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Research Explores Perceptions of Using Technology to Meet the Mental Health Needs of Adolescents and Young Adults

key findings

- Over 4,000 youth ages 14-24 were surveyed
- Over half reported a high stress level of ≥ 7 (scale 0-10)
- One in 9 experienced a severe level of psychological distress due to depression and/or anxiety
- Some youth prefer to use technology to reach out for support, but over half would rather talk to someone face-to-face
- Most youth have not utilized many of the mental health resources available through technology

Youth Perspective

"I'm constantly posting Snapchat stories, or I'm on Instagram... But if something really has me down for a little bit I just don't really post anything.... I see people post on Facebook all the time about their feelings and stuff... but that's just not how I deal with it."

— Female, Age 20

The Question:

What are the perceptions of using technology to meet the mental health needs of adolescents and young adults?

Three-quarters of mental health disorders begin before the age of 24; however, only 1 out of every 5 of those youth receive mental health treatment. Technology has the potential to serve as a supplement or alternative to traditional mental health care, which is especially relevant considering that a large majority of today's youth go online daily and use technology as a primary means of communication. In a study funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Tammy Toscos, Ph.D.; Maria Carpenter, RN, BSN; Michael Mirro, M.D., FACC, FHRS, FAHA; and Connie Kerrigan, RN, BSN, M.B.A. of Parkview Health in Fort Wayne, Indiana are leading a team of researchers and community experts to uncover the local community's perceptions of using technology to meet the mental health needs of a general population of youth ages 14-24.

In this mixed-methods study, researchers began with a series of online surveys to understand the perceptions of a diverse panel of experts. The findings were used to guide focus groups conducted with clinicians, educators, parents and youth ages 14-24. In the final phase of the study, a general population of high school students were surveyed during interactive events using polling technology. College students (ages 18-24) took part in an online survey. Technologies such as websites, apps, social media, text messaging, online chat and video chat were explored, including resources involving licensed mental health professionals, trained non-professionals, peer support and self-help applications.

The Implications:

Technology is an important part of the pathway to meet the mental health needs of adolescents and young adults.

Preliminary results indicate that technology can be a viable avenue for adolescents and young adults to receive mental health support, but it is not the sole solution to connecting this population with resources that meet their individual mental health needs and preferences. Experts agreed that technology may be used in a variety of beneficial ways to help youth ages 14 to 24, but many felt that technology cannot and should not serve as a replacement for in-person, face-to-face communication with a mental health professional.

Youth preferences for how they communicate with trusted sources about their stress or problems varied; while some prefer to use a form of technology, over half would rather talk to someone face-to-face. When given examples of mental health resources provided through technology, the large majority of youth reported not having utilized these types of resources. Findings show significant relationships between youth characteristics and preferences for various technologies, including: depression/anxiety screening results, prior thoughts of suicide, and self-reported stress levels.

Contact Us

For more information on the results from this grant, please visit the project website at www.parkview.com/mechanicsofmind, or contact the principal investigator Dr. Tammy Toscos (tammy.toscos@parkview.com).

If you would like to learn more about other related work, please contact:

Megan Collado, M.P.H., Director, AcademyHealth | megan.collado@academyhealth.org



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