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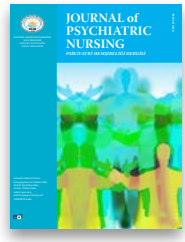

Review

Concept analysis of help-seeking intention in adolescents in the context of mental health: A conceptual review using the Walker & Avant method

Sri Wahyuni,* **Endang Triyanto**

Department of Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences, Universitas Jenderal Soedirman, Purwokerto, Indonesia

Abstract

Adolescents' professional help-seeking behavior is significantly influenced by their help-seeking intention (HSI), especially in relation to mental health concerns. Despite being widely used in various studies, the definition, characteristics, antecedents, and consequences of this concept remain varied and inconsistent. To strengthen the foundation for interventions and clarify theoretical understanding, concept analysis is required. Using the Walker and Avant method, this concept analysis seeks to elucidate the concept of adolescents' intention to seek help. This approach explores antecedents, characteristics, and consequences using Walker and Avant's conceptual method through eight analytical steps. It also presents case examples that clarify the conceptual boundaries of help-seeking intention among adolescents in the context of mental health. Help-seeking intention is defined as adolescents' cognitive and affective preparedness to seek professional or non-professional assistance and is influenced by attitudes toward seeking help, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and evaluations of help sources. In the context of mental health, stigma, social support, and mental health literacy are antecedents of adolescents' intention to seek help. The characteristics of this concept include problem recognition, attitudes toward seeking help, behavioral intentions, and preferences for trusted sources of help. Adolescent help-seeking intention is a multifaceted concept that includes social, affective, and cognitive components. This work provides a stronger theoretical basis for research on mental health literacy-based interventions and adolescent mental health promotion.

Keywords: Adolescents; humans; intention; mental health; nursing

Along with the rising incidence of psychological disorders among young people, adolescent mental health is a global issue receiving increasing attention.[1] According to a World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) report, approximately 1 in 7 adolescents worldwide experience mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, or behavioral disorders, which typically emerge between the ages of 10 and 19. Despite these psychological problems, the majority of adolescents do not seek professional help.[2] Many adolescents choose not to discuss their problems or are unaware that they need assistance.[3] These conditions affect social interactions, academic performance, emotional well-being, and the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors, including substance misuse and suicidal ideation.[4] In this context, the intention to seek help becomes a crucial concept that connects awareness and action.[5]

Although this concept is widely discussed in the literature, confusion remains between intention and behavior, creating problems with terminology, measurement, and intervention design. While some studies present help-seeking intention

***The current affiliation of the author:** *Department of Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences, Universitas Yayasan Pendidikan Imam Bonjol Majalengka, Indonesia*

Address for correspondence: Sri Wahyuni, Department of Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences, Universitas Jenderal Soedirman, Purwokerto, Indonesia

Phone: +85221806899 **E-mail:** sri.wahyuni013@mhs.unsoed.ac.id **ORCID:** 0000-0002-7450-9841

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(HSI) as a component of mental health literacy, others relate it to attitudes within the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). Inconsistencies in the outcomes of programs designed to improve adolescents' help-seeking behavior may also result from variations in terminology and conceptual elements. Nonetheless, conceptual clarity is essential for developing successful interventions.[6]

To ensure appropriate and culturally relevant interventions and assessments, conceptual clarity is essential in nursing practice, particularly in psychiatric and community nursing. Therefore, a concept analysis using the Walker & Avant approach was conducted to clarify the characteristics, antecedents, consequences, and empirical referents of adolescent help-seeking intention within the context of mental health.

Materials and Method

The concept analysis approach was used in this study to examine help-seeking intention in relation to mental health. In the context of mental health, where a concept is examined to gain a deeper understanding, this approach seeks to clarify the concept of help-seeking intention.[7] Walker and Avant's eight-step concept analysis method was applied in this analysis: 1) selecting a concept; 2) determining the aims or purposes of the analysis; 3) identifying all uses of the concept; 4) determining the defining attributes of the concept; 5) identifying a model case; 6) identifying borderline, related, contrary, invented, and illegitimate cases; 7) identifying antecedents and consequences; and 8) defining empirical referents.[8]

