Public Education and Help-Seeking

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The value of educational programs that teach people to recognize when they are depressed or suicidal and to seek appropriate help has been called into question by a study in South Australia. The authors report that although such “mental health literacy programs” may have value for the general public, “it appears unlikely that they will have an impact on those we consider most at risk, the depressed and suicidal.” The authors suggest that these findings “emphasize the importance of ensuring that clinicians provide optimal evidence-based care to those individuals who are depressed and suicidal.”

Mental health literacy programs have become increasingly common in Australia over the past twenty years. These programs are based on the assumption that people who are taught to 1) recognize when they are experiencing depression, suicidal ideation, or other forms of mental problems and 2) seek support and treatment when they are depressed or suicidal will, in fact, seek the support needed to alleviate these conditions and reduce the risk of suicide. The Australian government, private groups, and professional organizations have engaged in “continuing and determined efforts to improve public knowledge about depression and the effectiveness and availability of treatments.”

This study found that the cumulative impact of these programs seems to have improved the ability of people to recognize depression and encouraged people who are depressed, but not suicidal, to identify their condition, seek professional help and other types of support, and use antidepressants. However, the study also confirmed the results of similar research carried out in 1998 and 2002 that mental health literacy programs do not significantly change the help-seeking behavior of suicidal individuals.

The authors suggest that the explanation for the lack of impact of these programs on people who are depressed and suicidal might be found in other research that shows “that those who are suicidal perceive a limited range of options to stressors, and there is an apparent inability to utilize extra information such as that provided by community education programs.” The data used in the most current study were collected for the 2008 Health Omnibus Survey, a face-to-face research effort that conducted more than 3,000 interviews. More than 10 percent of the sample was found to be experiencing major depression.


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