



# Evaluation of nursing students' attitudes towards seeking psychological help and factors affecting their attitudes

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## SUMMARY

Psychological help-seeking means to benefit different sources of support system for the difficulties people have. It is important to find out help-seeking attitudes and factors which affect these attitudes, earlier to protect, and to advance mental health. The aim of this study was to investigate nursing students' attitudes towards seeking psychological help and factors which affect their attitudes. The study sample included 248 nursing students exposed to problem based learning at Dokuz Eylül University School of Nursing in the academic year of 2006–2007. Data were collected with Help-Seeking Scale. Obtained data were evaluated with variance analysis, *t*-test and Mann–Whitney *U* test. The third and fourth year students had more favorable mean scores for interpersonal openness, being forced and confidence in counselor than the first and second year students. In view of the obtained results, it can be recommended that first and second year students should be followed more carefully in terms of psychological problems and that a longitudinal study should be conducted on students' attitudes towards seeking psychological help throughout their study period.

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## Introduction

Seeking psychological help means benefitting from different sources of support to cope with difficulties. It is also defined as receiving support from informal and formal sources of support (e.g. mental health professionals) to solve emotional and behavioral problems (Srebnik et al., 1996). Individuals seeking help expect people who give support to be tolerant, to offer recommendations, information and support and to cure their conditions. Seeking help is an effective coping skill (Rickwood et al., 2005).

Sources of psychological help can be both informal (e.g. parents and friends) and formal (e.g. counselor and mental health professionals) (Nicholas et al., 2004; Srebnik et al., 1996). It has been reported that young people seek help from informal sources of psychological help, i.e. friends and family members rather than formal sources of support (Boldero and Falloon, 1995; Deane et al., 2002; Rickwood et al., 2005).

It has been shown that many factors affect seeking psychological help such as severity and type of a given problem (Wilson and Deane, 2001), gender, age (Halter, 2004; Rickwood et al., 2005), social support (Chadda et al., 2001), parents' education (Sahin-Ayaydin and Ozbay, 1999), knowledge of psychological services, factors playing a role in availability of the services (Wilson and Deane, 2001), prior experience in receiving psychological help or knowing someone receiving psychological help (Arslantas, 2003; Blumenthal and Endicott,

1997), shame, tension, emotional efficacy and confidence (Chew-Graham et al., 2003; Halter, 2004). There have been studies in the literature on the same variables investigated in the present study.

## Literature review

Halter (2004) in a study on baccalaureate nursing students presented a case of depression to the students and collected data with Attribution Questionnaire and Help-Seeking Intention Questionnaire about students' attitudes towards seeking help for depression towards being stigmatized. She found that as age increased so did help-seeking intention. However, Arslantas, using Help-Seeking Intention Questionnaire in another study on adults, reported that there was no relation between mean scores for help-seeking intention and age (Arslantas, 2003).

Sahin-Ayaydin and Ozbay (1999) in a study on university students revealed that as the education level of the students' parents increased so did the students' help-seeking intention. Kırımlı also reported that high school students whose fathers' education levels were higher had more intention to seek help (Kırımlı, 2007).

In a study by Arslantas (2003), presence of a relative receiving psychological help had a positive impact on being forced, confidence in counselor and social acceptance. Using the same data collection tool as Arslantas, Kırımlı in a study on high school students also reported that the presence of a relative receiving psychological help had a positive effect on the students' confidence in counselor (Kırımlı, 2007). Similarly, Halter (2004) noted that the presence of a relative receiving help had a positive influence on help-seeking behavior.

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Arslantas (2003) found that prior experience in receiving psychological help had a positive impact on feeling the need for receiving help and social acceptance. In Kırımlı (2007) study, the high school students having prior experience with receiving help more frequently benefited from school counseling services and had more confidence in benefits of these services. Blumenthal and Endicott (1997) using interviews in a study on patients with depression revealed that the patients with prior experience in receiving help had a higher tendency to seek help.

Social stigma related to mental disorders and use of mental health services also affects seeking psychological help (Czuchta and McCay, 2001; Kocabasoglu and Aliustaoglu, 2003). The research revealed that social stigma constituted a serious barrier to help-seeking behaviors. Barney et al., using Help-Seeking Intention, Self-Stigma and Perceived Stigma scales in a case study including adults in Australia found that both perceived stigma and self-stigma decreased the possibility of seeking help from all sources (Barney et al., 2006). In another study in Australia, Wrigley et al. found a negative relation between help-seeking behavior and perceived stigma (Wrigley et al., 2005). Chew-Graham et al. (2003) using semi-structured interviews on their study on medical students found that having mental health problems was considered as weaknesses and constituted a barrier to seeking help.