A literature search was conducted in the Scopus and ScienceDirect databases from database inception to March 2025 using the keywords "help-seeking intention," "adolescent," and "mental health." The search strategy was applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords and was limited to articles published in English. The inclusion criteria were full-text articles published in English; studies focusing on adolescents aged 10–19 years; articles from psychology, nursing, psychiatry, public health, education, or other health-related disciplines; open-access articles; and studies discussing the definition, attributes, antecedents, consequences, measurement, or conceptual understanding of help-seeking intention in the context of mental health. The exclusion criteria were studies focusing solely on help-seeking behavior without addressing help-seeking intention; studies involving populations other than adolescents; articles unrelated to mental health contexts; conference proceedings, editorials, commentaries, letters to the editor, dissertations, and book chapters; articles without accessible full-text versions; non-English publications; and duplicate records identified across databases.

What is presently known on this subject?

- The definition, characteristics, and conceptual boundaries of help-seeking intention remain diverse and inconsistent across the interdisciplinary literature; however, many studies recognize it as a significant predictor of mental health help-seeking behavior in adolescents.

What does this article add to the existing knowledge?

- Adolescents' intentions to seek help are a major focus of school- and community-based mental health interventions, as recent research has demonstrated that these intentions are influenced by mental health literacy, stigma, and attitudes toward seeking help.

What are the implications for practice?

- By identifying important characteristics, antecedents, consequences, and empirical referents as a theoretical foundation for the development of adolescent mental health nursing interventions and assessment tools, this article provides a systematic conceptual clarification of help-seeking intention in adolescents using the Walker & Avant concept analysis method.

A total of 465 records were identified through database searching. After duplicate records were removed and titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, potentially eligible articles underwent full-text review. Eighteen full-text articles were excluded because they did not specifically address help-seeking intention, involved non-adolescent populations, or lacked sufficient conceptual information related to the attributes, antecedents, consequences, or empirical referents of the concept. Ultimately, 11 articles met all eligibility criteria and were included in the final concept analysis. The article identification and selection process is presented in Figure 1. The flowchart illustrates the process of identifying articles and applying the inclusion criteria (Fig. 1).

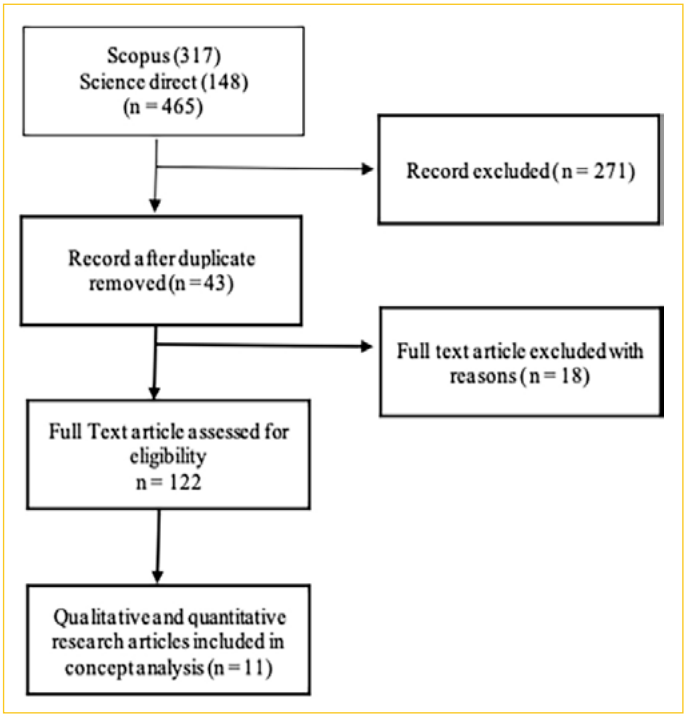

Figure 1. A flowchart detailing the article search and inclusion process.

Results

Concept Analysis of Help-Seeking Intention in Adolescents in the Context of Mental Health

Selecting the Concept

Help-seeking intention is the primary concept examined. As a psychosocial construct, help-seeking intention is essential for understanding help-seeking behavior related to mental health concerns.[9] Drawing on Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior, as described by Breslin et al.,[10] intention is regarded as the immediate antecedent of behavior, including help-seeking behavior.

