seeking behavior is not a linear process, it is also essential to investigate further possible entry and end points for HSB. A quantitative study on the relationship between support system-decision making and problem awareness – decision making can be explored. This is seen important for future program/service evaluation for university guidance centers. Knowing one’s perception and outlook towards help-seeking can give the counselor a preview of the client’s beliefs. How one evaluates his/her problem (self-assessment) is

crucial. The researchers suggest that a possible topic that can be discussed during sessions is client's perceptions on help-seeking, which can be facilitative in identifying the prognosis of case. Do college students have the skills needed to be able to effectively self-assess their own psychological state? Do they have the skills needed to be able to conduct psychological first aid to themselves and other people? Answers to these questions can deem beneficial in understanding one's intentions that may eventually lead to actual help-seeking behavior.

Self-awareness was seen to be an effective skill that can help students help themselves then eventually help other people. This is how we can create a culture of normative help-seeking behavior in our schools and eventually in our society. Family background and social dynamics play a pertinent role in the formation of one's perception towards help-seeking. This can be explored in succeeding research. Both informal and formal means of help are important in the whole help-seeking process. It is the awareness and acceptance of the help-seeker that there are concerns which might warrant professional help. Both literature and results would direct us that informal sources is still the first line of help that individuals go to. Depending on the problem, these support systems are instrumental in connecting them to appropriate professional help. Since this study is exploratory in nature, there were varied responses of the participants that made the results and discussion more challenging to analyze. Future researchers can further probe on each construct of the help-seeking behavior such as problem recognition, decision to seek help and support system. Quantitative measures can also be investigated to gather a bigger sample of the participants. It is interesting to note university students who are not open to seeking help, both professional and personal. It is the role of the university to also look after these types of students, who are wary of receiving any kind of help from other people.

Knowing the growing number of psychological needs of our students poses an even bigger challenge to our helping professionals in the university. How well do we know our students? Help-seeking behavior is an important psychological process to understand for us to effectively advocate progressive mental health programs in our universities and counseling centers. Furthermore, It is essential to investigate further the flow of help-seeking behavior. Help-seeking behavior can also be extended not only with the decision to seek counseling and its first session, but to complete the counseling process. Empirical studies can be conducted to explore student /school culture profile, effectivity and relevance of our guidance programs, help-seeking across developmental stages and students who are at the peripheries of the university At the end of the day, it is the goal of this research, as well as mental health practitioners, to give the best service to students who need of are in need psychological assistance, that they be able to get the competent and compassionate professional help when they need it the most.

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**Contact email:** luzviminda.uy@dlsu.edu.ph