

Developing a Sustainable System to Deliver Early Intervention for Emotional Health through Australian Schools

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Abstract : Up to 15% of Australian youth will experience an emotional disorder, yet relatively few get the help they need. Schools provide an ideal environment through which we can identify young people who are struggling and provide them with appropriate help. Universal mental health screening is a method by which all young people in school can be quickly assessed for emotional disorders, after which identified youth can be linked to appropriate health services. Despite the obvious logic of this process, universal mental health screening has received little scientific evaluation and even less application in Australian schools. This study will develop methods for Australian education systems to help identify young people (aged 9-17 years old) who are struggling with existing and emerging emotional disorders. Prior to testing, a series of focus groups will be run to get feedback and input from young people, parents, teachers, and mental health professionals. They will be asked about their thoughts on school-based screening methods and how to best help students at risk of emotional distress. Schools (n=91) across New South Wales, Australia will be randomised to do either immediate screening (in May 2021) or delayed screening (in February 2022). Students in immediate screening schools will complete a long online mental health screener consisting of standard emotional health questionnaires. Ultimately, this large set of items will be reduced to a small number of items to form the final brief screener. Students who score in the "at-risk" range on any measure of emotional health problems will be identified to schools and offered pathways to relevant help according to the most accepted and approved processes identified by the focus groups. Nine months later, the same process will occur among delayed screening schools. At this same time, students in the immediate screening schools will complete screening for a second time. This will allow a direct comparison of the emotional health and help-seeking between youth whose schools had engaged in the screening and pathways to care process (immediate) and those whose schools had not engaged in the process (delayed). It is hypothesised that there will be a significant increase in students who receive help from mental health support services after screening, compared with baseline. It is also predicted that all students will show significantly less emotional distress after screening and access to pathways of care. This study will be an important contribution to Australian youth mental health prevention and early intervention by determining whether school screening leads to a greater number of young people with emotional disorders getting the help that they need and improving their mental health outcomes.

Keywords : children and young people, early intervention, mental health, mental health screening, prevention, school-based mental health

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