This concept is important in the context of mental health nursing because nurses may help adolescents modify their mental health behaviors, including increasing their willingness to seek professional assistance.[11] By understanding the attributes, antecedents, and consequences of help-seeking intention, nurses can identify barriers and develop effective promotive interventions to encourage help-seeking behavior among adolescents.

Determination of Analysis Objectives

The goal of this concept analysis is to provide a precise, useful, and measurable operational definition of help-seeking intention, which remains unclear in the literature.

Definition and Use of the Concept of Help-Seeking Intention

This concept is frequently used in various fields, including psychology, psychiatry, public health, education, sociology, and nursing, according to a literature search conducted between 2015 and 2025. Each discipline provides a unique perspective that enhances understanding of the concept while also producing variations in meaning that need to be mapped. A detailed explanation of the applications of the concept is provided Table 1.

Use in Social Psychology

Help-seeking intention is a component of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) in social psychology, which holds that intention is the best predictor of actual behavior. It characterizes an individual's inclination to seek professional or non-professional assistance when experiencing difficulties.[12]

This usage highlights that intention is a product of an individual's perceptions of benefits, barriers, and social support rather than merely a willingness to act.

Use in Clinical Psychology and Psychiatry

This concept is used in clinical psychology to explain why many individuals with mental disorders do not seek treatment even when they experience severe symptoms.[13]

In relation to seeking professional assistance from a psychologist, psychiatrist, or counselor, this field examines intention as a mediator between clinical symptoms and behavior.

Use in Public Health

Public health emphasizes formal help-seeking behavior and access to services. Help-seeking intention is used to predict primary healthcare utilization, identify structural and cultural barriers, assess the effectiveness of mental health literacy education initiatives, and evaluate individuals' readiness to use health services.[14]

Use in Nursing and Psychiatric Nursing

According to Meleis' Transition Theory, help-seeking intention can be considered a predictor of self-management behavior, a component of the psychosocial adaptation process, an indicator of adolescent preparedness for developmental transitions, and an outcome of educational interventions, health promotion, and nursing counseling.[15]

Understanding help-seeking intentions helps nurses develop school-based psychiatric nursing interventions, support adolescents in making healthy decisions, reduce stigma in the community, and improve adaptive coping strategies. This concept serves as both a behavioral predictor and an indicator of psychological well-being in nursing practice.[16]

Use in the Education Sector (School Mental Health)

In the field of education, help-seeking intention is used to evaluate students' preparedness to seek assistance from guidance teachers or counselors, the role of the school environment in promoting mental health, the relationship between students' mental health literacy and help-seeking behavior, and psychological barriers such as mistrust of school services or fear of judgment.[17] This concept helps schools develop initiatives such as peer support, counseling, and mental health promotion.

Use in Health Technology (e-Health, m-Health)

In the digital age, help-seeking intention is used to predict the use of chat-based counseling applications, telepsychiatry services, acceptance of digital education platforms, and readiness to use online mental health services.[18]

The Essence of All Uses of the Concept

The fundamental premise underlying all variations of the concept is that help-seeking intention refers to an individual's psychological, cognitive, emotional, and social preparedness to seek help when facing mental health problems, whether from formal or informal sources.

Determining Defining Attributes

Based on a synthesis of the interdisciplinary literature, four main attributes were identified.

