

# Stressed teenagers reluctant to seek formal help, research finds

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Lead researcher, Dr. Valerie Sotardi from the University of Canterbury (UC), says it's vital that young people feel they can ask for help, before their stress escalates into more serious mental health challenges.

"It's not just a matter of accessibility—that talking to their friends is way faster and doesn't cost them anything as opposed to going to a professional service—it's also reflecting their beliefs about whether formal help will be useful and whether they feel as though they need that level of help," Dr. Sotardi says.

Informal help from friends and family, however, is not always effective.

"Do they know how to actively listen, how to ask good questions, how to normalize the problem and reassure the young person that they will be OK?"

## Training teens to provide good support

A solution could be creating resources to show teenagers how to respond effectively when their friends need to discuss their problems, Dr. Sotardi says, similar to [online resources](#) she created for Ako Aotearoa to help students cope with assessment anxiety.

"We can create interventions or programs that help friends or family members to learn how to receive and provide effective support," she says. "If we can find interventions that are cost effective, which is the reality of the situation, then best practice is training teenagers and adults to listen and give good advice, and those seem like good skills to have

anyway."

This training should start quite young, she suggests. "One of the important questions that we want to understand is when to start preparing young people, because I don't want a child to wait until they're 18 and are now just learning basic coping strategies to seek help. I want them to learn that in primary school so by the time things get difficult in secondary school they've got those skill sets equipped and practiced."

## Young people who don't seek help

While students were more likely to seek informal support from friends and family, many in the sample group of 1600 students in Canterbury and Auckland showed a reluctance to ask for any type of help.

"There was a huge reluctance among students to seek help. In general, it was abysmal and it is really frustrating to see. Some students would not seek help in any situation even given a range of options, from a counselor or GP, what we could call formal help, to friends or talking to family and whanau," she says.

"It's hard to see because if students can't seek help when they're stressed it is no surprise that they're not getting the support they need."

Those who experienced school-related or personal stress (the study measured both) were also more likely to have lower wellbeing scores and lower perceptions of their achievement at school, the findings suggest.

The study surveyed 13 to 19 year-olds from Christchurch and Auckland about their stress levels, help seeking intentions, life satisfaction (the technical term for wellbeing) and subjective perceptions of achievement at school. The survey was conducted before the effects of COVID-19 impacted on the students.

Co-authors on the paper "Adolescent stress, help-seeking intentions, subjective achievement and life satisfaction in New Zealand: Tests of mediation, moderated mediation and moderation" were Penelope Watson from the University of Auckland (UA), Cara Swit from UC, Deepika Roy from UA and Maansa Bajaj from UC.

**More information:** Valerie A. Sotardi et al. Adolescent stress, help-seeking intentions, subjective achievement and life satisfaction in New Zealand: Tests of mediation, moderated mediation and moderation, *Stress and Health* (2020). [DOI: 10.1002/smj.3021](https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.3021)

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