BRIEF REPORT:
Kids Help Phone: Developing a New Go-To Online Mental Health Platform Designed for Young Men in Canada

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Abstract:

Objectives: Kids Help Phone is Canada's only national, professional helpline for children, youth and young adults. BroTalk.ca is a new mobile-responsive microsite (website) and Live Chat service option for young men to reach out for help. A new app is forthcoming in 2016. The new platform and service design were informed by extensive focus group research and feedback received from young men in the target age group, professionals who work with teens, subject matter experts, as well as Kids Help Phone's counseling management staff. In this brief report, the research on the development of this service and the need for on-going research is presented, using Kids Help Phone as an example of youth outreach and community resilience-building.

Today's youth are increasingly gravitating towards technology and social media as their favored channels for communication. According to one poll, over 22% of teenagers log onto their favorite social media site more than 10 times per day (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). The Pew Research Center (Lenhart, 2015) found that 92% of teens report going online daily, with 24% of those reporting that they are online "almost constantly." Eighty-eight percent of teens have or have access to cell phones or smartphones; typically, a teen will

send 30 texts per day (Lenhart, 2015). Evidence suggests that favorable outcomes related to the presence of youth online include enhanced communication, social connection, growth of ideas, identity development, and technical skills (Ahn, 2014; Rushing & Stephens, 2011; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011; Valkenburg, Peter & Schouten, 2006). Concerns, however, include issues regarding identity, privacy, addiction, predators, bullying, inequality, literacy, social exclusion, and high-risk sexual behavior (Ahn, 2014; Rushing & Stephens, 2011; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011; Valkenburg et al., 2006).

More children and young people are adopting online chat, email and text messaging in order to seek support or advice (Child Helpline International, 2014). The convenience and anonymity involved with accessing health information online leads youth to seek web-based resources on commonly stigmatized topics of interest, such as sexually transmitted infections, stress reduction, and signs of depression (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Although its results cannot be generalized to all First Nations communities, one study found that using social media to reach Pacific Northwest Native youth may yield positive results, since many of those surveyed expressed interest in accessing health information online, with over 75% having done so in the past (Rushing & Stephens, 2011). An Australian-based survey of 486 young men, averaged 18.55 years old found that over half reported that they had talked about their problems online, and most said that talking online had "helped" (Ellis et al., 2013).

Since social media inherently fosters social interaction, it creates opportunities for youth to form and maintain relationships with others (Ahn, 2014; Valkenburg et al., 2006). Social support and close relationships can help youth foster resilience, buffer stress, and form "learned secure" attachments with others (Wekerle, Waechter & Chung, 2012). Resilience is defined as "both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that build and sustain their well-being, and their individual and collective capacity to negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways" (Ungar, 2012, p. 17). Masten (2001) said resilience appears to be a "common phenomenon arising from ordinary human adaptive processes" (p. 234). Young people's foray into the Internet for connection can be seen as adaptive, since help-seeking online may be interpreted as a form of resourcefulness and conducive to resilience-building.

Kids Help Phone

Kids Help Phone is Canada's only national, professional helpline for children, youth and young adults. Available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, the service is offered free of charge to young people, is anonymous and confidential, and is available in English and French. In 2015, about 500 young people reach out to Kids Help Phone every day through three service channels: phone, web post and Live Chat. They also have four award-winning websites that receive thousands of visitors a day. Information on their sites is vetted by a knowledge mobilization department, counselors, youth, and subject matter experts.

Through service monitoring, Kids Help Phone recognized that teen boys were contacting the service far less than girls. This finding is not unusual in the Child Helpline International community. In North America, 32% of contacts are from boys (Child Helpline International, 2011). At Kids Help Phone, that number is 20% (Kids Help Phone, 2015). The

number of contacts from boys to Kids Help Phone decreases from 13 to 16 years of age, and does not increase again until age 17; one in three of those who contact the service above the age of 21 are male (Kids Help Phone, 2015). Compared to girls, a higher percentage of boys contact Kids Help Phone about problem substance use and addictions, sexual orientation and gender identity issues whereas a lower percentage of boys and young men discuss mental and emotional health issues, and suicide or suicide-related issues.