Table 1. The concept definition of help seeking intention

No	Title	Author	Scope	Definisi intention help seeking
1	Continuum Beliefs About Mental Illness: Examining Stigma, Help-Seeking Intentions, and Help-Providing Intentions Among Adolescent Males[23]	Fernandez, Deane & Vella [23]	Psychology	The term "Help seeking Intention" refers to an adolescent's propensity or intention to seek assistance while dealing with personal or emotional issues from formal (mental health experts, general practitioners, hotlines, the internet) or informal (friends, family, teachers, coaches) sources.
2	Impact of Changes in Adolescent–Adult Relationships on Help-Seeking Intention Among Japanese Schoolchildren[24]	Rahman et al.[24]	Psychology/ public health	Help-seeking intention is defined as an adolescent's readiness and willingness to seek help when experiencing symptoms of distress or depression, asked through responses to a vignette with a choice of "talk to someone right away" (seek help) versus "don't talk to anyone" (not seek help).
3	Understanding help-seeking intentions in male military cadets: An application of perceptual mapping[25]	Bass et al.[25]	Nursing/psychology	The willingness or propensity of individuals (military cadets) to seek assistance for physical or mental health issues is known as help-seeking intention, and it is impacted by psychological characteristics such self-reliance, emotional control, perceived vulnerability, faith in professionals, and stigma. The belief that asking for assistance entails "losing control" or being viewed as "weak," which leads to poor help-seeking intentions. This essay focuses on this purpose as a mental and emotional preparedness to seek assistance.
4	Help-seeking attitudes and intentions for generalised anxiety disorder in adolescents: the role of anxiety literacy and stigma[26]	Calear et al.[26]	Nursing	The General Help-Seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ) measures an adolescent's intention to seek help while they are suffering anxiety. Here, intention is a subjective evaluation of a person's propensity to seek assistance from a certain source (e.g., mother, father, counselor).
5	Influences on adolescent help-seeking for mental health problems[22]	Pearson & Hyde[22]	Nursing	The definition provided by Rickwood & Thomas (2012) is cited in the article: An adaptive coping strategy that involves trying to get outside help is called "help-seeking." The General Help-Seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ) was used to gauge "the likelihood that adolescents would seek professional or informal help," which is the intention component. Therefore, intention is the cognitive preparedness or intention to seek assistance when dealing with emotional or mental issues.
6	Anxiety Specific Mental Health Stigma and Help-Seeking in Adolescent Males[27]	Clark, et al.[27]	Nursing	Help-seeking is described in the article as an attempt to obtain assistance from official or unofficial sources. The likelihood that a teenager will ask for assistance is predicted by their intention. This idea is consistent with the Theory of Planned Behavior, which holds that the main factor influencing a person's decision to seek assistance is their intention.
7	Help-Seeking Intentions Among Asian American and White American Students in Psychological Distress: Application of the Health Belief Model[9] Cheng, Saad, & Chu, 2012	Jin E. Kim & Nolan Zane[9]	Psychology	Seeking assistance The term "intention" refers to a person's deliberate and logical desire, motivated by their views of the issue, advantages, and obstacles, to seek professional assistance while they are experiencing psychological discomfort. According to the article, stigma barriers and views about the advantages of services have an impact on intention, which is a "approximation of actual help-seeking behavior."
8	Research Review: Help-Seeking Intentions, Behaviors, and Barriers in College Students – A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis[28]	Zhao et al.[28]	Nursing/ Psychology	When a student experiences mental health issues, help-seeking intention is defined as their willingness or desire to think about engaging formal support services, regardless of whether they actually do so. It is stated as "consider using formal help" before to the actual action.
9	Teen Mental Health First Aid (tMHFA) Intervention Study[29] stigma reduction, help-seeking, and suicide prevention program designed for adolescents in Years 10–12 of secondary school (16–18 years)	Hart et al.[29]	Nursing	Adolescents' intentions are linked to what they would do to support someone who is dealing with mental health problems, such as urging them to get professional assistance. This notion refers to behavioral intents to request or encourage help-seeking, even when the focus is on first-aid goals.
10	Concept Analysis of Physical Restraint in Mental Health Nursing [30]	Ye et al.[30]	Nursing	According to the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), intention is described as a person's propensity to act in a particular way based on moral obligations, attitudes, and subjective norms. Relevance: The TRA model (behavioral intention as a predictor of action) is frequently used to explain intentions to seek assistance.
11	Attitudes about mental illness and help-seeking amongst adolescent males[31]	Liddle et al.[31]	Psychology	The tendency or willingness of teenagers to seek assistance from formal sources (mental health experts) or informal sources (friends, family) while dealing with psychological issues, as well as the attitudes and beliefs that impact this readiness, is known as help-seeking intention.

Problem Recognition

Problem recognition refers to the ability of adolescents to recognize that they are experiencing emotional or psychological problems that require external help.[19] Indicators include identifying mental health problems that interfere with functioning and acknowledging the need to seek assistance.

Attitude Toward Help-Seeking

This attribute refers to adolescents' cognitive and affective evaluations of the benefits and feasibility of seeking assistance.[20] Indicators include perceiving assistance as beneficial and not feeling embarrassed or fearful of stigma.

