

More than one in four high school students have experienced symptoms of depression

March 20 2019, by Ivy Shih



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

More than a quarter of high school students have experienced symptoms of clinical depression and other psychiatric conditions, but most are not accessing support from mental health professionals, a UNSW-led survey reveals.

More than a quarter of high school students have experienced signs of clinical depression and other [psychiatric conditions](#), with the type of mood disorder influencing students' risk of suicide and self-harm.

The UNSW study – published in the Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease – offers a concerning insight into the lack of mental health support adolescents are accessing, with only 20 to 25 percent of students with a suggested psychiatric condition saying they had sought help from a general practitioner or a mental health professional.

The anonymous survey, led by UNSW Scientia Psychiatry Professor and Black Dog Institute Founder Gordon Parker AO, asked over 1500 year 11 and 12 Sydney private school students questions relating to mood and anxiety in recent periods and over their lifetime, and collected details about their history of self-harm behaviours, thoughts of suicide and history of being bullied.

Professor Parker says the study was conducted in response to community concerns about a number of upper North Shore students committing suicide in previous years.

"There is predictably considerable concern about the risk of suicide in adolescents," Professor Parker says.

"Based on the survey answers, we wanted to assess whether there were certain psychiatric conditions that put students at an increased risk of suicide and self-harm."

The [anonymous survey](#) was carried out with the consent of parents, school counsellors and principals. Questions were based on a set of guidelines used by psychiatrists and [mental health professionals](#) for psychiatric diagnoses, including detailed criteria for [major depressive disorder](#), social anxiety, [panic attacks](#) and post-traumatic stress disorder,

while eating [disorders](#) were also assessed.

"We quantified that 26.8 percent of students met the criteria for major (clinical) depression, 21.5 percent for social anxiety disorders, and 1.0 percent for a bipolar disorder," Professor Parker says.

"We also found that thoughts of suicide and previous self-harm were distinctly highest in those with a melancholic depression or bipolar disorder, in comparison to students with the other disorders or no condition at all."

Among students who had experienced major (clinical) depression, 29 percent had a history of self-harm and 59 percent had felt suicidal over their lifetime, and of those with a melancholic depression, 50 percent had self-harmed and 60 percent had felt suicidal. Among students with responses that fit the diagnosis of bipolar disorder, 57 percent had self-harmed and 90 percent had felt suicidal.

The survey also found that there was a higher rate of suicide and [self-harm](#) history in female students: 6.5 percent of the boys and 19.1 percent of the girls had self-harmed or taken an overdose of medication, while 26.5 percent of male students and 33.8 percent of female students had thought of suicide over their lifetime.

"The study also highlights the grave extent to which bullying occurs and the effects of such vicious personal attacks on vulnerable young people experiencing depression," Professor Parker says.

17.8 percent of the boys and 8.5 percent of girls had experienced bullying about their depression, with higher rates in those with a melancholic depression or a [bipolar disorder](#).

More information: Gordon Parker et al. The Risk of Suicide and Self-

Harm in Adolescents Is Influenced by the "Type" of Mood Disorder, *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* (2018). [DOI: 10.1097/NMD.0000000000000917](https://doi.org/10.1097/NMD.0000000000000917)

Provided by University of New South Wales

Citation: More than one in four high school students have experienced symptoms of depression (2019, March 20) retrieved 23 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-03-high-school-students-experienced-symptoms.html>

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