

ABSTRACT

Background: Even though mental health issues are common among adolescents, they are least likely to seek help for it. Psychological distress results due to many risk factors during adolescence and could lead to harmful consequences. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to identify help seeking intentions of adolescents in dealing with psychological distress, and to facilitate services which will help them receive the assistance needed.

Objective: To assess the help seeking behaviour in relation to psychological distress and associated factors among school going late adolescents (16-19 years), in the Colombo Education zone.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted among 621 adolescents aged between 16 to 19 years in the Colombo Education zone by using a multistage stratified proportionate sampling method. A self-administered questionnaire was used to assess psychological distress (K10) and related help seeking behaviour. Preferred help seeking methods and their associations, such as personal characteristics, recognition of the problem and stigma were assessed through Chi-squared tests.

Results: The sample consisted majority of Sinhalese (n=419; 70.4%), with 300 (50.4%) 16-year olds, 171 (28.7%) 17-year olds and 124 (20.8%) 18-year olds. The prevalence of psychological distress among late adolescents was 35.1% (95% CI- 31.1-38.8). Psychological distress was significantly associated with being female (p=0.001), increase in age (p=0.001) and Islam religion (p=0.002). Fifty four point eight percent (n=326) of students were able to identify distress as mental symptoms. Age (p=0.008), gender (p=0.001) and being positive for psychological distress (p=0.001) was positively associated with identification of symptoms of distress.

Majority of students (n=326; 32.4%) preferred speaking to a friend, followed by a parent (n=181; 30.4%) in regard to help seeking. Among the students, 12.2% wished to seek formal help whereas, 20.7% stated they wouldn't ask for any sort of help. There was a positive association between being male and seeking medical help (p=0.015). Students who were psychologically distressed, preferred physical and spiritual activities as methods of help which were found to be significant. Higher education level of the father was significantly associated with seeking medical help by students. Reasons such as

feeling shy, worried about what others might think, and having bad experience with treatment in the past showed positive association with low education level of parents.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Help seeking behaviour for psychological distress among late adolescents depends on various factors, namely age, gender, status of distress, parental education level, and personal characteristics. Formally assessing students for psychological distress, education regarding early identification and available services, and awareness on mental health for general population are recommended.

Key words: psychological distress, adolescents, help seeking behaviour