Behavioral Intention

Behavioral intention refers to readiness and specific plans to seek assistance in the near future.[21] Indicators include expressing a desire to consult someone and making a specific plan to seek assistance.

Source Preference and Trust

This attribute refers to adolescents' selection of and trust in individuals or professionals whom they consider capable of providing assistance.[22] Indicators include selecting a professional, friend, family member, or guidance counselor and having confidence in the source of help and feeling safe when seeking assistance.

Identifying a Model Case

A model case provides the clearest illustration of a concept because all defining attributes of the concept are present.

Model Case: Wini and the School Counselor

Wini, a 17-year-old eleventh-grade student, has been experiencing more anxiety than usual for the past two months. She frequently has difficulty sleeping, begins to lose interest in studying, and feels unable to control her thoughts. Initially, Wini dismisses these experiences as normal stress, but when her test scores decline and she begins to withdraw from her friends, she realizes that something is wrong (Problem Recognition).

One day, while attending a mental health education program at school offered by the local community health center, Wini learns that her symptoms are similar to those associated with anxiety. She begins to believe that speaking with her guidance counselor could be beneficial. She believes that seeking professional assistance could help her address her problems and that asking for help is nothing to be ashamed of (Positive Attitude Toward Help-Seeking).

Wini then decides to meet with the school counselor and makes a specific plan to visit the counselor's office during the next break. She even expresses her intention to a close friend and asks the friend to accompany her (Behavioral Intention).

Wini chooses the school counselor because she feels comfortable with the counselor, believes that her privacy will be respected, and trusts that she will not be judged (Source Preference and Trust). Wini ultimately visits and speaks with the school counselor. All defining attributes are evident in this case, making it a model case.

Identifying Additional Cases

Borderline Case

As he approaches graduation, 17-year-old Rian experiences considerable stress. He struggles to concentrate on his studies and frequently experiences intense anxiety. He recognizes that his condition is unusual and that he may require assistance (Problem Recognition: present). However, Rian is reluctant to seek professional assistance because he fears being perceived as mentally weak or unable to cope with stress. His attitude toward seeking assistance remains ambivalent (Attitude Toward Help-Seeking: weak/inconsistent).

Occasionally, Rian considers speaking with his teacher, but he repeatedly postpones doing so and tells himself that he can still handle the situation on his own (Behavioral Intention: unclear/insufficient). Rian also does not know whom to approach for help and is uncertain whether the school counselor could genuinely assist him (Source Preference and Trust: absent).

This case contains some of the defining attributes but lacks clear behavioral intention and trust in a source of assistance, making it a borderline case.

Related Case

Hera, a 15-year-old adolescent, recently lost a close family member. She feels sad but chooses to manage her emotions independently. She begins journaling, increases her religious activities, and exercises to relieve the stress she is experiencing. Her friends suggest consulting a school counselor, but Hera believes that she can continue managing her emotions without external assistance and therefore does not feel the need to seek help.

Hera recognizes her problem and uses adaptive coping strategies but has no intention of seeking external assistance. Therefore, this case represents self-help coping rather than help-seeking intention.

The absent attributes include behavioral intention, a positive attitude toward seeking assistance, and a preference for or trust in a source of assistance. This case is considered related because it involves problem recognition but does not demonstrate help-seeking intention.

Contrary Case

Fifteen-year-old Rani experiences severe anxiety. She loses her appetite, frequently screams, and has difficulty falling asleep. When her parents suggest that she speak with a counselor, Rani strongly refuses and insists that she is fine and that her reactions are normal (no problem recognition).

Rani has a negative attitude toward seeking assistance and believes that seeking psychological help is a sign of weakness (no positive attitude toward help-seeking). She has no behavioral intention to seek assistance. Furthermore, she has no preference for or trust in potential sources of assistance, including family members, teachers, or healthcare professionals. Therefore, none of the defining attributes of help-seeking intention are present, making this a contrary case.

Identifying Antecedents and Consequences

Antecedents are events or conditions that must occur before the development of help-seeking intention, whereas consequences are outcomes that occur as a result of the concept. The relationship among the antecedents, defining attributes, and consequences of help-seeking intention is illustrated in Figure 2.