To address the relatively smaller number of boys contacting the service, Kids Help Phone applied for and received funding over three years from the Movember Foundation to create the "go-to" online mental health platform for young males ages 14-18 in Canada. They engaged Canadian Red Cross (RespectED Program) and Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada as key collaborators to provide feedback and strategic support to the project.

Method

Kids Help Phone engaged the services of a market research company to further explore ideas of how to create an online platform and to better understand the challenges of young men. Twenty-one focus groups were conducted in Alberta, Ontario and Quebec, in rural, urban and remote locales. In total, 157 participants took part including teens who identified as male, Kids Help Phone counseling management staff, as well as professionals who work with male teens. There were distinct focus groups available for those who identified as GBTQ, Aboriginal or as someone with lived experience of mental illness. Kids Help Phone also consulted with a number of subject matter experts on male mental health to better understand the climate and barriers that young males experience when help-seeking.

Results

Participants cited that they experienced a great deal of pressure to fit in with their peers, to succeed and do well at school, and to determine next steps in their academic or career futures. They also noted mental health issues, such as depression and suicide, when discussing issues of loneliness or not fitting in. In general, it appeared understood that mental health challenges can present themselves when more minor challenges accumulate and are not adequately addressed.

Asked whether they would reach out to a helpline like Kids Help Phone, many of the young men said they would not. One participant noted, "It's a matter of pride. I am a guy and I don't necessarily like talking about my problems." Another noted, "Guys don't want to reach out to people because they feel like they gotta be all tough." It was clear that issues around perceived masculinity influenced help-seeking behavior. Kids Help Phone's online platform uses language and visuals that associate reaching out for help as an act of strength; normalizing help-seeking and reducing barriers to access are two fundamental goals. Aggregate counselor profiles are used so the platform user can better understand with whom they are speaking. There are also stories based on interviews with young men, who share experiences of resilience related to website topics.

Discussion

Kids Help Phone's new website is youth- and research-informed, providing content, videos and interactive tools designed with young males in mind. Expanded Live Chat hours are also offered given the proclivity for young people to engage online and by text. Kids Help Phone will also be releasing an app in 2016 that simulates text messaging, allowing a young person to connect with a counselor when Live Chat is available.

Another finding from the research suggested that young men want to learn solutions and actions to solve their problems if they are going to reach out for help. This discovery also fits with recommendations that "help-seeking" needs to be reframed as "taking action" or "taking control" (Hall & Partners Open Mind, 2012). As a result, the website uses an action-oriented voice, with short tips and suggestions. The first five topics on the site include information about fitting in, depression, relationships and dating, sex, and school-based concerns.

Kids Help Phone created a national Youth Advisory Committee for developing this service to ensure that male voices would continually infuse the project. The young men give feedback and vet the topic content, interactive tools and website design. Kids Help Phone believes that by putting youth at the forefront of planning for the go-to platform, that youth are co-creating a safer space for them to reach out and that they are empowered to help themselves before they are in crisis.

Conclusion

Kids Help Phone is offering young males an online space that is tailored to their needs. By taking insights from market research and creating features on the site important to young people (e.g., providing counselor aggregate biographies to create trust, using real interviews to report stories of resilience with young males), there is an increased chance that more young men will reach out to overcome the barriers to help-seeking. The interactive tools, as well as the Live Chat usage by boys, will be evaluated to better understand their impact on the target audience. Evaluation of these tools will contribute to the larger landscape of program evaluation of helplines, in which there is a paucity of research. Kids Help Phone will continue to involve teen male stakeholders in the testing, feedback and evaluation of the service and website.

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