A study including mostly Asian health professionals showed that the society was not willing to receive mental health care. It was attributed to negative attitudes towards mental health, shame and stigma (Wynaden et al., 2005). Halter (2004) in a study on nursing students also reported that stigma was one of the most important barriers to seeking psychological help.

It has been reported that nursing students are exposed to the same stressors as nurses (Baba et al., 2005; Jones and Johnston, 1997; Lee and Ellis, 1990; Parkers, 1985; Peskircioglu et al., 2005) and have difficulties in coping with stressors (Tully, 2004) and need counseling (Omigbodun et al., 2004). Aylaz et al. (2007) found that one fourth of the students at the school of nursing had signs of depression. A study using General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) revealed that the students got higher scores for GHQ and were found to be at risk of psychiatric disorders. The study also showed that the students wanted to forget their problems, smoked, took alcohol or drugs and talked to other people to be able to cope with their problems (Tully, 2004). In several studies, nursing students noted that they needed counseling to overcome their emotional problems (Omigbodun et al., 2004).

Although there have been studies showing that nursing students suffer from psychological problems, have difficulties in coping with these problems and need counseling, there have not been any studies about nursing students' attitudes towards seeking professional psychological help. In view of the fact that attitudes affect help-seeking behavior, investigation of nursing students' attitudes towards seeking help and factors affecting their attitudes will contribute to prevention of psychological problems and promotion of mental health among nursing students. It has been reported that seeking help earlier can help to prevent disorders and to decrease chronic symptoms (Kramer and Garraida, 2000). It has also been emphasized that seeking help earlier is an important factor in mental health and psychological wellbeing (Rickwood et al., 2005).

It is assumed that nursing students' attitudes towards seeking psychological help will have an influence on help-seeking behaviors and attitudes of patients for whom they will provide nursing care after graduation. In addition, it is thought that investigation of nursing students' attitudes concerning seeking psychological help will provide guidance in developing mental health promotion programs for these students.

The aim of this study was to investigate nursing students' attitudes towards seeking psychological help and factors which affect their attitudes.

Research questions:

1. Is there a difference in the mean subscale scores for Help-seeking Scale between the students in terms of their year at school?

2. Is there a difference in the mean subscale scores for Help-seeking Scale between the students in terms of their parents' education level?
3. Is there a difference in the mean subscale scores for Help-seeking Scale between the students in terms of their family members' prior experience in receiving psychological help?
4. Is there a difference in the mean subscale scores for Help-seeking Scale between the students in terms of their prior experience in receiving psychological help?

## Methods

This is a descriptive study and no sampling procedure was used. The study included all 299 students studying at Dokuz Eylül University School of Nursing (DEUSN) in the fall term of the academic year 2006–2007. The students who failed to provide complete data were excluded from the study and therefore, data about 248 students were statistically analyzed ( $n$ : 248).

### Data collection tools

#### Descriptive characteristics questionnaire

This questionnaire was composed of questions about students' year at school, parents' education level, current place of living, family members' experience in receiving psychological help, students' experience in receiving psychological help and the person from whom the students experiencing problems asked help.

#### Help-seeking Scale

The scale was developed by Ozbay to investigate seeking formal psychological help. The reliability and validity of the scale were tested for adults. Ozbay first created 46 items, but the number of the items decreased to 32 when the validity and reliability of the scale were tested (Ozbay et al., 1999). It is a six-point Likert scale and 1 corresponds to never, 2 rarely, 3 occasionally, 4 sometimes, 5 frequently and 6 always.

The scale is composed of five subscales: interpersonal openness, being forced, confidence in counselor, feeling the need for receiving psychological help, and social acceptance. The questionnaire does not have a total score. We can get the total score from the subscales one by one.

Cronbach alpha values reported by Ozbay et al. (1999) are .78 for interpersonal openness, .76 for being forced, .72 for confidence in counselor, .62 for feeling the need for receiving psychological help, and .34 for social acceptance and Cronbach alpha values found in the present study are .86, .82, .76, .68, and .65 with the same turn.

Approval was obtained from the ethical committee of DEUSN and informed consent was obtained from the all students participating in the study.

### Data analyses

Numbers and percentages were used to evaluate data about descriptive characteristics and variance analysis,  $t$ -test, Mann–Whitney  $U$  test and Kruskal Wallis analysis were used to evaluate obtained data.

## Results

### Descriptive characteristics

Eighty-one point nine percent of the students had a primary school graduate mother and 64.9% of the students had a primary school graduate father. Fifty-seven point eight percent of the students were staying in the dormitory, 74.2% of the students did not have a family member experiencing a psychological problem and 67.7% of the students did not experience a psychological problem. Thirty-nine

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