Antecedents → Concept → Consequences

Empirical Referents

Indicators, measurement tools, or observable examples of a concept that can be measured or empirically tested are known as empirical referents.[32] In this context, empirical referents address the question, "How do we know that someone truly has a help-seeking intention?" Therefore, empirical referents extend beyond definitions and provide tangible evidence that the concept exists in the real world through measurable indicators, scales, or behaviors.

Based on the identified characteristics of help-seeking intention in adolescents, the behavioral and cognitive indicators demonstrating the presence of help-seeking intention include the following:

Problem Recognition

This is demonstrated by adolescents' awareness that they need assistance with stress, anxiety, or emotional problems.

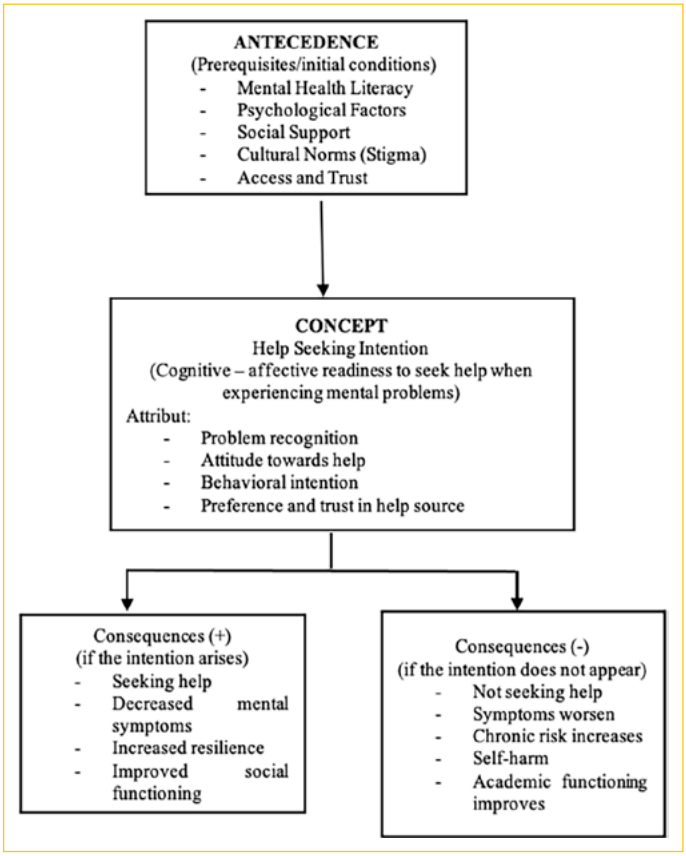

Figure 2. An overview of the antecedent – attribute – consequence model in adolescents' help-seeking intention.

Positive Attitude Toward Help-Seeking

This is demonstrated by the belief that seeking help is beneficial, safe, and not shameful.

Expression of a Desire or Readiness to Seek Help

Examples include statements such as "I intend to meet with the counselor" or "I will talk to the school counselor."

Source Preference and Trust

This is demonstrated by selecting specific individuals who are perceived as capable of providing assistance, such as parents, friends, teachers, counselors, or psychologists.

The instruments used as empirical referents for assessing help-seeking intention and its related attributes are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Instruments serving as empirical referents

Attribute	Empirical Instruments
Problem Recognition	Mental Health Literacy Scale (MHLS)
Attitude	Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help (ATSPPH
Behavioral Intention	General Help-Seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ); Intentions to Seek Counseling Inventory (ISCI)

Relevant additional instruments include:

- SSOSH (Self-Stigma of Seeking Help)
- IASMHS (Inventory of Attitudes Toward Mental Health Services)

These instruments represent measurable forms of the defining attributes and can therefore serve as empirical referents for assessing the presence of help-seeking intention among adolescents.

