

Adolescents' stigmatising attitudes towards peers experiencing alcohol misuse: influences on helping intentions and behaviour



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Background: stigma and mental illness

- Stigma has been defined as 'a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person'
- Multiple dimensions of stigma:
 - 'Weak not sick'
 - 'Dangerous and unpredictable'
- Stigmatising attitudes influence the way in which people with mental health problems are treated.
- Stigmatising attitudes vary according to type of mental illness



Stigma and alcohol misuse

- There is considerable evidence that adults with alcohol use disorders are more severely stigmatised than those with other (non-substance use-related) mental health problems.
- However, there has been minimal research examining adolescents' stigmatising attitudes towards alcohol misuse in their peers
- Necessary as young people often approach their peers rather than seeking professional help

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Aims

- (1) To compare adolescents' stigmatising attitudes towards alcohol misuse and depression in their peers
- (2) To examine the relationship of these attitudes to helping intentions and past helping behaviour

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Method and materials

- Participants: 2464 Australian high school students (mean age=14.93 years; 50.2% male)
- Participants read two vignettes describing a peer experiencing symptoms of alcohol misuse and depression, respectively
- Intentions to encourage help-seeking were measured by a modified version of the General Help Seeking Questionnaire (Wilson et al., 2011)
- Stigma was measured using 6 items (Jorm et al., 2008), which were combined to form two components: 'weak not sick' and 'dangerousness/unpredictability'
- Encouraged a friend to seek help in the past (yes/no)

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Alcohol misuse vignette

- 'Samuel is a close friend the same age as you. Lately, he's been getting smashed nearly every weekend at parties and doing things that are really embarrassing. The other week he got drunk and vomited. Some girls that were at the party posted pictures of him on Facebook with his head over a toilet. He's also been getting aggro when he drinks and people aren't inviting your group to parties anymore.'

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Results (stigma)

- Compared to a peer experiencing symptoms of depression, a peer experiencing symptoms of alcohol misuse was more likely to be considered weak rather than sick, and was perceived as more dangerous and unpredictable

Table. Comparison of stigmatising attitudes towards depression and alcohol misuse

	Depression		Alcohol misuse		t(df)	Cohen's d	p
	Mean	Std. dev	Mean	Std. dev			
Weak not sick	2.42	0.79	2.86	0.76	28.77(2418)	-0.58	<0.001
Dangerous/unpredictable	2.54	0.79	3.63	0.84	54.35(2418)	-0.85	<0.001

Results (help-seeking intentions)

Prediction of intention to encourage help-seeking for alcohol misuse

Stigma (IV)	Help source (DV)	B	SE B	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower CI	Upper CI
Weak-not-sick	Peer	-.071	.027	-.057	-2.637	.008	-.124	-.018
	Family	-.074	.029	-.055	-2.562	.010	-.130	-.017
	Formal	-.179	.021	-.173	-8.343	<.000	-.221	-.137
	Internet	-.077	.029	-.056	-2.614	.009	-.134	-.019
Dangerousness	Peer	-.083	.023	-.073	-3.555	<.000	-.128	-.037
	Family	.001	.025	.000	.021	.983	-.048	.049
	Formal	.133	.020	.115	5.739	<.000	.074	.152
	Internet	-.102	.025	-.083	-4.025	<.000	-.152	-.053

Prediction of intention to encourage help-seeking for depression

Stigma (IV)	Help source (DV)	B	SE B	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower CI	Upper CI
Weak-not-sick	Peer	-.078	.024	-.070	-3.298	.001	-.124	-.031
	Family	-.044	.023	-.041	-1.934	.053	-.088	.001
	Formal	-.101	.018	-.117	-5.548	.000	-.137	-.066
	Internet	-.015	.027	-.012	-.567	.571	-.068	.038
Dangerousness	Peer	-.080	.022	-.073	-3.585	.000	-.124	-.036
	Family	-.054	.022	-.051	-2.479	.013	-.096	-.011
	Formal	.430	.019	.046	2.284	.022	.006	.081
	Internet	.035	.026	.028	1.350	.177	-.016	.085

Results (past helping behaviour)

- Participants who had encouraged a peer to seek help in the past had lower scores on both the 'weak-not-sick' and 'dangerous and unpredictable' dimensions of stigma

Relationship between stigma and helping behaviour towards a peer

Encouraged a peer to seek help	No		Yes		OR	<i>p</i>
	Mean	Std. dev	Mean	Std. dev		
Weak not sick	2.74	0.68	2.54	0.66	0.649	<0.001
Dangerous/unpredictable	3.15	0.80	3.02	0.65	0.728	<0.001

Discussion

- Adolescents reported more stigmatising attitudes towards alcohol misuse than towards depression.
- Overall, greater stigma was associated with weaker intentions to encourage help-seeking from informal help sources. However, dangerousness was associated with stronger intentions to encourage help-seeking from formal sources
- Both dimensions of stigma were associated with fewer instances of past helping behaviour

Limitations

- Intentions may not accurately predict behaviour
- The use of hypothetical vignettes to may not have provided an ecologically valid assessment of adolescents' ability to recognise and respond to different disorders in their peers
- Assessment of past behaviour did not identify the problem or the help source involved
- As behaviour was assessed retrospectively, the direction of its relationship with stigmatising attitudes is unclear.

Conclusions

- Young people hold more stigmatising attitudes towards alcohol misuse than depression
- As the relationship between stigma and help-seeking intentions is present early (i.e., prior to the legal drinking age), there is a need to ensure that young people can recognise and respond appropriately to alcohol misuse in their peers
- A better understanding of stigmatising attitudes towards alcohol misuse during adolescence will help inform interventions that aim to facilitate appropriate helping behaviour amongst young people



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