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**Performing competence and
negotiating disclosure: Discourses of
adolescent help-seeking**

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Abstract

Research indicates that many adolescents experiencing psychological distress do not seek help. The traditions in which this research has been conducted have contributed to gaps in understanding about the meaning of seeking help and the ways that adolescents make sense of psychological services. Using a collaborative interview method, the help-seeking experiences of a group of nine adolescents aged 13 to 17 years of age were examined. An analysis of their talk identified two distinct but inter-related discourses. A performance-of-competence discourse made available a position of an agentive competent-self who claimed the ability to resolve problems without help from others. The competent-self was constructed in three ways; by providing evidence of competence as a continuous aspect of identity, by claiming a position as a source of help to peers and by constructing available sources of help as incompetent. Competence was also discursively maintained by constructing a 'not coping experience' variously as; an isolated one-off event, using indirect requests for help, normalising this experience, and spatially and temporally distancing the self from not-coping. Positioned against the competent-self was the incompetent-other whose inability to help was constructed in terms of irreconcilable generational differences, who acted in immoral ways by breaking confidentiality, who was culturally incompetent and who failed to notice clear requests for help. Both these positions of competency and incompetency functioned to disclaim the need for help and legitimised avoidant actions. A second discourse, negotiating-disclosure, was centred around the contradiction between wanting to disclose and holding back. Holding back was used to avoid the potential for being repositioned as incompetent by peers or powerful adults, as well as avoiding possible abandonment or ridicule by peers. The social consequences of being repositioned as incompetent impacted on both the level of disclosure and engagement with services. These consequences were managed by invoking the competent-self, withholding information or using silence to resist disclosure. Informants constructed facilitative 'rules of engagement' with psychological services in terms of professional competence, friendship, trust and confidentiality, congruence and indirectness. Implications are discussed for counselling interactions with young people in highlighting the importance of a competent counsellor in facilitating disclosure in ways that enable young people to maintain a competent identity.

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