Discussion

This concept analysis clarified the meaning and conceptual boundaries of help-seeking intention among adolescents in the context of mental health. Using Walker and Avant's method, four defining attributes were identified: problem recognition, attitude toward help-seeking, behavioral intention, and source preference and trust. These findings suggest that help-seeking intention is not merely an individual's willingness to seek support but rather a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, emotional, and social processes.[25]

The identification of problem recognition as a defining attribute highlights the importance of adolescents' ability to recognize emotional distress and mental health problems.[33] This finding is consistent with previous research by Sokolova (2024), which showed that mental health literacy is a prerequisite for help-seeking intention, as adolescents must first recognize symptoms before considering professional help.[34] Adolescents who fail to identify psychological distress often normalize their symptoms or rely on maladaptive coping strategies, thus reducing their likelihood of seeking help.[35]

Attitudes toward help-seeking emerged as another key attribute. This finding aligns with the Theory of Planned Behavior,[36] which suggests that positive attitudes significantly influence behavioral intentions. Previous studies have shown that adolescents who perceive mental health services as beneficial, safe, and non-stigmatizing are more likely to express intentions to seek professional support.[37] Conversely, negative beliefs and stigma remain major barriers that discourage help-seeking behavior despite the presence of psychological distress.[27]

Behavioral intention itself was identified as a distinct attribute rather than merely an outcome. This finding reinforces the theoretical assumption that intention represents the most proximal determinant of behavior.[36] The present analysis supports previous evidence indicating that adolescents who formulate specific plans and express readiness to seek help are more likely to engage in actual help-seeking behavior.[38] Therefore, interventions should not only improve knowledge but also facilitate concrete behavioral planning and decision-making processes.

Another important attribute identified in this analysis was source preference and trust. Adolescents frequently evaluate the credibility, accessibility, confidentiality, and emotional safety of potential sources of support before deciding to seek help.[39] Previous studies have reported that adolescents often prefer informal sources, such as family members and friends, before approaching mental health professionals.[40] This preference may be influenced by cultural values, perceived stigma, and concerns regarding confidentiality. Consequently, help-seeking intention should be understood within the broader social and cultural context in which adolescents live.

The antecedents identified in this analysis—mental health literacy, stigma, social support, and subjective norms—further support the existing literature on adolescent mental health help-seeking. Mental health literacy facilitates symptom recognition and awareness of available resources, whereas stigma functions as a major barrier that weakens help-seeking intentions.[27] Social support and positive subjective norms may encourage adolescents to view help-seeking as acceptable and beneficial. Together, these antecedents demonstrate that help-seeking intention develops through interactions among individual, interpersonal, and sociocultural factors.

From a nursing perspective, the findings have important implications for mental health promotion and psychiatric nursing interventions. Nurses working in schools, communities, and primary healthcare settings play a critical role in strengthening adolescents' help-seeking intentions through mental health education, stigma-reduction programs, peer-support initiatives, and counseling services. Interventions should target each defining attribute identified in this analysis, particularly problem recognition, positive attitudes toward help-seeking, and trust in available sources of support.

The present concept analysis also contributes to theory development by providing a clearer operational definition of help-seeking intention in adolescents. The findings may guide future instrument development and assist researchers in selecting appropriate indicators for measuring help-seeking intention. Furthermore, a clearer conceptual understanding may improve the design and evaluation of interventions aimed at increasing adolescents' use of mental health services.

Limitation

When interpreting the results of this concept analysis, several limitations should be considered. First, only English-language publications were included in the analysis, which may have excluded relevant studies published in other languages. Second, the literature review may not have been comprehensive because only publications indexed in the Scopus and ScienceDirect databases were included. Third, adolescents from all populations may not be adequately represented by

the defining attributes identified in this study, as the concept of help-seeking intention may vary across cultural and social contexts. Finally, because this study is a concept analysis, it provides theoretical clarification rather than empirical validation of the concept. Future research is needed to test the proposed attributes, antecedents, and consequences across diverse adolescent populations and cultural contexts.

Conclusion

Help-seeking intention is a key concept in efforts to improve adolescents' mental health help-seeking behavior. Four fundamental attributes were identified, together with their antecedents, consequences, and empirical indicators: problem recognition, attitude toward help-seeking, behavioral intention, and source preference and trust.

This study clarifies the conceptual boundaries of help-seeking intention and provides a solid theoretical basis for nursing interventions, instrument development, and future research. A more precise and structured understanding of this concept may contribute to improving adolescent mental health and strengthening school- and community-based psychiatric nursing services.

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