

Understanding the facilitators and barriers to help-seeking for self-harm in young people: A systematic review and a systems thinking-based analysis

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Background:

Self-harm is prevalent among young people in Australia and worldwide. Young people who self-harm require support and resources to address their self-harm, but they are often reluctant to seek help. Despite efforts to increase help-seeking, the rates of self-harm in this population continue to increase with no concomitant increase in help-seeking. An understanding of the facilitators and barriers to help-seeking for self-harm from a new perspective on this topic is needed to generate new insights and further contribute to the knowledge base.

Methods:

This study aimed to synthesise the literature on the facilitators and barriers to help-seeking for self-harm in young people, by analysing these facilitators and barriers using a systems thinking framework. This framework, known as Rasmussen's Risk Management Framework, views outcomes as emerging from the decisions and actions of stakeholders across the system hierarchy (from young people to their social environment, health professionals, schools, regulators and governments). The literature search was undertaken in 4 databases. Following a screening process, 33 peer-reviewed articles were included in this review.

Results:

The synthesis and analysis identified 17 distinct facilitators of help-seeking, with many of the known facilitators relating to service delivery and the social environment of young people. There were twice as many barriers (34 barriers). Most of these facilitators and barriers were related to lower levels of the system (i.e., service delivery and the social environment, and young people who self-harm). The key knowledge gap in the literature was limited consideration of broader systemic factors that influence help-seeking for self-harm and the interactions between the known facilitators or barriers in influencing help-seeking.

Conclusions:

While existing research on help-seeking for self-harm in young people has contributed to our knowledge base, future research using systems thinking frameworks and methods can help us gain a holistic, comprehensive understanding of this complex problem.

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